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Carrie Underwood Concert First with No Shuttle to Arena Alltel Arena Forced to Discontinue City Bus Shuttle Service

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (May 8, 2008) — Beginning in May, Alltel Arena will no longer be able to offer Central Arkansas Transit Authority (CATA) shuttle service to and from events. Due to new charter regulations issued by the Federal Transit Administration, the arena is now required to offer privately-owned shuttle services the opportunity to provide bus service for arena events.

The arena has had an eight-year operating agreement with the city- and county-owned CATA since opening in 1999 that allows the city-owned bus service to provide transportation to and from events at the facility in downtown North Little Rock. CATA buses pick up event-goers in Little Rock's River Market, and from stops in downtown North Little Rock. A .75 cent charge is added to each event ticket sold to provide the service; the charge will be dropped in May when service is discontinued. The sold-out Carrie Underwood concert scheduled for May 11 will be the first major event at the arena with no shuttle service.

The change will also affect Riverfest, the annual Memorial Day festival that draws well over 245,000 visitors each year to downtown Little Rock and North Little Rock. CATA has provided Riverfest shuttles for 18 years. While Riverfest will continue to offer shuttle service through a private contractor, schedules and pick up locations have been modified.

Michael Marion, Alltel Arena General Manager, said that while bookings at the arena will not be affected, thousands of patrons will. "This is going to be a big inconvenience for hundreds to thousands of patrons, depending on the size of the event and especially the disabled," Marion said. "Our shuttle service with CATA allowed concert-goers to be dropped off at the arena entrance, a big help to the disabled in wheelchairs. While we do have the appropriate number of handicapped parking spaces required by law available near our entrances, they fill up fast at big events."

Marion went on to explain that roughly 1,000 to 1,300 people at a large, sold-out event such as a George Strait concert park far from the arena in downtown Little Rock or North Little Rock and take the shuttle to the concert to avoid traffic congestion, limited parking space and long walks. "This is a major setback for downtown Little Rock and North Little Rock," Marion said.

To comply with the new federal regulation, Alltel Arena issued an RFP (Request for Proposal) to private bus/shuttle operators. Only one firm, Arrow Coachlines, returned an eligible bid, but the bid was rejected by the Alltel Arena Board because only a few of the Arrow buses are handicap-equipped, and the cost was nearly double that of CATA.

"We never want to have a situation where a disabled person is forced to wait in inclement weather, or miss part of an event, because they had to wait for the right bus to come along," Donna Hardcastle, Chairperson of the Alltel Arena Board, said. "Alltel Arena has always prided itself on being extremely handicap-accessible and we want to continue to make our events convenient and accessible."

Alltel Arena received the Access Arkansas Award from the Disability Rights Center in 2002 for its easy accessibility to handicap patrons.

"We're extremely proud of the service we provided to both Alltel Arena and to Riverfest over the years, and very disappointed in the Federal Transit Authority's decision to revise regulations governing shuttle service to events that are open to the public," Betty Wineland, Executive Director of CATA, said. "The terms under which CATA could continue to provide the service include a requirement that there be no interest from private companies in offering that particular service, and could also result in undue financial risk to the transit agency by prohibiting third-party funding."

Management and attorneys for the arena are currently reviewing the new FTA regulations and plan to solicit Arkansas' congressional delegation and city officials for help to solve the problem.

Average annual attendance at Alltel Arena is 500,000 per year at roughly 120 events. About 4.8 million people have attended events at the arena since its opening nine years ago.

Alltel Arena has been the pre-eminent place to enjoy great entertainment in Arkansas since opening in 1999. The arena is centrally located in the middle of all the excitement in greater Little Rock and North Little Rock and sits at the crossroads of Interstates 30 and 40 for easy access from virtually every city in Arkansas as well as a number of regional cities.

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