

From the *Press Register*

# Mass transit needed to TK?

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Daily traffic on U.S. 43 could more than double during construction of the ThyssenKrupp AG steel plant, if all the workers drive their own cars.

With gasoline at \$4 per gallon, making the 40-mile round trip each day up U.S. 43 from Interstate 65 to Calvert might seem expensive for people living in urban areas of Mobile and Baldwin counties. But few alternatives exist today for workers who want to avoid the drive.

At the peak of construction, 6,000 to 7,000 workers are expected at the site each day, ThyssenKrupp spokesman Scott Posey said, although they could be spread out over multiple shifts.

Posey said the company thinks it can meet "the majority" of parking needs on site, but "contractors will have to develop their own transportation systems."

Though the \$3.7 billion plant, expected to have 2,700 permanent employees, won't begin operations until late next year, the leap in commuters is coming much sooner. ThyssenKrupp has about 700 construction workers on site now. That number will begin to shoot up after Labor Day when contractors begin erecting the steel structure.

"I think some kind of mass transit system is going to have to be in place sometime soon," said Mobile County Commissioner Merceria Ludgood, who represents the U.S. 43 corridor.

Industries along U.S. 43 have long depended on the high-speed artery from I-65 to their plants. There were only two traffic signals between the interstate and Jackson, Ala., before the state Transportation Department put up a third at the entrance to ThyssenKrupp. The state will take down that light after it completes a \$15.7 million interchange.

While the number of vehicles has increased by 19 percent over the last decade at the corner of U.S. 43 and Dead Lake Road, just north of I-65, traffic counts between the northern end of Creola and Mount Vernon have changed little, even decreasing at times as industries along the road reduced employment.

But transportation officials are now worried about increasing congestion. Following a request by Mobile area business leaders, the state is paying Sain Associates, a Birmingham engineering firm, \$91,256 to study traffic on the highway.

The worst-case scenario — 7,000 people driving to and from work alone — would bump traffic on U.S. 43 in Calvert from 12,410 vehicles on an average day last year to more than 26,000. At Dead Lake Road in Creola, the number of vehicles would rise from 22,880 last year to almost 37,000.

That would be approaching the carrying capacity of the four-lane highway — roughly 41,000 vehicles a day, according to Tony Harris, a Transportation Department spokesman.

Riding the bus to work could be a tough sell in Alabama, where 83.6 percent of workers told the Census Bureau in 2006 that they drove to work alone. That was the highest level of solo commuters among all states.

But there are other reasons besides congestion to consider a bus service.

First, workers would save money, perhaps even thousands of dollars annually.

Casi Callaway, director of the Mobile Baykeeper environmental group, also said that transit service for ThyssenKrupp workers would help balance the pollution that the plant will produce.

"The single best thing ThyssenKrupp can do to offset its own emissions is to find ways to get people out of individual cars," she said.

Industries along the highway have long been employment centers, and the idea of some sort of transit has been discussed. But there are obstacles.

The city of Mobile's Wave Transit System would not be allowed to run a bus service all the way to Calvert, because it would need special federal permission to extend beyond the Mobile urbanized area, which stops at Creola. And Wave service beyond the Mobile city limits is a touchy subject, because some Mobile council members are upset that Prichard and the Mobile County Commission don't help pay to run the bus system.

"Why would the city do it?" asked Kevin Harrison, the transportation planner for the South Alabama Regional Planning Commission. "It's going to take the county, or it could even be TK."

The County Commission could set up its own rural bus service. In fact, as Harrison noted, Congress has set aside \$500,000 in capital money for the county to spend on transit in recent years. That money, which requires a 20 percent local match, couldn't be used to subsidize operations, though the federal government will also pay a share of what it costs to run a rural bus system.

The commission has spent part of the money to help Dauphin Island create a shuttle service and used more to build bus shelters in Prichard. It has about \$450,000 left to spend on other projects, and Ludgood said she's not sure that's enough to start a bus system.

"When you start spending \$500,000 on mass transit, it doesn't go very far."

Al Stokes, Mobile Mayor Sam Jones' chief of staff, said the Jones administration is working to bring bus service to shipyards on the east bank of the Mobile River and is also trying to build support for service to ThyssenKrupp.

"We think in the next year, there's going to be an opportunity," he said.

One way to structure a bus system would be what are known in Baldwin and other regional counties as "work routes." On some of those lines, riders "subscribe," paying for a seat reserved for them every day. Any leftover seats are available to the general public. BRATS, the Baldwin County bus system, has long run such routes to carry workers to beach restaurants and hotels.

Chandra Middleton, a BRATS employee, said the Baldwin system has already talked to ThyssenKrupp officials about trying to set up a work route to Calvert.

There are some other options. The Regional Planning Commission has begun a system to match people for carpools. Called CommuteSmart, the program had 52 participants as of June 25, Harrison said. The commission is only beginning to promote CommuteSmart, so that number could grow.

The Wave also operates a van pool program, where people commuting to one location share a van owned by the transit agency. But there are only six vans, and officials didn't indicate plans to increase that any time soon.

## **ON THE NET**

How much could you save from transit? See [www.apta.com](http://www.apta.com), click on services and programs, then go to transit calculator.

Carpool match for Mobile and Baldwin counties: [www.commutessmarter.org/mobile/contact.html](http://www.commutessmarter.org/mobile/contact.html) or call 706-1CAR.