

Turning four into one

By SCOTT AIKEN - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, December 12, 2014 5:00 am

ST. JOSEPH - A proposal to consolidate the four public transportation services in Berrien County under a single authority got a mixed reception Thursday from county commissioners.

The recommendation, based on a study developed by a coalition of 18 organizations over five years, identified serious shortcomings with public transit.

Cost duplication, operating losses, and gaps in a sometimes difficult-to-use system could be eliminated by consolidating the bus services under a county authority, the study concluded.

Benefits identified in the 220-page study, conducted over several years at a cost of \$182,000, could include stemming operating losses, saving money by cutting duplication and better service in urban areas that now have little or no service.

The study, conducted for the Berrien County Transportation Coalition, was discussed in a presentation to the county board by county Community Development Director Dan Fette.

Representatives from some of the transit organizations were present.

Some county commissioners expressed support for the change, which would likely take years to implement if it moves forward.

Commissioner Debra Panozzo, who represents the county board's 7th District, which takes in most of Lincoln Township, said residents there get no service.

Public transit should be improved in order to meet the demands of an aging population, she said.

Commissioner Mac Elliott of Buchanan, representing the mostly rural 10th District, said he's concerned that the proposed change would leave the county board with a lot of additional responsibility and little authority to address it.

As proposed, the transportation authority would be autonomous under the direction of an appointed board and supported by a county-wide property tax millage.

Elliott said forming the authority would put the county in the position of administering the millage, if



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it was enacted, without any oversight on spending.

The county board took no action on the study or the recommended action to consolidate.

A meeting with the Transportation Coalition is to be scheduled to allow commissioners to get more information and ask questions. Public meetings on the proposal may be held later.

Fette made the presentation during a committee of the whole meeting.

During the regular board meeting later in the morning, two citizens spoke in favor of forming the authority.

Joanne Johnson of the Disability Network said the current system doesn't serve the public.

People have a difficult time getting where they need to go when they need to get there, she said.

The "mish-mash" of spotty transportation makes it impossible for people to get to jobs, and discourages others from looking for work, she said.

"It doesn't work. It hasn't worked for a long time," she said.

One example used in the study shows that a person would have to take three buses, each with a different fare, to go from Buchanan to South Bend, a trip that could take several hours, depending on scheduling.

In his presentation, Fette said the KFG Group, which conducted the study, concluded that consolidation is the best way to address persistent problems with the transit system.

The recommended approach, backed by county Community Development, would be to create a county authority for the county-operated Berrien Bus alone. The transfer of other local systems could then be negotiated over time.

The other systems are the Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority, Niles Dial-a-Ride and Buchanan Dial-a-Ride.

Keeping all four operating costs \$4.1 million a year. They have three separate buildings a total of 59 vehicles, 55 drivers, eight administrators, 10 maintenance people, 12 dispatchers and six managers.

Combined operating losses are \$200,000 to \$300,000 a year, mainly because of cuts in state funding support. Berrien County, Buchanan and TCATA all show operating losses while Niles has shown a profit but greatly reduced service over the past few years.

Fette said consolidation would save an estimated \$215,000 a year, which would stem losses but alone could not create a profitable system.

In addition to state funding, the bus systems rely on rider fares. Some local government units also levy property taxes for revenue.

Fette said the state is cutting back funding for public transit systems that only serve one part of a county. Berrien is one of only a few in the state that remain, he said.

Unless steps are taken to consolidate as an authority, public transportation funding could run out in a few years and the systems in Berrien would be out of business, he said.

One major problem an authority would solve is the elimination of barriers between urban and rural systems. They are funded differently and that results in unequal rates and confusion for riders.

Another benefit of consolidation would be development of service and route planning. Currently, the transit systems have no dedicated staff for safety and training, marketing and outreach or service planning.

As a result, fixed route long haul planning is not feasible, the study found.

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