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Eastern Ottawa called 'missing link' in public transportation

By Cathy Runyon | Advance Newspapers

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A study of public transportation needs and interests that began in September 2008 is drawing to a close. The next step, according to Kathryn Gillen, with the Disability Network Lakeshore, which received a grant to fund the study, will be up to local governing boards.

"We hope they will decide to ask for public support, possibly a millage, or vote to fund public transportation," said Gillen after a presentation last week to the Georgetown Township Board.

Gillen was introduced by Pam Haverdink, director of the Georgetown Senior Center, which operates its own small transportation system. The fleet supplies 16,000 rides per year. Seniors may arrange for door-to-door transportation for medical appointments or other needs. Haverdink said she has heard seniors say the service is the reason they moved to Georgetown, but it cannot serve the whole community.

"We are turning people away," Haverdink told the board. "Love INC is turning people away." Public transportation would serve many seniors and low-income residents at lower cost.

Gillen said that 84 percent of people surveyed who were age 60 or older stated medical care as the purpose of their trip supplied by some form of transportation other than their private vehicle (such as Georgetown buses or volunteer drivers working through local agencies). More than 400 people living in eastern Ottawa County have contacted a community organization in the last nine months about an unmet transit need, according to the study.

The study surveyed Georgetown Township/Jenison, Hudsonville, Jamestown Township, Allendale Township, and Blendon Township.

"Eastern Ottawa County is the missing link," Gillen said, "the only urban core without public transportation." The most likely way to bring public transportation to the area would be an expansion of The Rapid into Hudsonville and Jenison, Gillen said, but even if a decision were made immediately by the governments involved, it would be two to three years before a bus made a stop.

"Public transportation is not self-supporting," she said. "It is usually funded through a millage. Right now, we just want local governments to start thinking about it."

In the third phase of the study, area elected officials are being asked to supply information about local interest in and support for public transportation. Then another survey of residents will be completed. A final report from the Michigan Department of Transportation is due in June. Anyone with comments or questions on the study, or opinions about public transportation, should contact their local elected officials.

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