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UIS, LLCC, Walmart on night bus route starting May 17

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The start of night bus service to the University of Illinois Springfield, Lincoln Land Community College and the Sixth Street Walmart later this month should strengthen ties between downtown and the south side of the city, the head of the Springfield Mass Transit District said Thursday.

A federal grant of more than \$400,000 is paying for the service, which will begin May 17.

The money is will support the Monday-through-Friday service for three years, said SMTD managing director Linda Tisdale.

"We received numerous requests when the South Sixth Street Walmart opened from people who want to get to work," Tisdale said.

She announced the new night-bus route at a transportation planning committee meeting on Thursday.

The 24-hour Walmart, which opened in 2008, has approximately 350 employees.

Tisdale said service to Walmart and a nearby Golden Corral restaurant also is a safety issue for the employees. The nearest night stop now is on Stevenson Drive.

"They will walk to Golden Corral and Walmart for jobs, and that's pretty treacherous in winter, when it's dark and there's inclement weather," said Tisdale.

A campus town-downtown connection

Tisdale said requests for night service to UIS and LLCC have grown along with enrollment at both schools. UIS enrollment is more than 4,900, including 1,100 students who live on campus.

LLCC's enrollment is about 8,500. About 3,200 students are at the Springfield campus daily. A spokeswoman said about 20 percent of Springfield students attend evening classes. Both colleges have day bus service.

"I think this is going to be heavily used. It's just going to make it easier for our students," said UIS vice chancellor for student affairs Tim Barnett.

Students frequently use day bus service to reach shopping and services elsewhere in the city, and a night route would provide one more option, including to and from downtown.

Junior Ashley Okooboh, who lives on campus, said the bus was her transportation lifeline in her freshman year, when she was without a car.

Even though she now has her own vehicle, she believes the night route will be popular on campus.

"My friends and I like to stay out later. We'd like it for entertainment purposes, to go to the store or a restaurant. I think it'll be a good thing for students to help get them out of their dorms," said Okooboh.

Downtown Springfield Inc. also has sought a downtown-campus town connection for years, said DSI executive director Victoria Clemons.

"We brought it up with them (SMTD) about using downtown as a hub for people who want to get to the city at night. For recreation and employment, it's a great avenue to travel back and forth," said Clemons.

The federal program

Funding for the route is through the Job Access and Reverse Commute program. A federal website describes the grant program as promoting better access to jobs, medical care and other services, especially for low-income people who need public transportation for employment.

Ridership on the three existing night routes — north side, west side and southeast side — has ranged from 3,500 to 6,600 riders a month the first two years, according to SMTD.

Springfield resident Jane Ford and her husband, Paul, were among residents who began lobbying for night service in 2004, primarily as a way to allow SMTD users to reach nighttime jobs.

"This has taken awhile, but the response is exactly what we expected," said Jane Ford.

Ford said a night route to LLCC and UIS was among the original proposals, but it was concluded the need for workers was greater on

the first three routes.

"We decided that jobs was the number one thing, but we're thrilled to death that this is happening," said Ford.

Tim Landis can be reached at 788-1536

New night bus route

*Scheduled to start May 17.

*Route begins at Fifth Street and Capitol Avenue.

*One bus will run each hour from 6:45 to 11:45 p.m. Monday through Friday.

*Bus will stop at the Walmart on South Sixth Street, the nearby Golden Corral restaurant, the University of Illinois Springfield and Lincoln Land Community College.

Source: Springfield Mass Transit District

Clarification: Enrollment at Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield is 5,657 students for the current semester. A 3,200 figure provided by the school for a Friday story on night-bus service is the average daily attendance.

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