

Lil' Easy works for the Big Easy

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In October 2008 the New Orleans Regional Transportation Authority (NORTA) contracted Veolia Transportation to take over operations in the first turn-key,



delegated management contract of its kind in the United States. Veolia Transportation immediately committed to a strategic rebalancing of service for the citizens of post-Katrina New Orleans with its unique proprietary EasyBus, an on-demand circulator service.

Justin Augustine, a Veolia Transportation general manager and long-time resident of New Orleans, is passionate about rebuilding the city, and is helping to implement his company's latest project.

In the New Orleans Lower 9th Ward, a ride on one of three 14-seat Lil' Easy Dodge Sprinters requires a reservation.

"Of all the communities, Katrina hit the Lower 9th Ward the hardest, so it was fitting that our revitalization efforts we began in January started in that area," says Augustine. "Lil' Easy matches the mobility needs particular to the residents of the Lower 9th Ward."

Efforts began with the service model it calls EasyBus, an on-demand circulator custom-designed to match the mobility needs of each city's population. Veolia Transportation pioneered EasyBus in Europe and determined it the perfect platform for Ward 9 and several others where post-Katrina population levels do not support full fixed-route service. The New Orleans product goes by the brand name the Lil' Easy.

Veolia Transportation says this service borrows from and mixes many traditional services such as fixed route, flex route, paratransit and neighborhood circulators to create its own unique characteristics. The company calls it dynamic routing because the vehicles can do something different during any given hour of service.

"We are committed to helping municipalities across the U.S. meet their unique

transit needs in innovative and cost-effective ways,” says Mark Joseph, CEO of Veolia Transportation. “The EasyBus concept has broad applicability to cities with smaller populations and high demand for public transit.”

Custom designed for the Lower 9th Ward with 24 flexible stops, where a ride on one of three 14-seat Lil’ Easy Dodge Sprinters requires a reservation. The buses circulate every hour on a fixed-route trip between the three transfer points that connect people to major bus routes without an advance trip request. These fixed stops are major destinations in the community and include a grocery store and post office.

Overall, the rules of service and fare structure of fixed route apply to Lil’ Easy. Stop locations are placed about every three to four blocks from all areas of Ward 9. The Lil’ Easy offers on-demand service, with passengers permitted to call and reserve a ride one hour in advance or up to seven days in advance, and will stop two to four blocks from their residence.

Riding the Lil’ Easy costs \$1.25, the same as a regular NORTA bus. The service accepts all RTA tokens, passes and transfers, and operates from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. on weekdays and 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. on weekends and holidays.



Area residents say they already appreciate the service. When the service launched, the first rider told Veolia Transportation she was forced to take a \$17 cab ride to and from her job at the Convention Center every day because she had no transit options. Now, because of the Lil’ Easy, her daily ride costs just \$1.25 each way. She says this service made a huge impact on her livelihood and is more than thrilled with the new service.

Veolia Transportation custom designed its on-demand service with 24 flexible stops. The buses circulate every hour on a fixed-route trip between the three transfer points that connect people to major bus routes without an advance trip request.

Veolia Transportation says the Lil’ Easy is purposely environmentally friendly and convenient for passengers. Normally riders who do not live on a bus route have a long walk to the nearest stop. Instead of stopping at every stop like a normal fixed-route bus, the Lil’ Easy mini-buses stop only where the people with a reservation are waiting, making the service inherently more fuel-efficient. The service goes to the three main stops on every trip, but not to every flexible stop every trip. It only goes to the flexible stops when passengers have made a reservation for pick-up or when a riding passenger requests to be let off at one of these stops.

Though the Lil’ Easy Sprinters are accessible, each with room for two wheelchairs, Veolia Transportation says the service does not replace NORTA ADA-compliant

paratransit service because the service area is contained within a smaller neighborhood. Veolia also says ADA passengers may ride this service if they are able to navigate to a stop location.

Veolia Transportation says the Lil' Easy combines the best aspects of an on-demand neighborhood mini-bus, and is the perfect solution for neighborhoods with low population density or low transit ridership.

The company's marketing experts created a visual style for the service that reflects the cultural richness of New Orleans that is certain to lift spirits. They also customized and coordinated an extensive promotional campaign to promote the Lil' Easy.

Veolia Transportation says it will soon begin rolling out slightly different configurations in other parts of the city when it and NORTA expand the service to three more wards. The Lil' Easy will grow from the three Sprinter mini buses it now runs to probably 10 or more. **BR**