

Allegan County public transportation topic of forums

By JIM HAYDEN

The Associated Press

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Allegan County, MI — Naomi Whetzel hasn't driven a day in her life because of a medical condition. The 87-year-old Dorr area residents uses the Allegan County Transportation bus system to get to appointments.

Whetzel has to schedule bus pickups at least two days in advance, but appreciates the service.

"I'd be stuck," she said, if the county service wasn't available.

Those who work with the county's transportation system know there are more people like Whetzel and they want the bus service to help them as well.

The Disability Network/Lakeshore and the transportation service have set several community forums in Allegan and Saugatuck to get input for a five-year plan that includes possibly connecting the county system to Saugatuck's bus service.

The Saugatuck meeting is 6:30 p.m. Monday at Saugatuck Christian Reformed Church, 6591 Old Allegan Road.

The county bus system has a limited reach because of its funding sources, according to Kathryn Gillen of Disability Network/Lakeshore.

The service area includes the city of Allegan with service along routes within a one-mile radius of M-40 to Holland, M-89 including Otsego and Plainwell and Fennville. Pullman, Shelbyville, Martin, Dorr and Wayland also receive service.

The county system does not go into the Saugatuck area, which has its own on-demand bus system that operates within the Saugatuck Township borders, including the cities of Saugatuck and Douglas.

"We're hoping, down the road, that they can expand their hours and service and transportation options for our area," said Cherie Giller of the Saugatuck area Interurban Transit Authority. "It would be nothing but a win-win situation."

Gillen agrees, saying people along the lakeshore need to get to Allegan for medical appointments and county services, such as the court house or treasurer's office.

"We're hoping with our five-year plan that we will connect to Saugatuck," Gillen said.

Allegan County Transportation is funded by organizations such as Allegan County Community Mental Health, Michigan Works and the county's intermediate school district. People who need these services can use the bus service.

"ACT is not really a public system," Gillen said.

That creates misunderstandings with county residents, many who think it is an on-demand service they can call to get to an event or another person's home.

In the draft of the five-year plan, the county bus service is examining ways to create a true countywide transportation system.

The meetings with community members are an important part of reaching that goal, Gillen said.

FORUMS

BUS FORUMS

If you want to give input into transportation plans for Allegan County:

- 10 a.m. Monday: Wings of Hope Hospice, 530 Linn St., Allegan
 - 6:30 p.m. Monday: Saugatuck Christian Reformed Church, 6591 Old Allegan Road
 - 7 p.m. Oct. 5: Downtown Development Board, Allegan
- For more information, call (616) 396-5326.

Facts about Allegan Co.

Transportation:

- Founded: July 2000
 - Service: City of Allegan with service along routes within a one-mile radius of M-40 to Holland, M-89 including Otsego and Plainwell and Fennville. Pullman, Shelbyville, Martin, Dorr and Wayland also receive service.
 - Riders: In 2008, 44,900 passenger trips (one ride equals a passenger trip); in 2007, 39,420 passenger trips
 - Fleet: 28 vehicles (vans and buses); 16 of the vehicles are wheelchair accessible
 - Fees: \$2; \$1 for seniors, persons with disabilities and children 5-12.
- Source: Allegan County Transportation Five-Year Strategic Plan, draft 1, August 2009

"The purpose of these sessions is to gain valuable feedback and suggestions on the potential transportation options offered in the ACT plan," she wrote in a press release.

So far, a workgroup has surveyed county residents, interviewed people and held focus groups to help develop the five-year plan.

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