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Metra leaves search engines at the station

Commuters survive with Web options other than onboard WiFi

April 25, 2010 | By Richard Wronski, Tribune reporter

Doug Denson enjoys commuting on Metra instead of driving downtown, but he'd like it a lot more if he could use WiFi to download documents, dash off e-mails or polish a PowerPoint.

"It's an hour ride for me, so it's an hour of lost productivity if I don't do something," Denson, a company CEO from Medinah, said as he traveled on his Milwaukee West line train.

Denson and other laptop-toting commuters are learning what people from Boston to San Francisco already know: Having Internet access on trains — the same kind of WiFi available in coffee shops and libraries — can help riders be more productive, save time or simply make a humdrum ride more fun with a little Web surfing.

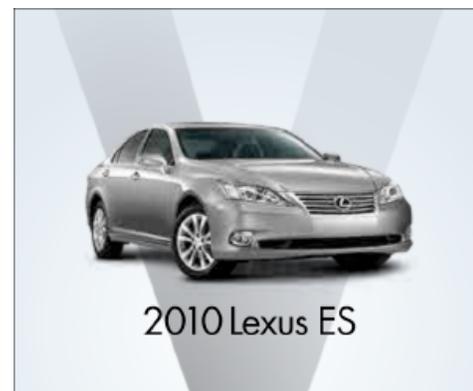
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But WiFi doesn't fly on Metra. The commuter rail agency, which still punches tickets by hand and only recently started taking credit cards, says providing wireless Internet is too expensive and technologically challenging.

Those reasons aren't stopping transit agencies elsewhere from joining the broadband bandwagon. Cities big and small have overcome the hurdles and added WiFi, or will soon. This month, New Mexico's Rail Runner commuter line serving Albuquerque and Santa Fe opened free WiFi service to its 4,500 riders.

Next month, New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority plans to open bids from companies that want to offer Wi-Fi to the 300,000 daily commuters on the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North lines, the nation's busiest.

WiFi proponents say making trains rolling hot spots, whether for free or for a small charge, is attracting new riders and encouraging people to leave cars at home.

"The response from riders has been overwhelmingly positive," said Scott Farnelant, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Bay Commuter Rail Co., which started WiFi two years ago.

Transportation experts say WiFi isn't just a frill. They liken it to installing air conditioning on coaches decades ago.

"It shows that public transit offers 21st century amenities," said Virginia Miller, spokeswoman for the American Public Transportation Association. "People are becoming more technology-oriented, and their long commutes on trains give them more time to be more productive."

A 2007 study, conducted for the Illinois Department of Transportation at the direction of the legislature, concluded that providing broadband Internet access on Metra and Amtrak could "have positive impacts on traffic congestion, traffic safety, the economy, and other aspects of the quality of life Illinoisans enjoy."

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In particular, the study said WiFi offers more telecommuting options for workers. Installing it would also create jobs.

Laptop users are already a common sight on Metra trains these days. No local studies are available, but about 71 percent of commuter rail travelers carry a laptop, PDA or WiFi-capable device and would use the services of wireless Internet connections, according to WiFi Rail Inc., the company that provides service on San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit.

Metra says commuters who need a mobile Internet connection can buy the service through their cell phone providers. But this is costly — fees range from \$20 to \$60 a month extra — and users say service on trains is spotty.

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In California's Silicon Valley, some high-tech companies even give their employees credit for time they spend working while commuting on the Altamont Commuter Express, which started offering WiFi in 2003 aboard its trains between Stockton and San Jose.

Last month, Amtrak began offering free wireless on all 20 of its high-speed lines that operate on the East Coast. WiFi is also available on commuter bus lines in more than 20 cities and intercity coaches such as Megabus.

After a successful pilot project on one train line in the Boston area, the Massachusetts Bay Commuter Rail now runs at least two WiFi cars per train on its 13 lines. The cars are emblazoned with a bright orange logo from AT&T, which provides the service.

Boston's system cost about \$1.3 million in startup fees, but officials predicted they will make up the costs with new customers.

So why no WiFi for Metra's 150,000 daily riders?

Metra says it doesn't have the money to install equipment along its 11 rail lines.

"We barely have enough money to operate let alone add such a luxury," Metra spokeswoman Judy Pardonnet said.

The IDOT study estimated that the equipment to provide reliable, quality Internet access could cost \$12,000 to \$15,000 per mile of track. So, for Metra's 550 miles of track, the cost could be about \$6.6 million.

Experts, however, say the technology is much cheaper and better now.

"The infrastructure was doable then; it's even more doable now," said Ramavarapu "RS" Sreenivas, an engineering professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who oversaw the study.

New York's MTA, with an \$800 million budget shortfall, doesn't plan to pay anything for WiFi installation, spokesman Aaron Donovan said.

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MTA asked potential providers to pay for the equipment and service themselves. In return, MTA plans to offer incentives, such as advertising considerations. MTA's Internet might not be free because companies may be allowed to charge customers, Donovan said.

Metra has met informally with companies that provide wireless Internet service, but they are willing to participate only if they can advertise aboard trains, perhaps with the kind of video screens common in elevators, Pardonnet said.

"We think it would be sort of compromising to the passengers because we would be forcing them to see and hear something they may not want to see and hear," Pardonnet said. "They are pretty accustomed to the way they travel now, so we don't know if that trade-off is really worthwhile."

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Besides, Metra says it's not sure customers want or need the service.

"A lot of people have air cards or have a connection (to the Internet) through their phones anyway," Pardonnet said. "It's not like we've had a lot of people crying out for WiFi on the trains."

Nevertheless, Metra Director James Dodge, whose background is information technology, says he's eager to put WiFi aboard Metra.

"It's on our radar screen; we're just not sure how to pull it off now," Dodge said. "I certainly wouldn't mind because there are plenty of times I work on the train."

State Sen. Michael Bond, D-Grayslake, whose legislation last year compelled Metra to accept credit cards, said he will continue to push for WiFi on Metra.

"It's all a matter of bringing Metra into the 21st century. I had to drag them kicking and screaming to take credit cards," Bond said. "People will wonder why didn't we do it a long time ago."

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