

The Record

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Mass transit lesson becomes an eye-opener



Rachel Lawrence, 82, of Teaneck reads the route information at the Garden State Plaza mall bus stop after taking the bus from Englewood. TARIQ ZEHAWI/NORTHJERSEY.COM

Seniors learn new way to ride



Garden State of Mind
Christopher Maag
North Jersey Record
USA TODAY NETWORK - N.J.

On the Web

Bergen seniors navigate the suburban bus system. Video at NorthJersey.com

When Joyce Strom started riding the bus, in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, the drivers would stop at every major intersection, swing open the doors, and ask pedestrians on the sidewalk whether the Brooklyn Dodgers were beating the New York Giants.

"Sometimes we'd ride the trolley to downtown Brooklyn," said Strom, 80, of Englewood. "The ride was so bouncy it made me feel like I was about to throw up!"

Trolleys don't roll down the streets of Brooklyn anymore. The baseball teams moved to California in 1957. And for decades, Strom never rode another bus. Until 10:20 a.m. Tuesday. That's when she stood in front of the Englewood Public Library alongside 19 other seniors, waiting for a bus bound for the Garden State

Plaza mall.

The trip was organized by Age-Friendly Englewood and the New Jersey Travel Independence Program. They hoped to demystify North Jersey's byzantine bus system for older adults, many of whom said they hadn't ridden public transportation since the Eisenhower administration.

The seniors did travel from Englewood to Paramus and back, but not without a few snags in between, like getting stranded in the mall's windy parking lot.

"I feel so sophisticated!" said Englewood resident Norah Hill, 74, after learning how to

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track a bus route using an app on her smartphone. "I'm going to call my son and tell him everything I learned today. He thinks I'm a dinosaur!"

This summer, Rachel Lawrence's life changed completely. A former journalist and editor for The Associated Press, the 82-year-old Teaneck resident was accustomed to moving quickly. But her advancing age and her regimen of medications left her brain feeling foggy. When her Honda Civic was totaled in an accident this July, she gave up driving altogether.

Suddenly, the 18-mile trip from her assumption I had to throw right out the window."

Many senior citizens in North Jersey underestimate how challenging it is to make the transition from driving in the suburbs to using mass transit, said Nieves Pimienta, an instructor who led the trip for the New Jersey Travel Independence Program. After years of driving in the suburbs, many seniors have no idea where buses go, how to hail one or how to plan their route, Nieves said.

"If you grew up riding a bus in Brooklyn or the Bronx in the 1950s, the buses today are completely different," said Pimienta. "With a little bit of training, we can help people regain their mobility."

Standing in front of the library, Pimienta pointed to a five-digit number printed on the bus stop. By entering the

home in Teaneck to her ophthalmologist in Bloomfield became a four-hour ordeal. Without rides from friends, getting to her favorite nature trails in the New Jersey Highlands became nearly impossible.

"I hate dependency. I hate it!" she said. "You're always at someone else's mercy."

Her biggest hope for Tuesday's class was to learn how to catch a bus to a mall with an Apple store so she could ask the employees to help her choose the right cords for her computer. That was the easy part, she said, looking out the window as the bus rumbled down Route 4. Learning the rules of her new life has proved harder.

"I assumed my friends or family will drive me places," she said. "That's an

number into their phones and pressing "send," riders can get updates on when the next bus will arrive.

Later, inside the Garden State Plaza food court, Pimienta taught Natalia Starikovskiy, an Englewood resident confined by multiple sclerosis to a three-wheeled scooter, how to use a laptop to plan multi-bus trips to museums in New York City.

"I have to rely on people to take me places, so I'm trapped in my house. It's depressing," said Starikovskiy, 64. "I'm hoping this will help me be more independent."

Other people who joined the trip still live independently, but they wanted to prepare for future changes. Linda Rutta

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grew up in Manhattan and never liked driving, so she relies on her husband, Stanley.

"We're still young yet," Linda said, "but we're looking ahead."

The trip to the mall did not exactly win them over.

"The bus routes in New Jersey are crazy," said Stanley, 69. "I could drive here in five minutes, but getting here by bus took an hour."

Norah Hill was thrilled to learn how to plan bus trips using an app on her smartphone. Phyllis Bogen of Englewood couldn't figure it out, so she scheduled a private lesson with Pimienta.

"I have a smartphone, but it's smarter than I am," said Bogen, 89.

Bogen still drives, but soon she may have to give up her car, she said. She worked for years as a social worker in a retirement center. That experience, plus watching her husband, Bill, and their friends grow older, make her even more determined to stay active, with or without a car.

"We don't work anymore, our children are busy, our grandchildren are scattered," Bogen said. "We need things to look forward to."

The trip to Paramus went smoothly,



A group of senior citizens board the 756 NJ Transit bus in Englewood on Tuesday. TARIQ ZEHAWI/NORTHJERSEY.COM

"The bus routes in New Jersey are crazy."

Stanley Rutta

but the return trip was difficult. The No. 756 bus scheduled to depart Garden State Plaza at 1:35 p.m. never arrived. The bus broke down, and the following bus hit heavy traffic, causing it to run about an hour late, said Sean Hughes, a spokesman for Coach USA, which operates the line for NJ Transit.

Starikovskiy navigated herself into place, but the driver initially barred her from the bus because there was no room on the crowded bus for her scooter. Pimienta protested.

Her group of 20 seniors had been standing in the cold for an hour, she said, and they all needed to go home, including Starikovskiy.

The driver relented. She extended the bus' wheelchair lift, then lifted a pair of seats to make room for Starikovskiy's scooter. When they stop for disabled riders, bus operators are required to fasten scooters and wheelchairs into place using straps located beneath the seats.

The driver of bus No. 756 did not do this. Instead she stayed in her seat. After Starikovskiy navigated her scooter into place, the operator closed the door and started driving.

"I've never seen anything like this happen," Pimienta said.

To prevent herself from tipping over, Starikovskiy leaned forward to grip a bus pole with her left hand, which is stronger than her right.

Pimienta kept her foot on the scooter's rear tire, and tiny Phyllis Bogen held on to the handlebars.

Even so, the scooter leaned perilously.

"It's OK," Starikovskiy said. "It only moves in tight turns."

Notified later of the incident, Hughes of Coach USA said the company is investigating.

"We're certainly taking that very seriously," Hughes said.

When they arrived back in downtown Englewood, many seniors were feeling tired. Some doubted they would ride a bus again anytime soon.

"This is the real reason why people don't ride the bus," Stanley Rutta said. "It's not dependable!"