

Plans for countywide bus system in high gear

By **JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer** | Posted: Friday, June 17, 2016 6:00 am

ST. JOSEPH — Progress is being made toward creating a county-wide public transportation system, Berrien County Community Development Director Dan Fette told the Board of Commissioners Thursday.

Fette said the county has informal agreements with the Niles and Buchanan Dial-A-Ride systems on the proposed governing structure of a new transportation authority, and officials will be meeting with representatives of the Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority, serving Benton Harbor, in the next two weeks.

In March, commissioners gave Fette and his staff permission to begin discussions with other area transportation systems about merging with Berrien County's Berrien Bus to create a more efficient service that would reach more residents.

Similar talks have taken place for years, without success.

Fette explained that the proposed articles of incorporation, which would create the governing authority of the transportation system, are separate from the service plan, which would spell out routes and service areas.

The Board of Commissioners will first be asked to approve a resolution adopting the articles of incorporation. Fette expects commissioners to vote on the articles in two to three weeks.

Once the commissioners approve the articles, they will be presented to 39 local communities, which will have the opportunity to opt out. Those communities that opt out will not receive services from the new transportation authority, Fette said, although they can later join through an amendment to the articles of incorporation.

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission is heading the selection process for hiring a firm to create the service plan, with funding contributors Berrien County, Lakeland Foundation and the Berrien County Manufacturers Association taking part.

Two finalists have been selected to form the service plan, and it is expected that a contract will be signed by the end of July. Completing the service plan should take eight months.

There is not a lot of time to waste, as Berrien Bus continues to lose money, Fette said.



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HP File PhotoA passenger boards a Berrien Bus at Lakeland Regional Medical Center in St. Joseph in 2009. Berrien County officials are making progress toward creating a county-wide public transportation system that would merge services with Niles, Buchanan and Benton Harbor.

“The thing is, the clock is ticking,” and Berrien Bus could be out of money within two to three years, leaving nothing to build on, Fette warned.

Under the proposed articles of incorporation, the transit authority would be governed by a 13-member board appointed by the Board of Commissioners. That board would consist of two representatives each from the Niles, Buchanan and Benton Harbor service areas, two county commissioners, and three representatives from districts outside the urban service areas.

The local areas will make nominations to the board, with the final appointment made by county commissioners. The idea is to spread out representation to avoid giving one area of the county too much authority, Fette said.

The county will be transferring the assets of Berrien Bus, including cash reserves, vehicles and real estate, to the new authority to get things rolling, Fette said. It is expected that the other transportation systems will follow suit.

In anticipation of consolidating services, Berrien Bus and the Niles and Buchanan systems have agreed to joint training for their drivers this year. Fette said the coverage agreement has been changed to allow some coverage into northern Indiana, which he said would be valuable for south county residents.

A request for proposals for a third-party operator of the transportation system will be posted June 20, and bids will be opened July 21.

County Administrator Bill Wolf emphasized that the transportation authority would be part of Berrien County, similar to the Road Commission.

Fette said the transportation authority would have the ability to place tax millage requests on the ballot, but he did not expect that would be necessary for three to five years.

In answer to a question from Commissioner Marletta Seats, Fette said that the transportation authority’s finances would be subject to an independent audit, and that they also would be required to report to the Federal Transportation Authority and the Michigan Department of Transportation.

In other progress, Fette reported that, in July, Berrien Bus would begin providing services to the St. Joseph Senior Center that comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. A similar agreement with Buchanan Senior Center is expected soon.

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