



The Herald-Palladium

http://www.heraldpalladium.com/news/local/bailing-out-berrien-bus/article_a728a8b8-ae11-5fd0-9346-df8f7e67d7d0.html

Bailing out Berrien Bus

Commissioners updated on troubled transportation system

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer Jan 26, 2018 Updated 25 min ago



The Berrien Bus makes a stop at Lakeland Regional Medical Center in St. Joseph in 2009. The system is struggling to stay afloat.

HP file photo

ST. JOSEPH — Berrien Bus, the county's public transportation system, continues to sputter along, and is in need of a major overhaul, the Board of Commissioners were told Thursday.

It's not the first time that commissioners have been informed of the dire straits faced by Berrien Bus. A 2014 report said public transportation across the county is inadequate and inefficient. The study recommended a consolidation of the county's operation with Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority (serving Benton

Harbor, St. Joseph and surrounding areas), and Niles and Buchanan Dial-a-Ride.

Community Development Director Dan Fette has warned that Berrien Bus is quickly going broke, and he has been trying to piece together a plan that would tie the four systems together to reach more residents at less cost.

The latest update came as part of the annual public transportation application to the Michigan Department of Transportation, presented by Evan Smith, the Community Development Department's transportation and planning coordinator.

Smith outlined a Berrien Bus system that is financially dependent on its contracts with such entities as Berrien RESA, the Area Agency on Aging, the Department of Human Services and county senior centers.

Berrien Bus receives no funding from a local tax millage, and relies on state funding, which has sharply declined, and federal dollars, along with its contract fees, at \$225,000 per year. Farebox revenue is \$75,000, and Berrien Bus fares are the highest in the county.

The number of contracts have also significantly declined, Smith said, which required the county to use more of its fund balance to keep things running. Cost-cutting starting in 2014 slowed the flow of red ink but did not stop it.

Berrien Bus has no fixed routes and only picks up individual passengers by request if the van is going to be in their area for a contract run, he said.

"There is no rhyme or reason" to this routing, Smith admitted.

Fette acknowledged that this part of the system is "very inconvenient" for residents, who must endure long rides and waits to return home. "It's not a good system."

A consultant reported last year that Berrien Bus only reaches 13 percent of potential riders. The four systems bypass 25 square miles of Berrien County, including Stevensville and Bridgman, one of Berrien County's most densely populated sections. The Twin Cities operation is the only one that offers rides after 6 p.m.

Smith said the only options available to keep Berrien Bus rolling are to create a county-wide service plan and/or obtain local funding; or what he referred to as "the nuclear option," eliminating individual rides, raising contract rates and seeking additional contracts.

If the Board of Commissioners appropriates \$100,000, we will run a better system, Fette said.

During the Finance Committee meeting, Commissioner Debra Panozzo, who has been in office for 22 years, seemed taken aback to be getting this information now. She added the the board has never been asked for additional tax funding for Berrien Bus.

Commissioner Mamie Yarbrough, another longtime representative, agreed that they need to be kept in the loop.

“Part of it is our fault. We haven’t asked for it,” said Yarbrough, who asked for quarterly updates on the county transportation system.

Fette said after the meeting that he is working with the other bus systems and the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission on a blueprint for the services a consolidated transportation system would provide, that should be completed in the next couple of months.

If all parties are satisfied with what’s on the table at that time, they can begin talks on merging the bus systems, he said.

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