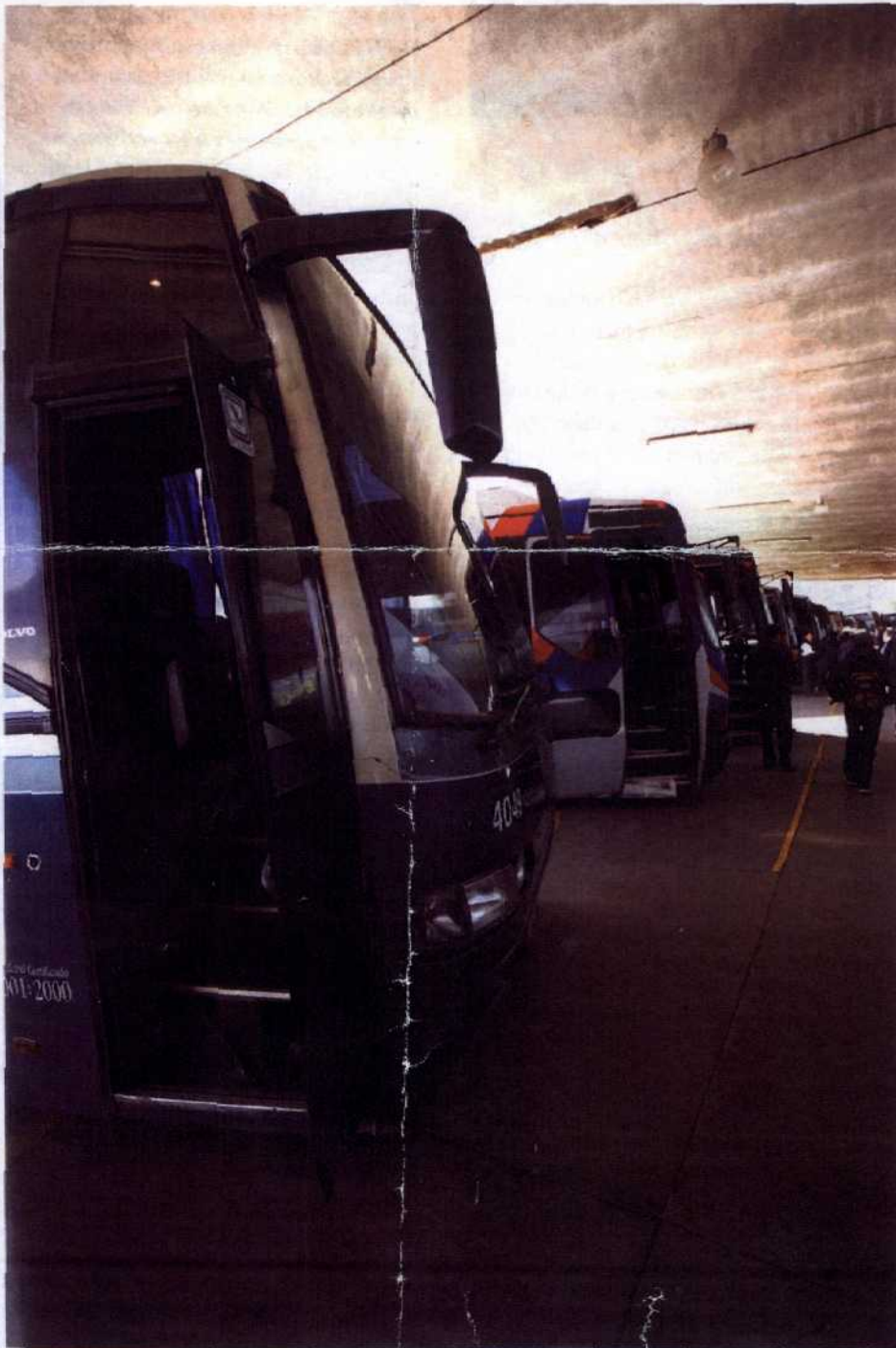


# Devils And Details

We Could Learn A Lot From Lawrence BY JOHN ROBINSON



Dante's *Inferno* describes hell as a place with many levels. I think I know what he means, having just experienced hell on a recent visit to Lawrence, Kan. It's not what you think, Mizzou fans. Lawrence is not a bad place; quite the contrary, it's a pleasant town built atop the rolling hills of the Sunflower State.

Similar to Dante's descent into hell, my tour of Lawrence seemed to follow a system of concentric circles around Allen Fieldhouse. But unlike the *Inferno*, I was surprised to find a city and campus that is, well, charming and vibrant — terms that most Missourians would consider blasphemy and deceit, the kind of flattery and pandering that might earn me a one-way ticket to the eighth circle of hell.

More than 170 years of mutual distrust and hate mean that when Missourians approach the Kansas border, they imagine the apocalyptic sign that reads: *Abandon hope all ye who enter*. Jayhawks simply warn: "Beware the Phog."

Even though Tiger fans — and Missourians in general — love to rain hell on Lawrence, we can learn a few things from our nemesis to the west. For starters, the University of Kansas Alumni Association boasts more members than the Mizzou Alumni Association, a revelation that sticks in the eye of a Tiger like the barb on Beelzebub's tail.

But the hell I experienced was the realization that Lawrence has an advantage when it comes to getting around town. So do Ames, Iowa, and Champaign, Ill. These college towns have invested in transit services that reach critical masses.



When Lawrence runs circles around us, it feels like hell. Lawrence's public transit system is driven by the students. They don't actually steer the buses, but they sure do ride them. Late on a Friday afternoon, the buses are mostly packed as they leave the KU campus to circulate through student housing neighborhoods. That evening and late into the night, "safe buses" will take over, ferrying students from nighttime hangouts to residential neighborhoods. Last semester alone, students filled 54,000 "safe bus" seats for rides home.

Unless you think you can stop students from partying, these safe buses perform a valuable service, making late-night streets safer and sparing courtrooms a longer docket of DWIs. The students voted to fund a similar program called Safe Ride, which allows them to call one of 10 Toyota Priuses to pick them up and deliver them safely home. The program delivered 20,000 safe rides last year to students who showed a college ID.

Lawrence drivers can't help but like the transit system. Overall, the buses average 15 passengers per vehicle hour. And when drivers see buses filled with



commuters, they realize that they're competing with fewer cars on the street, with less congestion and fewer pollutants.

Support for mass transit comes from just about every sector in Lawrence, including retirees, the disabled and businesses. Most encouraging is the strong partnership between KU and the city of Lawrence. The two met a few years back

to devise a way to pool their respective endangered bus systems — to combine them into one seamless transit service that maintained the strong points of the old systems and incorporated new services based on surveys, needs and available money.

Who pays? City voters approved a one-fourth-cent sales tax back in 2008. The university parking authority is happy to chip in because parking spaces are at a premium, and bus ridership eases the pressure. Again and again, the students vote to help fund the buses. The student body continually elects representatives who are supportive of a quality mass transit program that serves the students' needs. The city of Lawrence generates \$3.2 million per year for the bus program, but KU kicks in \$4.3 million, of which \$3.9 million comes from students who shell out \$12.10 per semester for the Safe Ride and safe bus services — a small price to pay to drive the devil of drunkenness off the roads.

Columbia is studying Lawrence's transit system — and others — to get ideas that will "put butts in seats," to use a popular transit planner term. For my visit to Lawrence, I joined a platoon of Columbia city officials, reporters, transportation advocates and Mizzou students hoping to learn the secrets to mass transit success. Likewise, a similar assembly was full of ideas when it returned from Ames. A visit to Champaign also brought nods of approval.

It's puzzling that the University of Missouri didn't send a representative along with the 18 Columbians who piled into a MO-X bus for the Lawrence study. Instead, Mizzou is taking an independent study route. School officials have hired an Atlanta consulting firm to evaluate the university's transportation needs. Let's hope the analysis will show ways the university can partner with the city to offer efficient mass transit.

A plan can't come too soon. With continuing budget pressures, the City Council has heard transit options that include reducing hours, routes and services. In the final report of the 2011 Columbia Direction Finder Survey, not quite one-third of Columbians have used public transit. Even though 90 percent of the people surveyed were

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not students, half of the respondents listed "expanding public transportation services" as a very high priority (24 percent) or a high priority (26 percent). The survey rates Columbians' overall responses to public transportation as higher importance, but lower satisfaction.

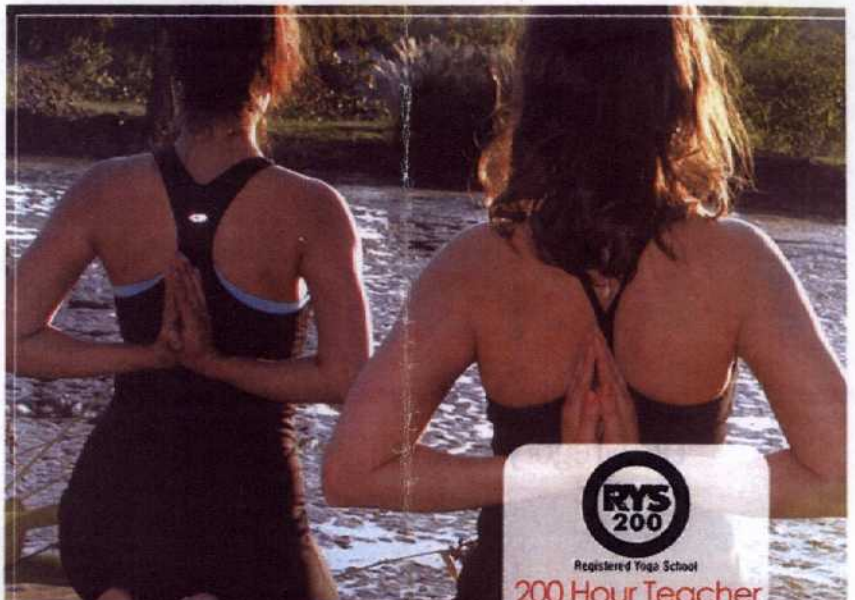
Rather than accept the status quo, a group called Columbians for Modern Efficient Transit (COMET) is gaining traction around town. At a recent meeting, nearly 80 people from all walks of life met in the basement of the Russell Chapel CME Church on Ash Street to build a vision for sustainable public transit. The meeting attracted a sea of new faces, many of them students who realize that public transit is key to a growing city that takes itself seriously.

If the Kansas model teaches us anything, it's that cooperation between city and university is essential. Along Columbia's existing routes, an average 20-minute trip might translate into the same amount of study time for students who could use laptops and iPads while commuting. That additional study time might help raise a grade point average. Who knows? Maybe such transit study time might prevent a few students from flunking out, thus preserving a few thousand dollars in economic impact for Columbia. Well, at least it would cut down on studying or texting while driving.

The benefits extend beyond campus, and even beyond the bus riders themselves. During rush hours, Columbia drivers groan through several hot-spot intersections. The bottlenecks mean that drivers often sit through several stoplight revolutions to cross an intersection. And later this year, when Stadium Boulevard succumbs to construction, the backups might get worse. More butts on the bus means shorter lines at the intersection.

The city and the university and the students can form a win-win-win partnership — the sooner the better, as gas prices soar toward \$4 per gallon.

I have seen the future, through the portal of Lawrence, Kan., and the message is clear: Riding an air-conditioned bus while working on a laptop is a comfortable and efficient way to commute. Allowing Columbia's transit system to wither is the express lane on the road to hell. ■



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