

# Jitneys in AC: What they do right and how they can improve

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ATLANTIC CITY Bob Weipert only had to deny a few riders one Thursday afternoon in May. His 13 seats were full, and those on the corner would have to wait for the next jitney.

At other stops riders stepped on, paid their \$2.25, and took a seat, as jitney No. 151 continued on its roughly hour-long loop around the city.

Weipert has been at it for 23 years, and he has no complaints about driving.

"It's worked for 100 years," he said. "Summer's busier, a lot more tourists. But during the winter, it's the local people that really keep us going."

Ask everyday riders and they'll tell you, too: the jitney system, operating here since 1915, is largely considered a convenient, reliable mode of transport for residents and visitors. But with a few tweaks— including extra seats, expanded late-night times and a more widely advertised app — the 190-minibus system could be the example by which other resort transport systems are judged.

Sean Reardon, 29, founder of the Pacific Square Community Association and winner of June's Republican primary for the 4th Ward Council seat, said the Atlantic City Jitney Association could still take notes from a system in South Florida.

"We're light-years behind a lot of other small cities and beach towns in terms of transportation," said Reardon, who moved from Florida three years ago. "The jitney is an affordable transportation method, however, it's not as convenient as things in other cities."

The jitney system that runs through all of Miami, in place since 1950, deploys fewer jitneys (70 v. 190) of a greater size range (9-28 seats v. 13) that drive along more routes (7 v. 1) than in Atlantic City. Miami's jitneys are also largely privately owned, and drivers pay "a weekly fee to the certificate holder for the right to operate in the approved route."

Geographically, Miami is more than three times as large as Atlantic City, and has about twelve times the population. But the jitneys in Florida's most populous county — and most famous seaside resort — are complementary to a system of about 1,000 traditional buses, meaning — in comparison — Atlantic City's drivers carry the full burden of tourists and residents using public transit to get around.

Still, it functions in largely the same way. The jitneys run "on an authorized fixed route between fixed terminals on a semi-fixed schedule where service is not prearranged and individual passengers hail the vehicle and pay a fare," said Karla Damian, a spokeswoman for Miami-Dade County's Department of Transportation and Public Works.

Riders have their suggestions. Shaina Bo, 23, works at Mrs. Fields cookies in Tropicana and takes the jitney there from her home in the Lower Chelsea area. She only ever has a problem when her job keeps her late into the night, when the jitneys come around less frequently.

"It's kind of hard to wait for 30 minutes," Bo said. "Especially when it's cold (and) wintertime."

Edward Selva, 26, paid cash when he got on at his stop near Columbia Avenue to go to his food runner job at Harrah's Resort.

Selva has few complaints, having taken the jitneys in Atlantic City his entire life. He just wants the drivers to be less aggressive.

The culprit, Reardon said, is a "glut" of stops.

"I think that's why they drive so erratically," he said. "You're always gunning it and then you're hitting the breaks and gunning it."

The jitneys' speed and size make them a problem, said Reardon. They're too wide for the streets, and they drive down Pacific Avenue at "frightening" speeds, he said.

The city, for its part, seems satisfied with the system. Director of Planning and Development Barbara Woolley-Dillon called the jitneys "a very cost effective way to go somewhere."

She has a point, in more ways than one: the jitneys also connect the city's points of interest with no cost to the city.

What the jitneys do well is form a functioning circulatory system within city limits, whereas buses and trains work to keep Atlantic City connected to the outside world. That's especially important in a town where few residents own cars, something Geoff Rosenberger, a member of the 1st Ward Civic Association and a South Inlet resident, chalks up to a high poverty rate.

"All the neighborhoods, somewhere, have some kind of ... a jitney stop within a few blocks of themselves," Rosenberger said

There are seven groups of jitneys which run in shifts, according to the Atlantic City Jitney Association's bookkeeper, Desiree Flath. There are about 20-25 jitneys on the roads at any given time, she said.

But the rise of ride shares as a convenient option for getting home from a night of drinking, and the waning success of casinos here, could make investing in a jitney less appealing.

In 2015, a franchise in the system could cost around \$180,000 according to a previous report. Now, Weipert says that figure is closer to \$100,000 to \$110,000.

"(Income) was better five years ago, before the casinos opened up in New York and Pennsylvania. It was a lot better, you know, you made a good living at it," Weipert said. "Now, you're just kind of surviving."