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COTA begins bus line between Downtown, Port Columbus

By **Rick Rouan** *The Columbus Dispatch* • Sunday May 1, 2016 8:06 PM



COTA has installed luggage racks and USB ports on the AirConnect buses. The fare runs \$2.75, with service running every half-hour from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. seven days a week.

People flying into or out of the airport have a public option for ground transportation for the first time in more than a decade.

The Central Ohio Transit Authority's new AirConnect bus service starts Monday between Port Columbus and Downtown, stopping every 30 minutes at the Greater Columbus Convention Center and more than a dozen hotels.

COTA has specially branded buses wrapped in red graphics — a departure from the silver and blue that color the rest of its fleet — so the buses at its airport stop will stand out to customers. Downtown stops will have the AirConnect logo listed among the other lines that pick up there.

Fares cost \$2.75, the same as COTA's other express lines. Passengers can pay with cash on the bus or use a credit card to buy tickets at an airport kiosk that was installed at the shelter there. Buses run from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. seven days a week.

COTA CEO Curtis Stitt said he expects the service to compete with other modes of transportation because of the price, ease of use and speed with which users can get to the airport.

"Residents who live Downtown don't need to go get their car or get an Uber to go to the airport," he said. "We're identifying users and markets and trying to make sure we get folks to understand the benefits of using it."

COTA tried to run buses to the airport in the past, but it didn't last. Stitt said part of the problem was that COTA was cutting service amid a budget crisis, and ridership on what was then known as the Capital City Flyer wasn't strong enough. That line started in May 2001 but was eliminated after two years. The \$5 fares on that line were higher than on normal service.

Buses are using I-670 between Downtown and the airport and they are allowed to travel on the shoulder when traffic clogs during rush hours, Stitt said. The buses will stop at a specially branded shelter in the airport's arrivals area, where people are picked up after flying.

Marketing the bus line, Stitt said, will be key. When travelers get off planes at Port Columbus, they'll see advertisements for the line on the concourse and on their smartphones when they check social-media accounts.

"The level of service is going to be a little bit above what folks think of as public transportation, and yet it's going to be at a public-transportation price and schedule," said Rod Borden, the airport's chief operating officer.

Inside the buses, COTA has installed luggage racks and USB ports for riders to charge their cellphones.

Borden said he expects airport employees to start using the service as well.

The new shuttle will simplify transportation for bodybuilders, anime fans and thousands of other convention-goers who come to Columbus every year for events at the convention center, said Don Brown, executive director of the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority.

The shuttle also makes it easier to attract new large events to Columbus, he said. Ground transportation probably was a factor in the Democratic National Committee's decision to hold this year's convention in Philadelphia instead of Columbus, Brown said.

"That would be a type of event where groups of delegates are coming in and would prefer to travel together," he said. "That's a perfect example where such a service might have been very useful and made us very attractive."

In the past, Columbus has had to offer to pay for shuttle services as part of its bid for conventions, Brown said.

"We believe the demand is there. We believe it's an expectation coming in for conferences," he said. "They find similar ground-transportation service in our competitive set elsewhere."