

# The Allegan County News



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## 5-year transit plan seeks efficiency, also needs funding

By Ryan Lewis  
Editor

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Although a strategic plan for public transportation in Allegan County points to a pressing need for more availability, implementing it will require more funding.

Pressed by Allegan County Board of Commissioners at their Thursday, Feb. 24, meeting to put a bottom line on his department's five-year strategic plan, Allegan County Transportation director Dan Wedge said a .3-mill tax would cover the costs of full implementation. The plan does not recommend any particular form of funding.

"You could fund this locally out of the (county's) general fund," Wedge said. "The likelihood of that, I've been told, is slim."

Wedge was acknowledging the county's recent history of budget cuts, with more on the way for next year given sagging property tax revenue and expected cuts to revenue sharing from the state.

Despite the budget crunch, the need for public transit persists.

Kathryn Gray is a public policy specialist for the Disability Network/Lakeshore. Her organization secured the Michigan Department of Transportation grant to fund the creation of the 54-page five-year plan.

"There is a huge public need for this service," Gray said.

According to the six studies conducted during the last three years by the Disability Network, 65 percent of current and prospective riders indicated the need for increased regional transportation in West Michigan during the next three years. As for employment, 25 percent of those same riders said the lack of transportation prevented them from keeping or looking for a job; 36 percent said they were prevented from attending medical appointments in the last year; 81 percent said the service was "very" or "somewhat important" to the community.

In a press release, Gray said, "Whether you're a businessperson, a student, a person with a disability, a senior or an elected official, public transportation means more for everyone. The benefits include increased employment options for adults, more access to medical care for adults, more access to medical care for seniors and more participation in after-school activities by students."

The plan would not radically change the service already offered. Riders would continue to reserve in advance spots on buses, but hours would expand from its current 8.5 hours between 5 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. on weekdays.

In the new plan, riders could reserve rides Monday through Friday from 5:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., with some service from 9 p.m. to 11 p.m. for destinations with heavier traffic. There would also be up to 115 hours available for Saturday-Sunday service.

Fares would remain the same: \$2 per one-way trip per adult; \$1 for senior citizens, people with disabilities and children.

The Disability Network said that in a taxpayer survey, 78 percent said they were either "very" or "somewhat likely" to support a county transit millage.

Even if a millage is delayed or defeated, that does not abort the entire plan.

Wedge said that while adding additional hours of service would definitely increase expenses, "There are pieces we can add without adding additional cost."

Getting the department's major users—Allegan County Mental Health and Michigan Works!—to commit to certain days of service to particular regions of the county, ridership can be concentrated and made more efficient. In addition, sticking to a regular regional schedule will allow the general public to rely on the service and piggyback on those days.

"We're developing a plan to get at least two days a week in each of four areas of the county," Wedge said.

He said he is also working to form regional partnerships that help free up the department's vehicles.

A veteran, for example, headed to the VA hospital in Battle Creek could be taken to the Kalamazoo County line, be met and picked up by that county's transit service to go the rest of the way, because it already makes several stops there daily. The Allegan bus can make other stops and then pick the veteran back up in the same spot (instead of idling in Battle Creek during the veteran's appointment).

"There's a huge need for regional transportation, primarily for medical appointments," Wedge said.

Commissioner Steve McNeal voiced concern over the entire county bearing the cost of a service that tends to be less cost-efficient outside of urban areas.

"I have real mixed feelings about this," McNeal said. "(Riders) with special needs are one thing. As far as a transportation system for those who use it by choice, it's difficult for me to see a tax on corn stalks paying for an urban service. I'm not sure it makes sense to fund it."

Wedge said 15 of 16 recent county transit millages elsewhere in Michigan passed by wide margins and that public transportation services functioned like a form of insurance for riders who might lose access to personal transportation.

"Just like you might never need the fire department, (if you do) you sure are grateful," Wedge said. "This isn't really about the millage; it's about the county taking accountability that there are needs that need to be met."

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