It's not a bus ride, it's an experience

By John A. Read -- Staff Writer

2/24/02 Many people think of travel by bus in terms of big city commuting -- dozens of people crammed into a small seat or perhaps standing up for the entire run. Eyes front, don't bother your neighbor or you might encounter commuter rage.

But this is the New Millennium and this is the Central Coast. Welcome to the Clean Air Express, your home away from home, at least for a couple of hours each day. Time for reading, chat, snoozing or just staring out at the beautiful wine grapes growing on the hillside. And maybe even a pizza party or holiday event thrown in (see part two in Monday's edition).

Demand by riders for the Clean Air Express has been growing, with a waiting list for the subscription-only buses from Santa Maria or Lompoc buses to the Santa Barbara area.

But thanks to the addition of the Coastal Express in the Ventura Region, county traffic managers have been able to add an extra nonstop Compressed Natural Gas Clean Air Express bus nonstop from Lompoc to the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Currently costing just $100 a month for Monday through Friday, non-holiday service, the bus is idea for those who want an early start and to get home at a reasonable hour. Despite two hours on the road roundtrip, riders are back to their cars in Lompoc about 5:15 p.m., according to Scott Spaulding, transit coordinator for Traffic Solutions.

Traffic Solutions handles van pools and now will be coordinating bus travel since its parent organization, the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments, has taken over management of the bus routes from the Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District.

Spaulding explains that the buses started out in 1991 as an air quality program, but the district's main function is monitoring air pollution, not
SBCAG, which does transportation planning as part of being a clearinghouse for highway funding, was a natural to take over the program. The official changeover is April 1, as the current air district contract with Santa Barbara Airbus to run the buses is still in effect, Spaulding said.

Santa Barbara Airbus also won over three other companies for the new contract. The exact amount of the contract isn't known. SBCAG will pay on a cost per revenue hour basis for the eight routes (five from Lompoc and three in Santa Maria) and the number of hours varies each month -- but the basic rate is $95 per revenue hour.

The service is about 80-90 percent self-supporting, Spaulding said. Airbus bills only for the difference between farebox revenues and the total cost, he said.

When the new route launched only last Tuesday was approved, Spaulding set out notification to the 348 existing subscribes. Some of those have transferred from other routes to the new Lompoc-UCSB route, opening space on other buses to Goleta, he said.

When the bus became available, officials pondered whether to put it on the Lompoc or Santa Maria run, Spaulding said.

"The best information we had was that the greatest demand was in Lompoc," he said. SBCAG's own staff had riders who were interested in transferring, Spaulding added.

SBCAG is currently in process of replacing older dual fuel (diesel-natural gas) buses with newer CNG models, he said. And funding has also been freed to expand the system. But it's a year-long process before the funding will actually translate to on-the-ground service, he said.

SBCAG was recently sued by a group claiming that funds for transit had been diverted to highway construction, mostly in the North County. The Clean Air Express is separate from other transit evaluations, Spaulding indicated.

"It's a working program and its a very popular program for both traffic congestion and air quality," he said.

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