

# Commissioners back county-wide bus proposal

By **JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer** | **Posted: Friday, December 2, 2016 6:00 am**

ST. JOSEPH — The Berrien County Board of Commissioners on Thursday endorsed creation of a county-wide public transportation system, but the day the buses roll is still a long way down the road.

The endorsement is the latest move to consolidate existing transportation systems, including Berrien County's Berrien Bus, into a more efficient operation that will reach more residents.

Community Development Director Dan Fette reported earlier this year that Berrien Bus could be out of money in two to three years. He said that the program, along with transportation systems in Benton Harbor, Niles and Buchanan, leave out large sections of the county. A 2014 report recommended consolidation of existing systems.

Fette has secured preliminary agreements with Niles and Buchanan officials to participate in a county-wide plan. But Benton Harbor city commissioners voted to keep their Dial a Ride operation out of any plan that comes forward.

Berrien County Commissioner Mamie Yarbrough said Benton Harbor's Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority is doing well and is even expanding, and that she was pleased that city officials opted out of the county plan.

She said she does support a county-wide transportation system even if it doesn't include Benton Harbor. "I was elected to represent all of Berrien County. I want all of Berrien County to work."

Commissioner Mac Elliott cast the lone no vote on endorsing a transportation authority. While he supports the concept, Elliott said he thought the resolution was "premature" until commissioners learn whether there is backing among local communities.

Commissioner Bill Chickering countered that the endorsement is the way to find out if county-wide public transportation is backed by Berrien's 156,000 residents and not just the 12 commissioners.

Fette has explained that passing an endorsement will provide some fuel that will allow necessary discussions to move forward and to educate officials and residents on the proposal.

He had initially planned to ask commissioners to create the authority and articles of incorporation, but opted to seek an endorsement in response to some of their concerns.

Those questions included whether local governments had been given enough time to consider joining the transportation authority, and whether the authority should be formed before a service plan has been drafted. It was also pointed out that four new commissioners would take office after Jan. 1, and should be part of the decision-making process.

The county's 39 local communities will have the opportunity to join the authority, and those that opt out will not receive transportation services. They could join at a later date under an amended agreement.

The service plan, setting such parameters as bus routes, is being formulated under the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. Completing the service plan could take at least 12 months.

Fette decided that creating the transportation authority shouldn't wait on the completion of the service plan, and that possible partners should have a say into how the authority is formed.

And there's not any time to waste. Fette pointed out that, according to a timeline from a 2009 study, the county already is 30 months behind in getting the transportation authority up and rolling.

Endorsing the creation of the authority now gives current commissioners a vote, while allowing the new commissioners to participate in its formation, Fette said.

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