In the current transit system that once was perceived as mostly serving folks with disabilities, new immigrants without driver's licenses and people in poverty is now looking a little more mainstream.

"Because people see other people using the buses, they think, 'If it's good enough for them, I can ride the bus,'" he said. "And it's the reverse as well."

There's one other piece of evidence that the bus-riding population is more representative of the broader community than it once was — all of the advertising opportunities on the outside of city buses have been.

"All of our buses are wrapped in advertising," Anderson said, adding that all spots on three replacement buses coming later this year have also been sold. Advertisers also are buying slots at bus stops and on transit benches.

The next phase

While the initial change was a revenue-neutral one, the study's recommendations included a Phase 2 that would expand service to and around the university area — although only if MSU students were willing to pay for it.

Called the "Green Transportation Fee," the proposed new revenue source was a per-credit charge for all MSU students, capped at $9 per student per semester. The fee has since risen to $10.20 for fall and spring students.

"In exchange for that, you can ride any city bus with your MSU card," Anderson said.

MSU's student government and administration supported the green fee, as did students themselves in a campus vote. And students and staff definitely jumped on board when the new system and the improved service began with the start of classes in 2012.

The academic year generated 428,000 rides on MSU-focused routes, compared to 269,000 the previous year, according to PSU statistics. The student fees generated the bulk of the roughly $530,000 a year that the university is now contributing to the transit system.

Manito Mayor Eric Anderson, who said he often watched empty buses roll by his financial services office at Warren and Second streets in the past, credits the college-financed improvements with boosting the vitality of the transit system.
BUS: Riders on the bus go up, up, up

“...the best thing that happened to me. It was the green fee at MSU,” the mayor said. “...With the advent of the green fee, the bus system is really providing a service to the community.”

Financially conservative, Mayor Anderson said he supports the transit system despite its being heavily subsidized by state dollars. The ability to take a bus saves college students hundreds of dollars in car-related expenses, the system provides transportation for people with few or other options, and the buses reduce traffic congestion on campus and elsewhere in the city.

What worries him is the aging population, the growth in Mankato as a health care center, the city’s expansion, the increasing perception of Mankato as a metropolitan area and the demand to drive up people’s expectations of the level of service that should be provided by the bus system. “I can tell you that the demands are going to grow, and the challenge will be to how to use those limited resources to provide the best services at a price that’s reasonable,” he said.

More changes coming

The growth in the ridership and efficiency of Mankato’s bus system has been noticed by state transportation officials, who recently granted the city additional dollars for route expansions that will begin later this year.

The expansion grants are awarded based on need but also on a transit system’s performance compared to similar cities. “We were able to rank pretty high and squeak some money out,” Mark Anderson said. “It’s been a long time and we’ve never had expansion dollars.”

It was the opposite in the 1980s and 1990s, when declining revenue was prompting reductions in service, which made the bus a less attractive option to riders, which means less revenue in the fare box.

“A few years ago we looked like we were in a death spiral,” the transit director said.

Now, he’s thinking about more expansion — saying buses are longer than is able to contemplate eventually bringing back service to neighborhoods such as the rural area and west Mankato. And he believes the city will have to find a way to add a route to the Wabash distribution center by the time it opens next year on the far east side of town.

The new routes approved for this year won’t reach that far, but starting July 28, a route tentatively named Route 13 will provide bus service to the expanding Wickersham Health Campus on the city’s far northeast end, along with stops downtown, at Bethany Lutheran College, the hospital/clinic, Century Plaza, the VA Clinic and the Menard’s retail area. A second new route will come in the fall to more efficiently connect MSU to apartment complexes and other students housing up to a mile east and southeast of campus.

Operating costs typically run about $20 per hour of service, but federal and state aid covers 50 percent of operating deficits on eligible routes. State and federal funds cover 80 percent of new bus costs with a 20 percent local match, and those buses have a sticker price of about $340,000 for the largest buses and $142,000 for smaller ones.

The new routes will use one of the big buses, the ones that can hold 26 passengers when all the standing-room spots are occupied, Anderson said. And unlike a few years ago, he’s confident that virtually every space will be filled on a regular basis.

“They will be standing all the way to the front,” he said.

Students flock to bus stops

By Mark Fischenich

MARKF@MankatoFreePress.com

MANKATO — Imagine the sort of Minnesota State University student that might be waiting for the city bus on campus during the final week of class, and Zach Shambolt might be someone who would come to mind.

The senior communications major is without a vehicle after the car he shared with his younger brother met its demise.

“I tried to convince him to drive a little slower,” Shambolt said of his little brother who crashed the car. “But he was OK, and that was the main thing.”

A Plymouth native, Shambolt never used mass transit growing up. But he likes the Greater Mankato Transit system, with buses running often during the school day from his off-campus apartment complex to the Centennial Student Union in the heart of campus.

“It’s good, better than walking,” he said. “Even if I had a car, I’d use it,... My buddies who have cars use the bus, too.”

In fact, the vast majority of students interviewed by The Free Press when they were waiting for or departing from a city bus said they had a vehicle. What they don’t have — by preference — is a long walk from the sprawling campus parking lots or an MSU parking pass, which can run $100 or more a semester.

By comparison, all MSU students pay a Green Transportation Fee that tops out at about $10 a semester and provides unlimited fare access to city buses.

“It’s free and it’s really convenient, pulling right up to CSU,” said Amanda Gohlin, a junior.

Gohlin lives far enough from the nearest bus stop that she drives to the stop, parks and buses to campus, avoiding the parking fees and the long walk from the parking lots to classrooms.

Chelsey Peterson, a junior nursing student who transferred from the University of Minnesota, said she used Metro Transit constantly.

“I didn’t even have a car when I lived there,” Peterson said.

She’s a car owner in Mankato, but when she discovered the bus stopped right in front of her house, she started using it. Buses might not run as frequently as in the Twin Cities, but she doesn’t have to transfer between routes like she did there.

Kierstin Guenther, by contrast, specifically looked for a place to live for the 2013-14 school year where she wouldn’t have to drive, picking a place by James Avenue after living on North 10th Street the previous year.

“When I moved this year, it was to be closer, to be able to walk or take the bus. I walk when it’s nice,” she said. “I didn’t want to have a parking pass and deal with parking and more gas money.”

Guenther’s only complaint about the Mankato bus service is the overcrowding on buses that arrive at MSU just before the top of the hour. She said she typically takes an earlier bus to avoid “super-packed” rides.

Overcrowding was the only concern mentioned by Ashok KC, an international student from Nepal who grew up using mass transit.

“When I’m from, most people didn’t have private cars, so they had to use transit,” he said, adding that he’s impressed with Mankato’s service. “It’s very good. During the winter, yes, it’s very crowded. If they could increase the number during winter, that would be great.”

Most of the students said their taste of transit in Mankato won’t lead them to car-free lifestyles after graduation. A couple said they would consider it if they lived in an urban area like downtown Minneapolis, but they still love their cars.

“I like driving around myself,” Peterson said.