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Free bus may be en route

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Students tired of finding a designated driver or cab when traveling off campus may have a free alternative starting in the fall.

The people behind "To the Bottom and Back," a nonprofit bus service, are talking with university administrators to work out a route to campus.

The program, founded by Jim Porter last August, provides free transportation from 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. every Thursday through Saturday. The buses can be tracked online and by iPhone, Porter said. The buses are also available for private events, said Sandy Appelman, a partner in the company.

Right now, two buses follow a continuous loop from Ellwood Thompson's Natural Market to the Market at Tobacco Row, according to the Web site. The school buses are easy to spot with their lime-green and black paint, as well as the license plates "2BNB" and "2BNB-2." They stop anywhere along the way to pick up riders, Porter said.

Appelman had formed a business plan four years ago for a very similar program, in which riders would pay \$5 to be picked up and dropped off around the city. He pitched the proposal to GRTC, but did not receive any positive feedback, he said.

"One day I was watching the news back in August, and I see a story on Jim Porter and the bus, and I said, 'Oh my God!'" Appelman said. "I wasn't jealous, I was envious, because I knew it would work."

He approached Porter, showed him his business plan and they have been working together ever since, he said. Porter said he had been driving people around the city of Richmond since he was 18 years old.

"I used to drive people around in my dad's Winnebago," he said.

Two car accidents also motivated Porter to start the program.

"I was a passenger on my way to my son's high school graduation in 2007, when we were hit by a drunk driver," he said.

Another car accident in 1998 left him paralyzed for a year. He relearned how to walk, but still has some paralysis on the side of his face, he said.

Porter said he used to hang out on the Richmond campus and he hoped that with a new route to the university, the gap between Richmond students and Virginia Commonwealth University students, which has opened during the last 20 years, would shrink.

Steve Bisese, Richmond's vice president for Student Development, said talks about the

program were still in the very early stages.

"If you contribute to it, and you pay for that service in some way, then the question has to be asked, 'Are you assuming liability of it?' and those kinds of things," he said.

Bisese has talked to members of student government about the program and said it wouldn't be long before they made a decision.

If a partnership is worked out, students may be able to use the bus by next school year, he said. The idea is going to be discussed with the university's transportation group, he said.

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"We have an amazing city, and I want to see it really flourish," Appelman said.

Daytime bus routes to museums, historical sites and shopping centers are future goals, he said.

Both Porter and Appelman stressed that the program was not solely for passengers too intoxicated to drive.

"It's not just a transportation system for drunk people," Appelman said. "It's just to move people around the city of Richmond efficiently."

Still, the bus is a lot of fun, Porter said.

"The atmosphere is unbelievable," he said.

The majority of the riders are VCU students, but anyone can hop on the bus. Everyone is very friendly toward one another while riding the bus, and people have applauded when they see the bus drive by, he said.

Appelman said that although similar shuttle and trolley programs in the past had become unsuccessful, it was not the case with this program.

"I think everybody was sitting there waiting for us to fail, and now they've realized that we're not going to. Now the advertisers are coming on board, and more people in the community are stepping up to help fund it," he said.

The funding for the nonprofit company comes entirely from sponsors and donations. Sponsors include Star-lite Dining and Lounge, Bank Restaurant and Nightlife Virginia, and about a dozen others, Appelman said. Tips can be given on the bus or through a PayPal link on the Web site, he said.

"A lot of the donations come from parents of VCU students who send checks," Porter said.

The money goes toward insurance, inspections and a bus host, who acts as a sort of

mediator, Appelman said. It also pays for the roughly \$50 in gas the bus goes through per night.

To the Bottom and Back has not used any advertising, Appelman said. The Facebook fan page had 3,026 fans as of Friday, Feb. 26, and the service also maintains a Twitter account.

The system is so popular that drivers are starting to have to turn people away along the route.

"Two buses do not serve this area," Appelman said. "We need to have at least four buses running on Main and Cary [streets]."

Right now, the goal is to raise enough money to add buses to the fleet, he said.

The program also drives private parties any night of the week, ranging from birthday parties to office get-togethers Appelman said. A group of women even organized a wine tasting through three Charlottesville wineries, he said. He said he hoped the buses would soon have routes to Norfolk and Charlottesville for concerts and other events.

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