

Go Suburban — leave the driving to entrepreneur

UI student starts shuttle as option to Greyhound

By DON DODSON
News-Gazette Staff Writer

Dennis Toepfen started his own bus service when he was a sophomore at the University of Illinois.

Seven years later, his Suburban Express service carts hundreds of UI students to the Chicago suburbs every weekend.

Toepfen, 25, has expanded Suburban Express to serve students at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston and Illinois State University in Normal.

And he's added the O'Hare Shuttle, a shuttle service that takes travelers from Champaign-Urbana to O'Hare Airport in Chicago. The shuttle uses a 33-seat touring coach and a 25-seat mini-bus equipped with a television, videocassette recorder and reclining seats.

Toepfen admits "the awareness of Suburban Express in the community is probably zero," even though he's been in business seven years.

But Toepfen's enterprises have certainly caught the eye of Greyhound Lines and the Illini Union Board, which receives commissions from the sale of Greyhound tickets.

Suburban Express has snared a majority of riders from campus, said Lynda Czochara, manager of the Illini Union travel center.

AT THANKSGIVING break, Suburban Express dispatched 37 busloads of students to the Chicago suburbs of Crestwood, Oakbrook and Woodfield. Each bus carried about 47 students, or about 1,700 students in all.

Toepfen's drive impressed and occasionally confounded —

Robert Mindrum, who was manager of the travel center when Suburban Express was founded.

"It's not unusual for a student to be an entrepreneur, but the scale and growth Dennis has experienced have been pretty unusual," said Mindrum, now the associate director of the Illini Union.

That a student could succeed in a business requiring regulatory filings and complicated insurance coverage was, he said, remarkable.

Toepfen said a fascination with transportation, particularly trains, drew him into the business. As a UI freshman, he wondered whether he could make extra money by bringing a carload or vanload of students with him on trips home to Mount Prospect.

He even considered buying a 1967 bus. The more he thought about it, the more he realized it cost less per seat to charter a bus than to pay for a seat on Greyhound.

SO FOR THANKSGIVING 1983, he chartered a bus from Monticello Bus Service and began running round trips between Champaign and Chicago.

Toepfen said he caught a lot of flak from the Illini Union Board, which derived part of its revenue from the sale of Greyhound tickets. At one point, the board issued a flier urging students to go Greyhound and not Suburban.

"It is no secret that profit made by private-charter operators benefits only those persons who have vested interest," one flier said.

But Suburban Express, thanks to its low prices, managed to attract a following.

By the end of the spring semester, Suburban Express had snared 20 percent to 30 percent of the Champaign-to-Chicago market. Toepfen got the word out about his service by having students distribute leaflets to people getting on Greyhound buses.



News-Gazette photo by Robert K. O'Daniel

Dennis Toepfen stands by a fleet of buses chartered for his Suburban Express service. The enterprise, readying Friday for a weekend run to the Chicago suburbs, caters to area college students.

"Never in the first semester of operations did we have a weekend that was not profitable," Toepfen said.

Later, in a filing before the Illinois Commerce Commission, Greyhound challenged Toepfen's authority to operate as a public utility.

TOEPFEN COUNTERED that Suburban Express wasn't running as a public utility. He said he served only University of Illinois students. To protect himself, he had riders show their UI identification cards before each trip.

As double protection, he issued them membership cards in the "Overland Travel Club."

Ridership grew, and eventually he convinced the Illini Union to sell Suburban Express tickets. The commerce commission, which ordered him to cease and desist, itself desisted.

Mindrum said Toepfen fits the profile of an entrepreneur.

"He does his homework and is an aggressive marketer," Mindrum said. "He would have students hired, if a Greyhound bus was late, to pass out leaflets that said, 'Want a bus on time? Ride

Suburban Express.'"

"Then he would have the Suburban Express bus drive past the waiting students," Mindrum recalled. "It was funny and quite effective."

Most Suburban Express riders are freshman and sophomore women who live in residence halls, Toepfen said. Often, their parents don't want them accepting rides from friends or taking the train to the Amtrak station in downtown Chicago, he said.

SUBURBAN EXPRESS relies on Royal American, a charter bus company in South Holland, as its primary contractor. But it also charters buses from Monticello Bus Lines in Monticello and from Crawford Bus Service in Watseka.

When Toepfen came to the UI, he planned to study electrical engineering. But he eventually switched to business.

"I don't know what's next," he said, mulling his future. "The way I see it, I'm kind of stuck with Suburban Express. Revenues are fairly good — probably between \$350,000 and \$400,000 for the past year.

"BUT THE ASSET situation is not conducive to sell as a going concern," he added. "I have the cash flow and good income, the good will and the computerized ticket system, but not the office, the buses and garage that constitute a normal bus company. That makes it difficult."

Toepfen said the money he's made is "better than I would have done if I'd gone out and gotten an entry-level position in finance."

But he now wants to be involved in a company with a bigger future.

"The campus isn't a growing market," Toepfen said. "It's saturated, and the outlook for growth in the market is poor. Five years from now, I will not be happy with the increase, but I can't just stop operating. It's not something I want to walk away from."

Toepfen said he's considering

Elevators pin profit hopes on '90 crop

By ANNE COOK
News-Gazette Staff Writer

Planters are ready to roll, and area grain elevators are hoping the new crop year will be more profitable than those of the past several years.

Local elevator managers note the lack of bin-buster harvests in recent years — the kind that make money for elevators. And they cite recent changes in farming and government that cast a pall over the grain business.

"Last fall, we had one of our better drying incomes in four years which have been the pits," said Dave Prahl, merchandiser for Heartland Cooperative Grain. Heartland, with a storage capacity of about 5.5 million bushels, was formed last September in a merger of elevator chains at Villa Grove and Tuscola.

"But our drying income was still only half that of one of our big years," Prahl said. "Our storage income was down, but we weren't hit any worse by the loss of government storage than by loss of farmer storage."

WHEN PRESIDENT Ronald Reagan announced in 1985 that he intended to clean out the country's granaries by making commodity prices competitive, he made a move that would cost the U.S. industry billions.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture paid local elevators about 30 cents per bushel annually to store and take care of that grain. But most of that grain is now gone, moved out in fire sales to foreign countries. For elevators, the income leaves with the grain.

And, Prahl said, farmers didn't store their grain last year either.

"There wasn't any money in it," he said. "The market was telling them not to. They sold about 60 to 70 percent over the scale, and normally it's about 35 percent."

"Our farmers sold a lot over the scale, and our drying income wasn't as fancy as it could have been either," said Dave Hastings, manager of Ludlow Cooperative Elevator Co. which has about 9 million bushels of storage at five