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Initiatives make travel easier

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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 two days in advance.

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

With the help of the Tennessee Department of Transportation, 10 rural transportation agencies are installing computer technology that will allow agencies to coordinate trips for customers that will allow them to get to destinations more quickly, even if more than one county is involved. Three human resource agencies, including the Mid-Cumberland Human Resource Agency, 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 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."

Shaw said a \$12 million federal grant would help agency officials 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 same place. The system allows you too 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 including Rutherford 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.

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

And 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 hotline. They give their location, where they need 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 their neighborhood and can take them to their 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," said vanBergen. "Instead of 24-hour notice, they can do a same day notice."

Any person can use the rural public transit, though popular demographics that access it include 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.
