Phone apps keep transit riders on time

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Allen Stern says he had a 40-minute wait between buses when he lived in the Manhattan borough of New York City. Using a free mobile app that became available about a year ago, he could at least tap into the Metropolitan Transit Authority with his cell phone and find out exactly how far away the next bus was from his stop.

"If you could stay in your house another 10 minutes because you know the bus isn't here yet, and don't have to stand in freezing rain till it gets there, wouldn't you?" said Stern, who moved in July to Austin, Texas.

Cities across the United States use the Internet and smart phone technology to help riders make connections with their transit systems, whether the system is bus or rail or tram.

Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Boston are among the cities that have begun test-driving systems within the past nine months. Orlando announced in July that it had given the green light to a project to provide bus schedule information on select routes to riders with smart phones by October.

San Francisco, Washington and Chicago have apps that allow riders to use their Internet-accessible phones to get real-time information showing when their next bus or train is due. "It's part of what had to happen in the evolution of transit, bringing technology into it," said Stern, who maintains a public transportation blog called Inside Transit.

Most apps are available for all kinds of phones with Internet access. The

apps provided by the municipal transit authority are free. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority relaunched its "Next Bus" program in July 2009 after a trial run in 2007. Next Bus is available on 335 routes with 12,000 stops for no charge.

In September, the Rochester Genesee Regional Transportation Authority in New York is to install electronic Advanced Traveler Information Systems signs at bus stops to connect riders to real-time bus status, said Shelly Dinan, vice president of communication for the authority. The technology combines GPS, Web and cellular technologies, she said. The authority has a phone app in development that should be available by the end of the year she said.

Apps designed by third-party developers sometimes come with a fee. "Exit Strategy NYC" is $4.99 through iTunes and plots exactly which subway stop is nearest your intended destination. The San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit app is available for iPhones for $1.99. Other apps are available for Android, Blackberry and other brands as well.

"The transit industry as a whole is embracing social media and figuring out how we can use it to provide value to our riders," said Denis Eirikis, spokesman for the Florida Public Transportation Association.

"It's part of what had to happen in the evolution of transit, bringing technology into it," said Stern, the Inside Transit blog writer.

The San Francisco's BART was one of the first major transportation systems to go digital, in 2007, Stern said. BART was among the first to allow third-party developers to have access to its train and bus scheduling data, something New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority recently opened itself to, Stern said.

"Technology tries to help get more riders on the trains and buses, and

potentially happier," Stern said. "That's a good thing, even if they're not paying for it."

The movement of third-party developers showing what they could do with transit system data was a necessary step, said Josh Whiton, a computer scientist with his own company that develops real-tracking system apps for small, mostly college, towns.

"A transit authority needs an official, reliable technology offering that is going to be consistent," he said. Orlando's Central Florida Regional Transportation Authority plans to spend $2.4 million -- mostly from federal grants -- on a bar code system installed at bus stations that will let riders with smart phones or cell phones access schedule information at their stop, spokesman Matt Friedman said.

The transportation authority will test the system at stops along several routes that have yet to be determined, Friedman said. "I think it's a very unique way of adding some new way for transit passengers to find information on the service right at their fingertip," said Jeff Hiott, senior program manager for bus technical services for the American Public Transportation Association.

The real-time tracking owes its development in part to computer scientists such as Whiton. As an undergraduate at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, he spent a lot of time riding buses -- and waiting at bus stops.

Six years ago, he started Transloc and has sold his Transit Visualization Systems to 16 cities, mostly college towns, including Gainesville, Fla.; Princeton, N.J.; Baton Rouge; and Auburn, Ala.

"When you think of a university college town or a transit rider that rides a shuttle system, you had your first riding demographic with 100 percent

cell phone, computer access," Whiton said. "You had the most wired rider in the country. That's where our technology was a hit first."

"Those little university systems gave us a glimpse of the future," he said. "Now we're seeing that computer and cell phone ownership among municipal transit systems."