

One bus system for Berrien recommended

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, July 25, 2014 6:00 am

ST. JOSEPH - Berrien is the only Michigan county with four separate public transportation providers.

And that's not a good thing, said Kim Gallagher of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

Berrien Bus, Twin Cities Area Transit Authority, and Dial-A-Ride in Buchanan and Niles are a "patchwork system" that make it difficult and expensive for residents to get around, Gallagher told Berrien County commissioners Thursday.

Gallagher and Dan Fette, the county's community development director, are asking commissioners to approve the formation of a single Berrien County Transit Authority.

"The idea of a county-wide service is what we're getting at," Fette said.

The existing transportation systems last year made 320,000 trips and covered 1.1 million miles, taking people to work, school and medical appointments, among other destinations.

But it can still be difficult to get from place to place. Almost half of the county, including Bridgman, and St. Joseph, Lincoln and Royalton townships, have limited or no public transportation service.

That's because state and federal funding regulations dictate where the vehicles can go, Gallagher said.

A trip from Buchanan to South Bend, requiring transfers from Berrien Bus to Dial-A-Ride, costs \$8 one way. Gallagher said a trip of the same length in Van Buren County, which has a single transportation authority, would cost around half that amount.

Joanne Johnson, with the Disability Network of Southwest Michigan, said during public comments that residents often can't get across the county, or even to the next block, because of the limited jurisdictions of the available systems.

Going from St. Joseph to Berrien Springs, Buchanan or Niles by public transportation can be an all-day trip, Johnson said.



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The Dial-A-Ride bus makes a regular stop in Benton Harbor in 2012. It's among four public mass transit systems in Berrien County, and the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission is arguing the services should be integrated.

Having a single authority could make operations more efficient and less costly, Gallagher said.

It could even out fares for residents, and improve the connections between communities and rural areas, she said.

The current systems use 59 vehicles, three facilities, 13 administrators, and 12 dispatchers. Their combined expenses are about \$4 million a year.

The estimated operating cost for a county-wide system would be \$3.8 million in the first year, going up to \$5 million in five years as the system expands.

Funding options include a county-wide millage.

The Twin Cities Authority now levies 1.25 mills in Benton Harbor, bringing in \$110,000 annually. Buchanan Dial-A-Ride levies one mill, collecting \$81,000. And Niles Dial-A-Ride levies a half-mill, earning \$95,000.

A county-wide levy of 0.25-mill would generate projected revenue of \$1.7 million. That would be a lower rate for those parts of the county already paying a millage, according to the report.

The amount needed from a millage would be about \$903,000 in five years.

This wouldn't be one system swallowing up all the others, Gallagher said.

"It has to be a good deal for everyone. No existing system is taking over," she said.

She said it would be a long process, which starts with the county commissioners approving the creation of a Berrien County Transit Authority, followed by hiring an executive director, passing a millage and making the transition.

Commissioners Neal Nitz and Cathy Thieneman said it would be good if Lakeland HealthCare could provide its own transportation, as many of those who use the buses are visiting their facilities.

Fette said a county-wide system wouldn't prevent Lakeland from offering shuttles, but that wouldn't solve the problems that exist with the current transportation options.

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