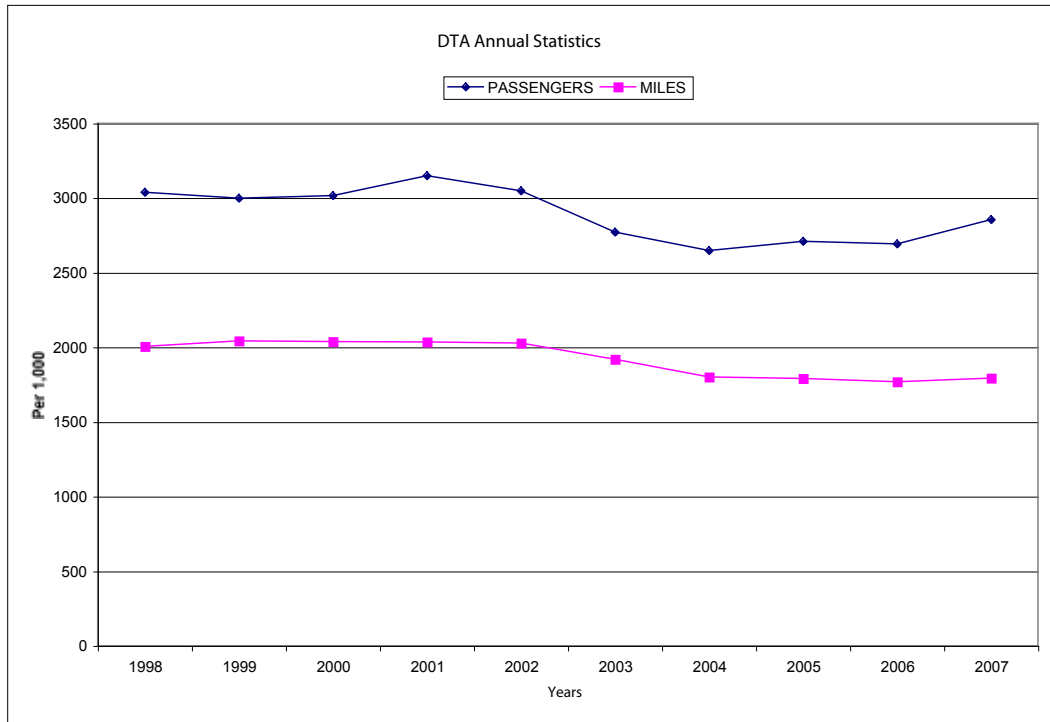
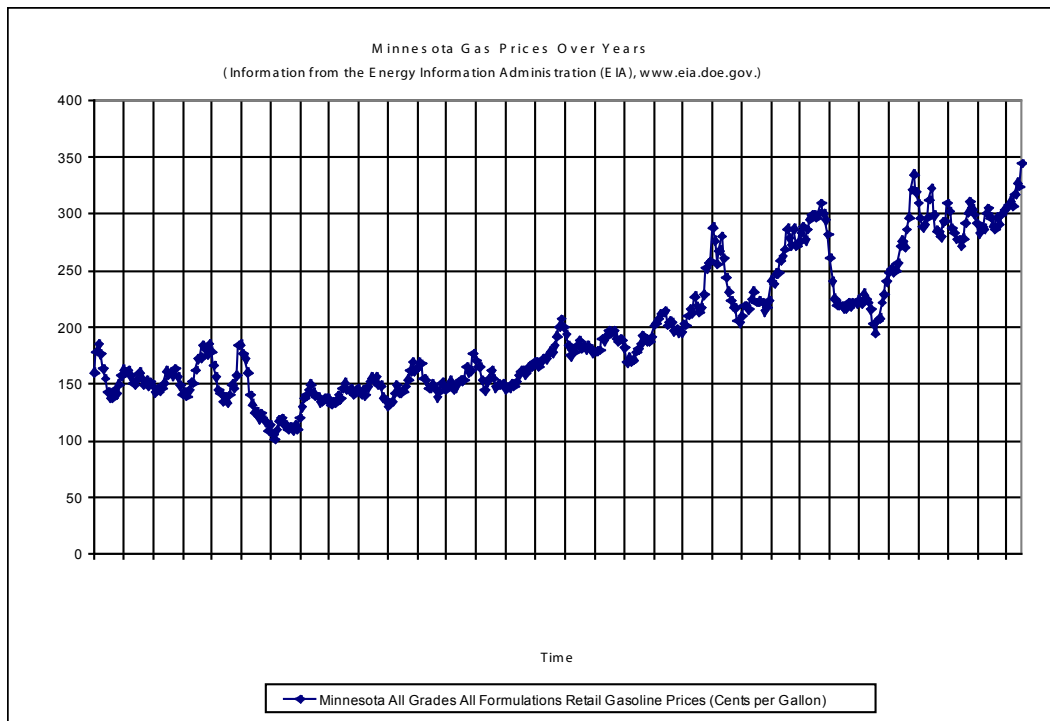


DTA ridership rises with gas prices among other factors



ABOVE: According to data released by the Duluth Transit Authority (DTA), ridership is down overall in the last ten years, but there has been an increase in ridership from 2004 to 2005, and from 2006 to 2007. It is too early to know how 2008 will compare to previous years.

BELOW: According to data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA), Minnesota gas prices rose from 2004 to 2005. Prices jumped even more significantly during 2006. Prices were consistently high in 2007 and continued to rise going into 2008.



BY SARAH HASSELQUIST

Jayson Johnson has been driving Duluth Transit Authority buses for the last 10 years. Although he does not ride city buses to get around town, he has noticed an increase in ridership at the DTA in fuller buses.

“It’s a little harder to say on time when more people ride,” Johnson said.

According to data from DTA director of operations Phil Torgerson, ridership has indeed been increasing overall and among college students through the U Pass program. The program allows students to ride the bus for free with the use of their student IDs, and each student pays a small fee to the DTA through their school’s mandatory fees.

The U-Pass Program started providing service to UMD in September of 2000. The following fall in 2001, Lake Superior College (LSC) and College of St. Scholastica (CSS) were included in the program. The U-Pass program recently expanded to also include the University of Wisconsin Superior (UWS) in September of 2007. In each of these years, the DTA has seen an increase in overall ridership.

Johnson said that he believed the first of three main reasons was gas prices for causing the increase in ridership in recent years.

A recent poll of 96 UMD students, conducted by the author, supported Johnson’s theory; 99 percent indicated that they perceived the gas prices as expensive. Some even took the time to write “very” next to their answer one or two times. The poll also showed that approximately 51.5 percent of those surveyed who ride the bus said they did so because it would help them save money on gas. Of all those surveyed, they make up of 35.4 percent.

UMD second-year student Jamy Szabla said he rides the bus because he doesn’t want to drive for two main reasons.

“Gas prices,” Szabla said, “and I don’t want to pay for parking.”

Szabla is not the only student unwilling to pay for parking. Four students indicated their agreement by writing in “parking” as a reason to why they didn’t take the bus. Three of the four students also indicated gas prices were a deterrent.

Johnson’s second idea for why ridership is up was that it is cheaper to not have a car and have to pay for car insurance. The same poll supported that theory, showing that approximately 22 percent of those surveyed rode the bus because they didn’t have cars.

Johnson’s last theory considered the bigger picture.

“I think people are becoming more environmentally aware,” he said.

Although the survey did not provide this answer as an option, the student could choose “other” and write in another reason for riding the bus. Only one student indicated a concern for the environment, and this student also did not have a car.

Additionally, Torgerson attributed other variables to the changes in ridership over the years.

“... Increase in fuel prices is an example, but other factors such as weather, detours, service changes and special events will also result in short-term and long-term trend changes,” Torgerson wrote in an e-mail.

Ridership from UMD is also up because of the increasing popularity of the program for University for Senior students. An endowment from Robert Brownlee of \$5,000 per year allows U for S students to ride the DTA buses and STRIDE vehicles for free.

Mary Lee Lalich, a program associate with the U for S, said that ridership started off slow with only about five or eight members of the program. This spring, however, there were 120 students signed up for bus passes, up from 80 students in the spring of 2007.

One of the reasons for the popularity might be gas prices, said Carol Schweiger, another program associate with the U for S.

“Some people are on limited budgets,” she said.

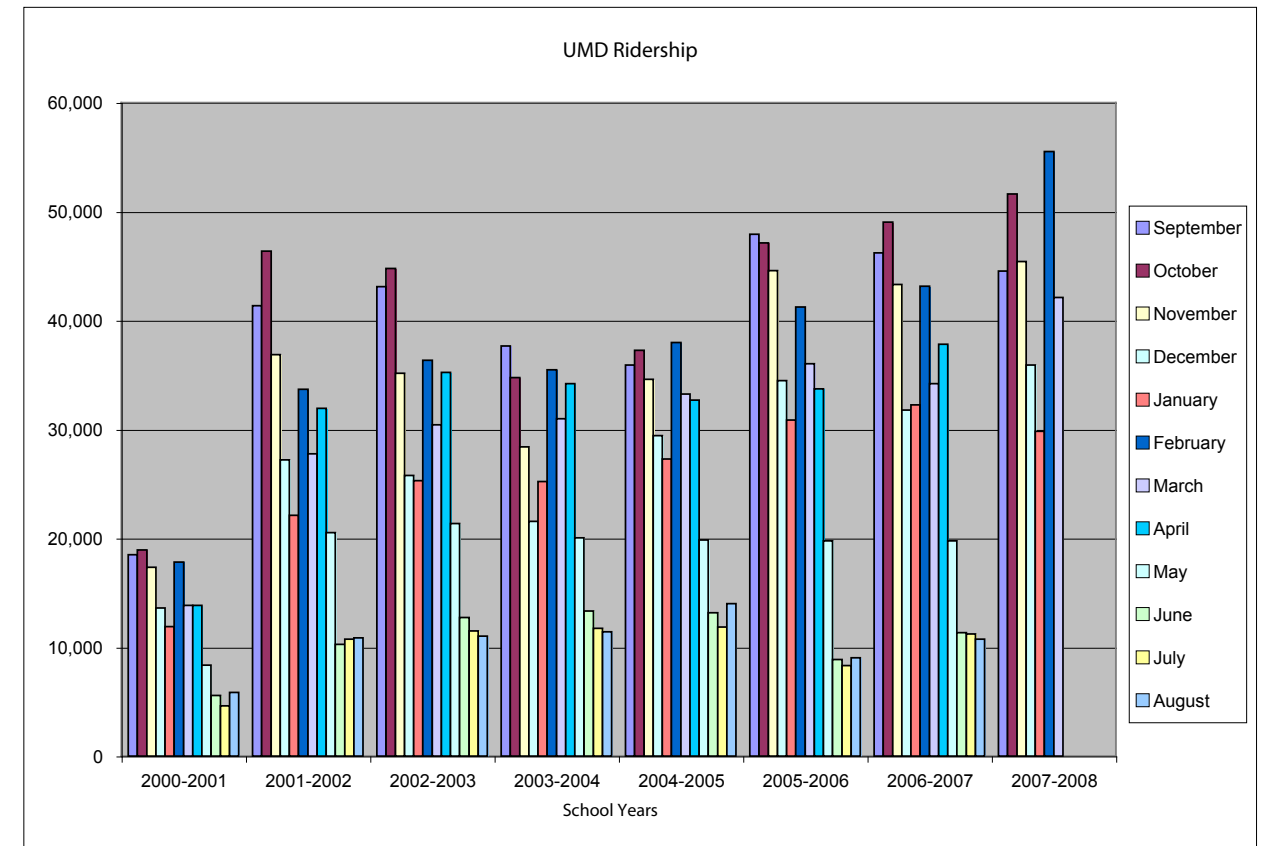
But there may be other reasons for why the U for S students are using the program in record numbers.

“Lots of people can’t walk from the parking lots [far from campus buildings]. The buses provide opportunities for people who may not otherwise be able to attend classes,” Schweiger said.

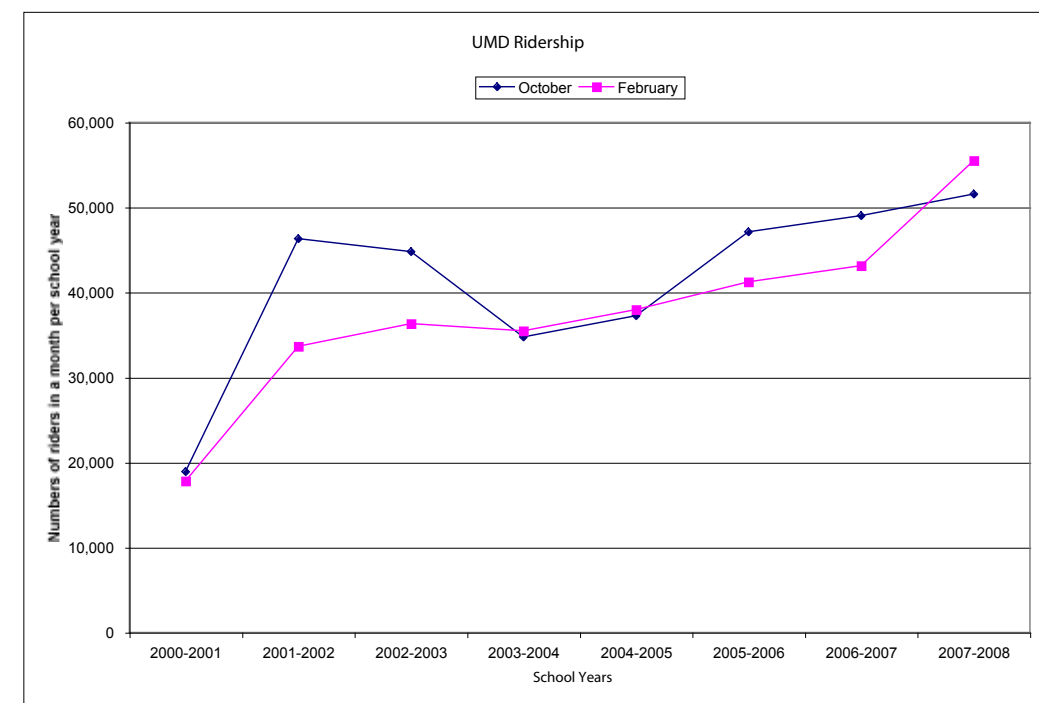
Jan Nelson is in her third year as a U for S student and uses the bus passes provided by the program.

“It’s funded just for us,” Nelson said. “Even if you have wheelchairs, walkers or canes, [you can] use the elevators,” Nelson said happily. “It’s very easy.”

All data displayed in the charts and graphs pertaining to ridership were contributed by the DTA.



ABOVE: UMD ridership for the school years from 2000 to current has a general up-trend, though the ridership was lower in 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. In this valley on the chart, the gas prices were relatively low, with the lowest price at 139 cents in April of 2003, and the highest peak was near the end of August 2005 at 288 cents. In the years following 2005, gas prices were much more varied and jumped much more drastically.



RIGHT: With the school year’s frequent holidays and breaks, the two months that keep students in Duluth the most are October and February. In both months over the years, there is an initial jump in ridership as the program developed, and there is a lull in the school years between 2003 and 2005. After that, UMD ridership increases with gas prices. This also would boost the overall DTA ridership.