

Building a better bus system

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, May 10, 2017 6:00 am

NILES — Transportation experts have looked under the hoods of Berrien County's four bus systems and found operations that are expensive and inefficient, with limited hours and routes that miss a large chunk of the population.

These planners think that consolidating the systems – Berrien Bus, Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority, and Niles and Buchanan Dial a Ride – would result in a service that reaches more residents for less money.

The first two of four information sessions held by Connect Berrien, to share the study and gather ideas, were held at the Niles library Tuesday. The sessions will be repeated from 5:30-7 pm. today at the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, 376 W. Main St., Benton Harbor; and 5:30-7 p.m. Thursday at the New Buffalo Township Library, 33 N. Thompson St., New Buffalo.

Greg Strangeways, with Nelson Nygaard consultants, said that the four systems bypass 25 square miles of Berrien County, including Stevensville and Bridgman, an area that is home to 21,000 people. That's one of Berrien County's most densely populated sections, Strangeways said.

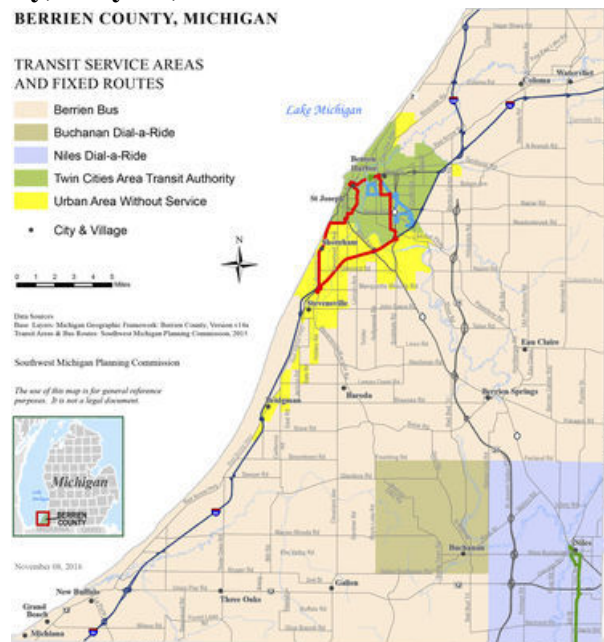
The Twin Cities operation, providing service to Benton Harbor, St. Joseph and surrounding areas, is the only one that offers rides after 6 p.m., the consultant said. Countywide, public transportation is limited on Saturdays, and no service is available Sundays.

Niles resident Dorothea Brown agreed that the hours are severely limited. Brown, who uses a wheelchair, said she has experience with each of the county's bus systems. If you have an event after 4 p.m., such as a PTA meeting or a church activity, there is no way to get there by bus, she said. And if you have a doctor's appointment that runs late, you can miss your bus ride home, she offered.

"It's functional," Brown said of the county's buses. "Those of us who use it are grateful."

But a new system needs to be more flexible, especially for people with special needs, she said.

Strangeways said that the systems have combined annual operating costs of \$4.3 million, and duplicate such operations as dispatching, maintenance and administration.



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The yellow area on this map shows the places that are not served by one of Berrien County's four public transportation systems, missing some 21,000 residents. Planners are working on a proposal to consolidate the systems into one operation that they believe would be more efficient and reach more riders.

Berrien Bus, operated by Berrien County, covers 440 square miles, which has a population of 67,000. But its connecting routes only reach 13 percent of potential riders. The system's fares are the most expensive, ranging from \$2.50 to \$5 a ride. Hours are 5 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday.

Twin Cities covers 21 square miles, home to 33,000 residents. Its fares for rides on demand are from \$2 to \$6, and fares for its fixed routes are \$1.

Goals are to "simplify, reduce and standardize" fares, Strangeways said, along with expanding the service area and evening and weekend hours.

With fixed routes "density is the key ... having enough people going to the same place at the same time," Strangeways said.

Strangeways said planners are looking at ways to increase the number of fixed bus routes in and around Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, and in Niles. Routes are being considered between Stevensville and Benton Harbor; and from Benton Harbor to Niles, and then to South Bend along M-63, M-139 and M-51.

Dorothea Brown said the connections to transportation in Indiana are "terrible," and it's so difficult to get a bus back from Mishawaka that you might as well spend the night and come back in the morning.

Berrien County fares could range from \$1 to \$5, depending on the service, with a 50 percent discount for seniors and people with disabilities. Berrien has a large population of older residents and others who are dependent on public transportation. Benton Harbor has the largest concentration of residents who do not have access to a vehicle.

Doing nothing is not an option, as all the systems face funding challenges, the consultant said.

Dan Fette, Berrien County's community development director, has warned that Berrien Bus is losing money and could be broke within two to three years, leaving nothing to build on. There is no countywide millage supporting Berrien Bus, while Niles, Buchanan and Benton Harbor levy millages to cover some of their costs.

Strangeways said a service plan could be drafted by the end of the year or by early 2018, and Berrien officials and residents can make a decision on what direction they want to take.

The full 2014 transportation study and other information is at www.connectberrien.org.

Contact: jmatuszak@TheHP.com, 932-0360, Twitter: [@HPMatuszak](https://twitter.com/HPMatuszak)