

Berrien County ponders the patchwork

By SCOTT AIKEN - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, January 30, 2015 5:00 am

ST. JOSEPH - Berrien County commissioners want to collect more information before deciding whether to back a proposal to consolidate public transportation services.

Some commissioners said Thursday they are aware of the shortcomings of having four separate transit systems, problems that might be addressed by joining them into a single countywide authority.

But questions about how an authority would be set up, funding, and who would direct it need to be answered, officials said.

The county board in December first heard of the proposal to form an authority.

It was recommended in a lengthy study of public transit needs in the county developed by a coalition of 18 organizations.

Dan Fette, community development director of the county, led a discussion Thursday which aimed to gauge board support by moving forward.

If there is support, Fette planned to have meetings with local elected and appointed officials around the county to answer questions and address concerns.

Commissioners, however, said they first want to have some understanding of how the authority would be set up.

"We need to know the legal parameters first," Commissioner Mac Elliott said.

Commissioner Andrew Vavra said it's important for the board to have more discussion "before the staff is out talking with officials."

As a step to getting a better understanding, the board approved a motion directing interim corporate counsel John Dewane to review the statutory criteria and options pertaining to operating and funding a county transportation system.



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The dial-a-ride bus makes a regular stop at Michigan Works in Benton Harbor.

Most of the discussion was during a committee of the whole meeting. Board action to have Dewane conduct a review came during the regular board meeting.

Fette said that the four transit systems in total get \$3.5 million to \$4 million a year for operations. But there are gaps that leave some areas underserved and others with no service.

"Bridgman is a good example," he told the board. "It doesn't receive a lot of services."

The systems, which are independent of each other but try to coordinate services, are The Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority, Niles Dial-a-Ride, Buchanan Dial-a-Ride and Berrien Bus. The county operates Berrien Bus through a contractor. It serves areas outside the other systems.

If an authority is formed, he said, any community could opt out of it. If a countywide property tax millage is approved to support the system, communities that are not served would not have to pay the tax, Fette said.

The 220-page transit study was conducted for the Berrien County Transportation Coalition. It took several years to complete and cost \$182,000

The study identified problems with cost duplication, operating losses, gaps in the system and lack of marketing.

The transit systems have three separate buildings a total of 59 vehicles, 55 drivers, eight administrators, 10 maintenance people, 12 dispatchers and six managers.

Operating losses combined are \$200,000 to \$300,00 a year, largely because of dwindling state funding.

The state is pushing political jurisdictions to consolidate transit systems, Fette said. Proposed legislation would further cut funding for those areas with multiple systems, and if nothing is done to consolidate, the money could run out in a few years.

"The question is, are we spending money in a way the neediest members of our community require," Fette told the board's Finance Committee.

The system doesn't work well for many people who rely on it, he said, hampered by gaps in service, long waits, and great difficulty in coordinating transit between urban and rural areas.

The Community Development staff believes major improvements are within reach.

Berrien Bus operations could be transferred quickly to the new authority, if it is formed, without changing existing services.

For that reason, Fette said in Thursday's discussion, the county is in the best position to take the first step.

Other transit services could then be brought in, and if they decline, Berrien Bus would be no worse off, he said.

Finance Committee Chairman Neal Nitz said action is needed.

"I think we need to go forward with this," he said. "It's such a cobbled-up mess, what we've got now."

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