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Digital age advances in Harvard Square



Harvard University transportation services director John Nolan (left) and general manager David Harris look at a map displaying the real-time location of college shuttle buses, available online at shuttle.harvard.edu. (MARK WILSON/GLOBE STAFF)

By Janice O'Leary, Globe Correspondent | October 21, 2007

As Harvard Square counts down the days until its free Wi-Fi goes live, it has become increasingly digital.

Already, some of the 8 million or so visitors to the Square can take an anticipatory virtual tour of its streets and shops online, through a link on the Harvard Square Business Association website. And Harvard students and staff can now log on to the Internet to track university shuttle buses - no more worried waits at night or cold waits as the weather turns to winter.

Come Nov. 1, all of that online tracking and exploring can happen at places like

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Winthrop Park or the Pit outside the T stop. Free wireless service will be offered outdoors from the Inn at Harvard to the Charles Hotel to the Cambridge Common, according to Denise Jillson, executive director of the business association.

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"After working with the city and Harvard, we hired a private contractor to deploy a mesh network," she said. "The technology has advanced so much in just the last six months."

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As her group geared up for the free Wi-Fi, Jillson said it also wants to showcase its website and make it more fun. The association signed up with Waltham-based EveryScape to have an interactive map of Harvard Square linked to the site. This is one of the company's first such maps to go live.

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Jillson also said that more filming of interiors of individual businesses will take place this week, and the pictures will be added to the virtual tour on harvardsquare.com.

"This will be great for people planning parties or places to meet," she said.

At the same time that the business association was amping up its high-tech offerings, Harvard University was implementing some of the latest transportation technology on college campuses. Harvard is believed to be the first university in the Northeast and only the seventh in the nation to sign up for the shuttle-tracking system.

Students or staff can access the map at shuttle.harvard.edu and track the five shuttle buses on two major routes around the university. Eventually, the site will include all 15 shuttles and routes connecting the business and medical schools with the main campus.

"It's pretty cool," said John Nolan, director of transportation services for the university. "Students are so mobile, now they can call up the map from their PDAs or computers without the university investing in a lot of hard infrastructure.

"From a safety perspective, this is also a good thing," he said. "Students won't have to wait so long outside."

Nolan said he also is looking ahead as the Allston campus becomes a reality. This system will help link the two areas.

Start-up costs have been about \$150,000, which includes the installation of global-positioning systems in each bus, Nolan said.

Some features of the site include being able to turn off particular routes so you can focus on just the one you need. Tiddlywinks-shaped markers show each vehicle as it approaches individual buildings or stops. Nolan said the devices ping so frequently to satellites that there are very few pauses in their movements that don't relate to traffic or light signals.

Most of the feedback during the project's development was positive, Nolan said, although some drivers were concerned about the tracking being invasive.

"But they understand that is not a primary objective for us," he

said.

David E. Harris, Harvard's general manager for transportation services, first brought the system to Nolan's attention.

Nolan made the trip to North Carolina State University, the program's first site.

"When I saw it in action, I was amazed," Nolan said.

He quizzed the students on that campus and discovered how popular it was.

"We needed to do something better to communicate the shuttle times to faculty, staff, and students," he said.

The shuttles run from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and do not always run to a rigid schedule because of traffic delays.

Nolan hopes this will help riders, and administrators, estimate arrival times more precisely. ■

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