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CTA's online Bus Tracker rolls into sight at Wicker Park shops

Businesses display information so public can stop and shop

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Getting Around

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Commuters stopping at the Red Hen Bread bakery on North Milwaukee Avenue in **Bucktown** can also check to see when the next **CTA** bus will pull up at the corner, without leaving the cinnamon-toasty warmth of the store.

Estimated bus-arrival times sent directly from the Chicago Transit Authority's **Bus Tracker** system stream across the bottom of a flat-screen monitor installed at Red Hen and eight other businesses by the Wicker Park Bucktown Chamber of Commerce. Community news and information about upcoming events fill the rest of the screen.

"It's still new, so a lot of people haven't figured out what it is yet. But once people realize it's Bus Tracker they're all excited because it means you don't have to stand in the cold for that long," said Lisa Dellagiarino, 28, an employee at Red Hen, who commutes to work from her home in **Logan Square**.

The CTA on Monday will launch a developer tools Web page on the transit agency's Web site, www.transitchicago.com. The page will allow developers to more easily download Bus Tracker and other transit data for creating desktop applications, widgets and mobile applications, and present it to their audiences to help improve travel planning.

The pilot project represents an opportunity to greatly expand access to Bus Tracker (www.ctabustracker.com) information beyond computers, BlackBerry-like cell phones, personal digital assistants and other mobile devices.

Bus Tracker uses the global-positioning system to track the location of all 2,000 CTA buses. It provides estimated bus-arrival times at about 12,000 bus stops for all 150 CTA bus routes, offering transit commuters a chance to reduce waiting times and travel more comfortably, officials said.

The proliferation of Bus Tracker data is being accomplished without requiring the CTA to shoulder the cost.

"By making information readily available to developers, the benefits of tools such as ...Bus Tracker and the data it generates can be applied in ways beyond what is currently within the CTA's means," said CTA



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President Richard Rodriguez.

There is a link to the developers Web page at www.transitchicago.com/developers. After registering to access the application program interfaces and accepting the terms and conditions, users will be sent an access code, which will allow them to begin submitting requests for data, officials said.

Information provided through the Bus Tracker application program interface is updated every minute. Data are sent as soon as a request is received.

"This technology creates an opportunity for us to make data available for innovative uses by our riders and the public," said CTA spokeswoman Noelle Gaffney. "We are asking people using our data to tell us about it."

The CTA Bus Tracker Widget is among the independent programs already up and running for use by Mac computers. It goes beyond providing estimated bus-arrival times by also displaying up to five arrival-time predictions for each bus stop and offering to track as many bus stops as the user requests.

The CTA also will soon make available to developers pre-packaged application program interfaces for bus and train schedules, customer alerts when service disruptions occur and the CTA's Google transit feed for planning transit itineraries, officials said.

The CTA is sharing its real-time bus service information with Chicago's **Office of Emergency Management and Communications**. The OEMC is developing a system to use Bus Tracker data to estimate real-time traffic conditions on major streets citywide.

The traffic-monitoring system will be introduced in 2010. For now, Red Hen and the eight other businesses that display Bus Tracker information like the extra sales being generated by increased foot traffic from passengers seeking travel information, said Jamie Simone, program manager at the Wicker Park Bucktown Chamber of Commerce.

"Our goal is to improve transit information to the public and alleviate traffic congestion and parking pressures," Simone said.

The chamber has spent about \$10,000 on the project, mostly to purchase 17-inch screens, Simone said. In addition to Bus Tracker, this ranges from information on property-tax assistance workshops to art shows and holiday celebrations.

The pilot project is focused on the area near the intersection of **Milwaukee, North and Damen avenues** -- a neighborhood served by more than five CTA bus routes as well as the **Blue Line "L"** stop at Damen.

Other participating businesses that have the Bus Tracker screens are Wow & Zen, 1912 N. Damen; Caffe de Luca, 1721 N. Damen; Gallery Cafe, 1760 W. North; W Grocer, 2060 W. North; Myopic Books, 1564 N. Milwaukee; The Silver Room, 1442 N. Milwaukee; the office of Ald. Manny Flores (1st Ward); and the Wicker Park Bucktown Chamber of Commerce, 1414 N. Ashland Ave.

Several employees at some of the businesses questioned whether the screens will be popular with the public in neighborhoods like Wicker Park and Bucktown, magnets for young urban professionals who seem to have all of the latest electronic gizmos.

"We all ride the buses around here, but honestly people don't use the digital screens all that often," said Jordan Gower, 21, a bookseller at Myopic Books. "I guess they're great for anybody who doesn't have an iPhone app to look up Bus Tracker themselves."

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