

Shuttles offer safe alternative

By Natalie Harms | December 11, 2012

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To **Walt** Zaneck, the solution to drunken driving

Photo By Thomas Nguyen/Freelance

1 of 3

Riders get into the spirit of partying while taking the WALT inc. shuttle bus. If they live with a four-mile radius of Willowbrook Mall, the bus will pick them up at home and take them to their favorite bars or restaurants for a one-time fee.



More Information

Want to go?

Walt inc.: www.83callwalt.com or 83-CallWalt.

Goes to any bars or restaurants in the four-mile radius of Jones Road and FM 1960 intersection

accidents and fatalities was clear - a local shuttle service.

"The only way to really be effective at safe driving is to have people leave their car at home," Zaneck said.

Four years ago, he started his company, WALT inc., in the Willowbrook Mall area.

Because of logistical problems, his efforts were delayed, but now the bus is up and running, navigating the four- to -five-mile radius around the Jones Road and FM 1960 intersection.

The bus operates with a 9-15 passenger jitney license from the city of Houston, one of only two jitney licenses in Houston.

Zanek hopes to find the same amount of support and financial backing in Willowbrook as he has found in the South Montgomery County area.

Last summer, Montgomery County residents saw two fatal drunken driving accidents in the span of 48 hours, and some people blamed the local bars for being irresponsible.

"There were statements that characterized us as loading the gun and firing the bullet," said **Chip Jackson**, owner of Tewbeaux's Sports Bar. "But I want nothing more than to see my customer get home safe and be able to come out again another day."

Jackson and other bar owners and managers of the Rayford/Sawdust and I-45 area knew individually the actions they were taking to be responsible. Jackson, on several occasions, has even driven patrons home himself.

About four months ago local bars officially united to form the **Montgomery County Bar Owners Alliance** and since then have made numerous partnerships focusing on safe and sober driving.

"We are a group of like-minded business owners that came together to basically try to make a positive impact to the community," said eXit 73's Marty Wilgers, "and to do what we can to get people home safely when they come out to our establishments."

To be a MCBOA member, a bar has to have a designated driver rewards program, said Wilgers, who is also the representative for the alliance. Both eXit 73 and Tewbeaux's give declared designated drivers a free meal, endless nonalcoholic drinks and a chance to win \$100 every month, but it varies at each restaurant.

The alliance, shortly after its formation, began brainstorming safer alternatives to driving after a night out.

Cab service is an unreliable option because it can take over two hours to arrive and even longer past 10 p.m.

Viable option

Zanek's service seemed a viable option.

Six of the MCBOA's bars, interested in his idea, purchased all of the ads for Zanek's second bus in The Woodlands area.

The Woodlands-area shuttle, just like the Willowbrook one, picks up at any home in the 4-mile radius from the Rayford/Sawdust and I45 intersection, and takes you to eXit 73, Tewbeaux's, Ranch Hill, Rookies, Papa's **Ice House** or The 19th Hole Grill and Bar.

Both the Willowbrook and The Woodlands-area shuttles run on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights from 6 p.m. until the last rider is home safe for just \$15 or \$25 for a couple.

For groups of three or more leaving from and returning to the same place, the charge is just \$10.

Responsible drivers can call ahead or the night of for this service or can be driven home, one-way, for \$10.

Milstead Automotive also offers a similar service in The Woodlands area with its last-call program. For \$50, Milstead will take you and your car home, as long as it's within 10 miles of pick-up, after a night of overindulgence. But these programs, while successful in keeping some dangerous drivers off the road, are not enough.

More alternatives

The MCBOA is still looking for more alternatives to drunken driving and Zaneck is looking for more places to expand his service. But he needs more sponsorship in the form of bus advertisements. The shuttle is popular yet financially insecure.

What WALT inc. needs to be successful in this area, as well as to expand to new areas, is to be able to sell advertising on the bus.

"So far the Willowbrook bus has only been supported by my paycheck," Zaneck said. "It has been an experiment, but I just can't afford to pay a driver. If I get more buses in each area then I can actually make a difference."

In January, Zaneck plans to make the Willowbrook shuttle self-sufficient by selling all the ads the bus can have. After that, he wants to expand to a new area and is considering Copperfield next. Expansion is key, said Zaneck, because the more buses he has, the more drunken driving accidents he can prevent.

"Every time I have to turn someone down, that's a potential accident," Zaneck said. "And I feel somewhat responsible that I don't have a way of picking these people up. So that's why I need to get people to support me."