

Talks about countywide busing system ready to roll

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, March 18, 2016 6:00 am

ST. JOSEPH — The discussion about creating one public transportation system across Berrien County, which has gone on for years, appears to be moving out of neutral and into first gear.

Berrien County Community Development Director Dan Fette on Thursday received permission from the Board of Commissioners to begin talks with the Niles and Buchanan Dial-a-Ride systems and with townships and municipalities about forming a countywide transportation authority.

Fette said the Niles and Buchanan systems are interested in opening talks. The Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority, serving Benton Harbor, said it might come on board later if the merger works out, he told commissioners.

If Berrien County waits much longer, there won't be anything left to build on financially, Fette said.

County Administrator Bill Wolf agreed that it's urgent to start negotiations.

"Berrien Bus is bleeding," Wolf said of the Berrien County-run transportation service that is steadily losing money.

Fette said Berrien Bus is expected to post a \$135,000 loss for fiscal year 2015. If officials wait too long, there won't be any capital remaining in a few years, he said.

Commissioners have long agreed that the current system is an inefficient patchwork that is losing a lot of money while bypassing many residents.

"If Berrien Bus disappeared tomorrow, we wouldn't miss it," said Wolf, a Stevensville resident, where Berrien Bus doesn't stop.

A 220-page report issued in December 2014, five years in the making, spelled out the system's shortcomings and recommended consolidation.

Keeping all four systems operating costs \$4.1 million a year, the report stated, with three separate



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A Berrien Bus unit picks up a passenger at at Lakeland Regional Medical Center in St. Joseph in 2009. Berrien Bus would be included in a proposed merger of Berrien County transportation services. HP file photo

buildings, 59 vehicles, 55 drivers, eight administrators, 10 maintenance people, 12 dispatchers and six managers.

The report revealed that combined operating losses are \$200,000 to \$300,000 a year, due in part to cuts in state funding. Fette said last year consolidation would save \$215,000 a year.

After reviewing the report in 2015, county commissioners balked at talking about consolidation until they knew more about what such a transportation authority would look like, and asked attorney John Dewane to study the legal aspects.

On Thursday, Commissioner Jeanette Leahey said she wanted more research done on how other counties manage their public transportation systems.

Fette said there is a lot of information in the previous report, but that kind of research would be part of the discussions in drafting articles of incorporation.

He said a draft of those articles could be ready by June, and a transportation authority could be created within nine to 12 months. The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission is forming a transportation service plan, which should be completed at about the same time, Fette said.

An autonomous transportation authority would have the ability to place tax requests on the ballot, Fette said, and municipalities that choose not to participate or receive services could opt out. A consolidated service will be able to claim more federal funding, he said.

The directors of the Niles and Buchanan Dial-a-Ride systems want to make sure that they have equal representation on the board of the transportation authority, Fette said.

Commissioner Mac Elliott said the county will have an obligation to oversee the finances of any tax-supported program, as it does with the levies that fund the senior centers, the 911 system and law enforcement.

Wolf emphasized that Fette and his staff are asking for the OK to come up with ideas and create a better transportation system. He said he didn't want the staff to be hamstrung "while they try to find a way through this maze."

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