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Editorial notebook: Google maps, RT routes: A perfect marriage

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So I was wandering around maps.google.com, looking for a business that recycles computer printers and monitors. I was looking at the intersection of Fulton Avenue and Arden Way when I noticed little blue bus stop icons.

Huh? Bus stop icons? OK. The location of bus stops is an interesting map feature. But the real magic comes when you click on the icon. Up pops a list of departure times for that location.

I found this fascinating, and so I went over to Watt and El Camino to see what Google maps can do with a stop served by three buses. And, sure enough, when you click on the icon you get the times for all three buses that stop there. After a little checking I discovered that even at transit centers such as 65th Street, where many buses stop, the map offers times for each bus serving that station. The map even shows light-rail stops, and clicking on those brings up the train schedule at that stop.

Since December 2005, Sacramento Regional Transit has offered a trip-planning service at infoweb.sacrt.com that allows transit riders to enter a starting point and a destination to find which combination of buses and trains are available. You can even specify starting times or look based on the arrival times.

Now, RT is working with programmers at Google to marry Google's mapping technology with RT's route information. This all comes together at www.google.com/transit, where you can do everything as at RT's Web site, but now you get a visual representation of your route.

Sacramento is on the leading edge of this effort, which includes a growing list of California, U.S. and international transit agencies. Roger Thorn, Regional Transit's information technology director, says his staff has devoted a significant amount of work coordinating with Google to make this happen.

And the future looks even brighter. Thorn says RT, in coordination with the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, is working with Roseville Transit, YoloBus, UniTrans and Elk Grove Transit to get their data up on Google Transit as well. RT will be the trip planning service aggregator for all of the agencies in the Sacramento area.

This is precisely the sort of work – making it easier to find information about transit options and to visualize the choices – needed to get more people to choose to ride transit.

– John Hughes

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