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Agencies ease travel for rural transit riders

Van users will no longer have to give two days' notice

BY CHRISTINA E. SANCHEZ • STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 11, 2008

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People who ride rural public transportation vans to travel to a doctor's appointment, a job or just about anywhere used to have to reserve a spot up to two days in advance.

But a new statewide transportation initiative will make it easier for people to take last-minute trips around their county and across county lines.

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With the help of the Tennessee Department of Transportation, 10 rural transportation agencies are installing computer technology that will allow agencies to coordinate trips that will get customers to their destinations more quickly, even if more than one county is involved.

Three human resource agencies already use the technology as part of an initiative dubbed Intelligent Transportation Systems.

"As fuel prices have increased and put a burden on people, they have had to look at other ways to get around," said Paula Shaw, director of program operations for TDOT's Multimodal Transportation Resource Division.

"The demand for public transportation is astounding. Tennessee is just starting to get into an environment where we recognize the importance of public transportation."

Grants Help Serve More

Shaw said a \$12 million federal grant would help the agencies implement the system, which includes installing global positioning systems in transit vans. Her division's goal is to have the technology in place at all 10 agencies by August 2009.

With the new system, called RouteMatch, the agencies also will use fewer vehicles and travel fewer miles, but serve more people, Shaw said.

"Before you had one person taking one van to work, and then another person who had to go to a doctor on another van," she said. "They maybe lived in the same area and were going to the same place. The system allows you to coordinate and bring all those people together."

The three agencies currently using RouteMatch are Mid-Cumberland Human Resource Agency, which serves 12 counties surrounding Davidson County, and Upper Cumberland and Northwest Human Resource agencies.

Jeff Simpson, transportation director for the Mid-Cumberland agency, said he has seen benefits to both his agency and customers.

"The program gives us a bigger-picture look at the trips and resources, the vans we have out there and how to best provide these trips," Simpson said.

WHOM TO CALL IF YOU NEED A RIDE

Three agencies use ITS to improve rural public transportation. Seven more agencies will implement the program by August 2009. The three are:

Mid-Cumberland Human Resource Agency

Serves 12 counties around Davidson County
www.mchrtransit.org
615-850-3956 or 1-866-456-4967

Upper-Cumberland Human Resource Agency

Serves 14 counties in northeast Middle Tennessee
www.ucarts.org
931-528-1127

Northwest Human Resource Agency

Serves nine counties in northwest Tennessee
www.nwthransit.org
731-587-4213

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Mid-Cumberland began the ITS program almost a year ago. In that time, the agency has seen the number of trips they are able to provide increase by 20 percent.

System Is Easy To Use

Using the transportation system is easy, said Shaun vanBergen, TDOT's project manager for the ITS project.

A person who lives in one of the service areas calls the agency's transit hot line. He gives his location, where he needs to go, when and what time. A dispatcher puts the information in a computer to match the rider with a van that will be in his neighborhood and can take him to his destination.

For example, a person who lives in Wilson County and needs to go to Nashville for a doctor's appointment can call the Mid-Cumberland agency to get a spot on a van. A dispatcher looks at the computer and can see where all vans are, where they are headed and the number of people on board.

Agencies still recommend that people call in advance as soon as they know they need a ride, especially if they have to travel between different counties. But if space and the schedule permits, same-day service may be available.

"These agencies can be a little more responsive to their clientele," vanBergen said. "Instead of 24-hour notice, they can do a same-day notice."

Any person can use the rural public transit, though many of the riders are participants of the Access for Jobs program, the elderly and people with disabilities. Costs vary depending on travel route and number of required stops.

Shaw said program coordinators hope to connect all systems to eventually make it possible for a person to get from one end of the state to the other.

"This is a more streamlined way to get people to their destinations," Shaw said.

Contact Christina Sanchez at 615-726-5961 or cesanchez@tennessean.com.

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