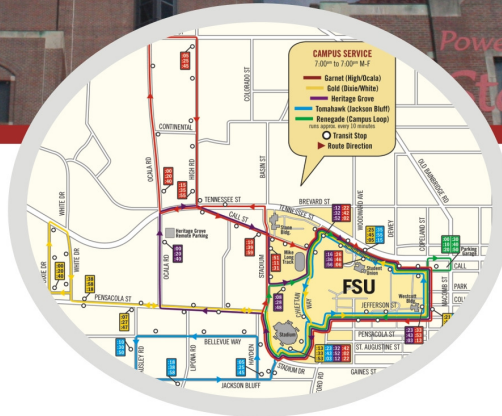




# J. Robert Havlick & Thomas H. Muehlenbeck Award for Innovation in Local Government



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## Overview

The restructured transit service for the Florida State University (FSU) students, appropriately named the Seminole Express, was launched in August 2007 and has proven to be a much lauded, innovative success. StarMetro, in partnership with Florida State University, devised a new route structure to address the problems of students driving to campus, congestion in and around campus, limited parking, perceived difficulty using the bus service and sustainability. The previous route structure had eleven buses circling one of the smallest campuses in Florida, essentially connecting classrooms and parking areas. StarMetro's Senior Planner, Samuel Scheib, plotted student address data into a GIS map to produce a clear visual representation of where students were living by student density. Next, he developed a route structure to connect the densest corridors with the University. The new system uses the same number of vehicles as previously used in the campus circulator system, so students now have a one-seat ride from home to class with no parking concerns and at little additional cost to the university.

## Seminole Express Restructuring

In the spring of 2005 the institutions dominating Tallahassee's two best-known hills were glaring at one another. On one peak of College Avenue sits the 19<sup>th</sup> century central business district, considerably updated with the state capitol building, several gleaming condo towers, and city hall. As might be expected, at the other end of a street named College is the Westcott Building with its namesake fountain and gate marking the photogenic entrance to Florida State University.

The university was seriously considering discontinuing its \$900,000 annual contract with the city's transit agency with consideration being given to providing its own transit service. University officials generally considered the campus service, known as *Seminole Express*, in the words of one vice president, "not really conducive to student use." So in April 2005, when Ron Garrison arrived for his first day of work as the executive director for the transit system previously called Taltran, he had a visitor waiting for him: FSU Associate Vice President for Administration Paul Strouts. Vice President Strouts wanted let him know in person the university was considering other options for student transportation needs and may not renew its contract with the city. Starting a university transit system would cost FSU millions of dollars and the transit system would loose nearly 40% of its ridership, not a winning proposition for either organization. Mr. Garrison, just arriving on the scene from Washington D.C., discussed a number of changes and ideas with Mr. Strouts and was able to renew the contract.

For more than 25 years, the City of Tallahassee provided mass transit to the Florida State University. Service began with two routes, Garnet and Gold, each with a pair of buses operating in opposite directions around what was and is one of the smallest campuses in the state university system, only 347 acres. Florida State is often compared to Florida's other two research universities, the University of Florida, partly an agricultural school sitting on 2,000 acres, and the University of South Florida, established in Tampa in 1956 on 1,700 acres. Florida State, however, as current president T.K. Wetherell has put it "operates under the greatest geographical constraints," and physically has more in common with urban universities like Harvard (380 acres) or Yale (397 acres).

Over the last few decades, growth had been the defining characteristic of this campus: growth in enrollment, the number of buildings, the operating budget, and the number of parking spaces. The lone exception to the pattern of expansion was housing; not one bed was added from 1985 to 2005. Beginning in the late 1990s, the university began a campus-wide dormitory renovation program,

including razing and reconstructing DeGraff Hall, thereby decreasing the number of available on-campus beds by several hundred.

The predictable result of a net decrease in on-campus housing was the externalizing of housing to the community; student apartment complexes sprouted around Tallahassee like azaleas in the spring, the size of each increasing in direct proportion to the distance from campus. By the 2006-2007 school year there were four parking garages on campus with a fifth under construction, for a total of 39.44 parking spaces per acre, the highest parking density of the eleven state universities (the next highest was Florida International in Miami with only 31.98). But with such a small campus, the university could not meet demand: there were still only 0.34 spaces per student, the third lowest ratio in Florida.

The transit system had also gone through significant changes. By February of 2007 the agency was completing a massive overhaul that included changing its name to StarMetro, repainting and branding all the vehicles, putting up new shelters, and implementing a new advanced farebox system.

By 2007 the eleven buses circling the Florida State campus, accounted for 25% of StarMetro's annual ridership. An additional 15% of FSU ridership came from the U-pass program allowing students to use the fixed route system to get around the city and to the campus. Staff began an analysis of the student population riding the transit system and found that only 7% of the student body lived on campus. The packed campus buses used by the students were moving student from parking lots and garages to class. Planners also noticed distinct pockets of student housing within a few miles of the campus. FSU had publicly acknowledged that even with the recent opening of the fourth parking garage and the construction of the fifth about to begin, there would still be a net decrease in the number of parking spaces each year. The heavy traffic congestion on the streets surrounding the university due to the large number of students living off campus, the limited amount of parking available and the increased interest by the University to address this growing issue provided an opportunity for StarMetro to develop a total redesign of the transit service utilized by the student population.

Staff requested and received student address data from the university and geocoded it in a geographic information system (GIS). Map 1 below shows the FSU campus and student population densities concentrated on roads leading to campus. Although not surprising, it was important to have data visibly supporting basic assumptions about student housing patterns. The goal was to take the eleven on-campus buses and use them to bring students to campus with high frequencies without compromising student mobility on-campus. This would be a challenge since heavily traveled streets on campus had prevented this frequency from actually occurring in the past.

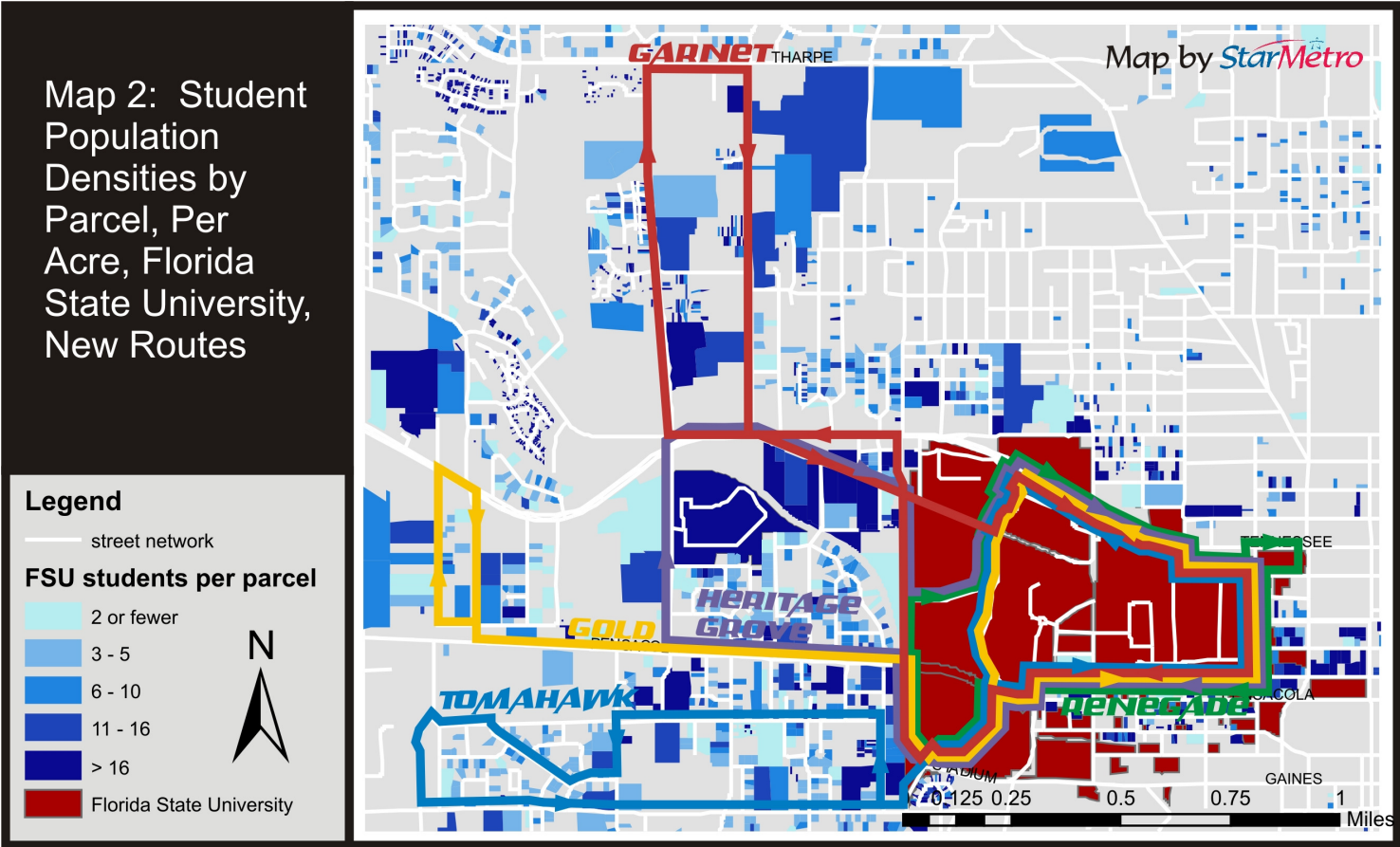
The original *Seminole Express* had the advantage of being simple to understand and use. It had also been in use for more than a generation, and there was the risk in replacing something entrenched and broadly understood. Some of these concerns were voiced during public meetings, and some student senators insisted the new service would fail for these very reasons, so creating a service that was completely functional and convenient was of the utmost importance.

The route design—a series of figure-8 patterns—brings transit to within a quarter of a mile of 53% of registered FSU students living off campus. As seen on map 2, the routes named Tomahawk and Gold are paired to operate in a counter-clockwise direction when on campus; each has two buses on a 40-minute route so that a bus comes off-campus every 20 minutes. The Heritage Grove route has two buses on a 30-minute interval and the Garnet route has three buses on a 45-minute interval so this pair, operating clockwise when on campus, provides 15-minute service off-campus for passengers. All four routes have

scheduled arrival times printed on signs at each bus stop and the routes are staggered so they enter the campus at different intervals. A fifth route, Renegade, has two buses maintaining the familiar circular pattern of the original Seminole Express routes, staying on campus to maximize on-campus mobility.

Each route in the Seminole Express system had previously started and stopped at different times, which could be confusing, and all ended before 6:00 p.m. Since the revised routes would be taking students home, the hours of operation were extended and simplified to 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. The beauty of this system is that, while the university paid the cost of operating additional evening hours, the routes provide service to many more destinations without a decrease in the level of service and with more dependability for a minimal increase in cost.

University officials had been looking at addressing the issues of getting students to campus and around campus in an efficient and cost effective manner for a number of years. StarMetro’s proposed new routing scheme was a resolution to these issues. FSU and StarMetro staff worked together to develop and print new route maps for the students. New bus stop signs were printed and installed along the new routes. FSU agreed to split the cost on a new marketing initiative to inform students of the change. The team put a route brochure in the welcome packet given to every student living in apartments along the routes, Seminole Express was added to the official campus map for the first time, and printed the map on Z-cards, a handy folding map that has a pocket for holding FSU student ID cards. When students get new ID cards, instead of a plastic sleeve, they are placed in a Z-card so that students will have a route map with them. Carol O’Donski, the new head of FSU Parking and Transportation Services even changed the name of her office to Transportation Services to deemphasize the importance of parking and to promote transit use. She hired temporary staff to act as transit ambassadors who would answer questions and offer guidance to students for the first few weeks of class and she requested FSU Police to direct traffic at key locations around campus to ensure the buses could get through and keep on



schedule during the first few hectic days.

Officials at StarMetro and Florida State University are thrilled with the results of the change. Ms. O'Domski estimates there are between 400 and 700 fewer cars on campus each day and StarMetro's planning division reports about a 35% increase in campus ridership. These numbers are projected to only increase. This year only the freshmen have no recollection of the old system; next year half the student body will only know the new way and when the current freshmen graduate this excellent student transit system will be the only one the students know and it will be viewed as a normal way of getting to class.

The most direct recipients of this program are the FSU students who have an efficient and easy way to get to campus. When those students are not driving to campus, they are not congesting the Tallahassee roads, circling the campus looking for parking spots, or sitting in their running cars waiting for one. The immediate impact is a reduction in emissions and fewer cars on the roads in Tallahassee. Longer term, student familiarity with transit will provide for higher density development around the campus that will make the community surrounding the university more interesting and attractive as well as decreasing vehicle miles traveled by students in Tallahassee. For StarMetro and Florida State, the greatest success of the route restructuring was in finding success together.

The comparison below dramatizes the difference between the old and new service. The all new Seminole Express has been a winning combination for the university, StarMetro, the community, the economy and the environment.

***Old Bus Service to FSU Campus***

***New StarMetro Service to FSU Campus***

Students had to work with several different bus schedules	One simplified bus schedule
Service was not on time	On Time
Service seen as unreliable	New service seen as Reliable
Service did not service where most students lived	Service goes directly to off campus to student apartments
Service did not run early or late enough for student travel needs	Service expanded to run from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM
Students had to transfer at the campus stadium and then wait for the next bus. This made the trip longer and less desirable	No transfer - the buses go directly to the entire campus area
Buses could not keep on schedule on the campus, thus service was irregular	Buses arrive every 10 minutes on campus and every 20 minutes at student apartments off campus
Driving to campus caused considerable congestion in and around campus	The new service is so popular; many students are now using the bus service. Thereby reducing considerable congestion in and around the campus
Many students who use to drive to campus would leave 60 to 90 minutes early just to get a parking space	Using the new bus service, students can get to the campus in 10 to 15 minutes
Students driving personal cars added to greenhouse gases	Greenhouse gases have been reduced with the increase in campus route ridership
Very difficult to get a parking space and the parking demand was increasing	More parking available, thereby negating the need to build additional expensive parking facilities in the already severally restrictive available of land in and around the campus

Senior Planner Samuel Schwab deserves much of the credit for doing the research, analysis and design of this successful new service.