



Rail, shuttle service among regional transportation needs, stakeholders say

By Donna Buttarazzi

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YORK COUNTY -- Stakeholders from across southern Maine came together in Kennebunk Thursday to discuss local and regional transit needs and explore solutions for communities in York County in need of transportation programs.

Many of the smaller and more rural communities in York County have no public transit available, and as the oldest state in the nation, this poses a growing challenge for those who can no longer drive themselves, said Mary Ann Hayes, multimodal planning division manager for Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT). The challenge also exists for other transit-dependent populations like the disabled, veterans and the low-income.

Combine the needs with the challenges -- changes in vehicle technology (autonomous vehicles, electric cars), crumbling roads and infrastructure, and the need to reduce fossil fuel emissions -- and Scott Rollins, Assistant Director of Planning for the Maine Department of Transportation said the new long-range plan he's spearheading is going to include things they've never done before.

While the moving parts create challenges, they also create opportunities to change the dialog and include more efforts and innovative ideas for transit alternatives to meet the needs of more Mainers.

Thursday's York County Transit Forum was the first forum of its kind led by MDOT and was designed to take the pulse of stakeholders on issues facing communities and to gather feedback on strategies MDOT is currently considering for transit in the 2018-2050 Long-Range Plan.

An undercurrent of frustration vibrated through the auditorium as stakeholders said solutions are needed now -- not years in the future.

“It’s heartening to see so many people here and to see so many interested in long range planning. But I’m coming from a place of significant disappointment. The talk about bicycle friendly roads has not really materialized. And the talk about rail as well -- it’s very critical. In general I have a bit of disappointment and a lot of hope that these things will get the funding they need. I hope this plan reflects the need to decarbonize,” said Kennebunk resident Jay Kilbourn.

Rollins said funding is a big aspect of every new plan, and the reason why things take so long. Members of the crowd of about 50-60 weren’t buying that excuse for not addressing transit issues in a more timely manner.

“I object strongly that your priority is funding,” said Bill Leffler, a member of Kennebunkport’s Senior Advisory Committee. “If we want to do something we find the money. I want to hear your priorities, then we will figure out how to fund those priorities.”

Attendees participated in a real time survey with electronic clickers, prioritizing proposed strategies for the long-range plan.

Over 50 percent of respondents said they wanted to see a rail station in Kennebunk, while 54 percent supported increased efforts to bring shuttle service from the Wells train station to Kennebunk.

Sixty percent felt expanded bus service between Sanford and Wells was a priority, and 56 percent wanted to see expanded service between Wells and Biddeford/Saco.

Patricia Quinn, executive director of NEPRA (New England Passenger Rail Association) said they are exploring a proposal to expand the Wells Amtrak station and add a second track to increase the number of round trips to Boston, Massachusetts, and provide commuter service from Wells to Portland.

Over 50 percent of respondents felt that initiative was very important.

Eighty-one percent supported mobility network efforts connecting different modes of transportation.

Nearly everyone at the transit forum, 92 percent of respondents, felt medical providers should be a part of the transit discussion. Medical providers could group appointments for people living in rural towns to make ride-sharing and/or bus transportation easier to schedule.

Sixty-eight percent said Maine should invest in electric buses and trolleys and charging stations, and 64 percent felt having bike racks on buses and trains was very important.

Sustainable micro-transit such as Lyft and Uber programs designed for use by seniors was seen as a viable solution with 49 percent saying it's very important to support those efforts.

Employer sponsored commuter runs were seen as very important to over 60 percent, while increased availability of Uber and Lyft in rural communities was also seen as very important.

Stakeholders would also like to see support for walkable and transit friendly neighborhood designs.

Stakeholders also strongly supported creating a transit system to link the smaller communities surrounding Sanford. They also supported sustainable micro-transit systems that did not rely solely on volunteer drivers.

Let your voice be heard

MDOT's needs your input in helping to make the 2018-2050 Long Range plan valuable and relevant. Visit <https://mainelongrangeplan2050.metroquest.com/> to take the online survey.

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County transportation issues: Bus routes, rides for seniors

Published by Other on 11/08/2018

By Abigail Worthing

KENNEBUNK – The Maine Department of Transportation held a public meeting at Kennebunk Town Hall to get input from York County residents as to how they think public transportation can be improved.

Mary Ann Hayes of the Maine Department of Transportation mediated the Nov. 1 meeting. Bob Currie from York County Community Action Program and Al Schultz from Shuttlebus-Zoom also participated.

Hayes shared concerns that had been brought to the meetings by both residents and officials, adding that at the end of the meeting, there would be a vote to determine which points would be prioritized when the Maine Department of Transportation makes an official plan for public transportation in York County during the next few months.

Hayes brought up lack of routes between towns, lack of technology available to track and plan bus trips, lack of qualified drivers and funding for improvements. Also being considered is the implementation of ride sharing options, such a ZipCars and bicycle stations.

Prior to the vote, the 25 residents gathered were able to share some of concerns they believed should be added to the list of priorities.

Paul Weiss of the Maine Rail Transit Coalition expressed concerned over the lack of focus on the environmentally friendly option of furthering rail travel. He said there should be more of a focus on how the DOT will move forward considering the reality of climate change.

“We’re not thinking big enough,” Weiss said. “Climate change is going to be upon us before we know it. We need to be ready.”

A common refrain throughout the meeting was the concern for seniors left without transportation. Of those was Duffy Gold, who was there to represent the people of Shapleigh and the state’s Lakes Region. Where she lives, there is no access to public transportation, something she feels needs to be remedied as soon as possible. Gold said people are put in a position that if they need to go to a doctor’s appointment, they need to rely on neighbors and relatives.

Wanda Heath of Kennebunk talked about her experiences driving her daughter to the bus stop every day. She asked why there is still no train station in Kennebunk and said she was frustrated that the town isn’t prioritizing the station.

“Every day while I drive I see a man, who must be about 70, who rides his bike every day to the bus station. This is an older man. He should not, under any circumstances, have to rely

on a bike to get public transportation,” Heath said. “The town has been aware of this for a while. In 2014 we voted for a train station. What are we waiting for?”

Jean Saunders of Age Friendly Saco spoke about research she's done to try and find transportation options for area seniors. She mentioned programs that are offered in other parts of the country that could be implemented by the state, such as Go Go Grandparent, which uses ride-sharing to get seniors from one to place to another. She thinks it's time for there to be more options for seniors, most of whom, can no longer drive.

“We need to find a solution for the seniors in our community,” Saunders said, which was met with applause from the audience.

Voting was done using a handheld device passed out to all meeting participants. Members of the meeting could look at a projected screen for options and then select the number of the option desired to indicate what they thought was the highest priority, providing data in real time. Of those topics voted on were replacing aging fleets of buses, updating technology and the expansion of bus routes. Votes as a top priority was adding a general purpose bus route between Biddeford, Saco, Scarborough and Portland, and adding service between Kennebunk and Wells.

Hayes encouraged those who still had comments to send them to the Maine Department of Transportation. The next meeting has not been scheduled.

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DOT, County officials explore local public transit issues

Published by Other on 11/23/2018

Christopher Bouchard

CARIBOU, Maine — Maine Department of Transportation officials met with representatives from a variety of County agencies on Monday to discuss issues with the northern Maine public transit system and determine which aspects of the program should be prioritized moving forward.

MDOT Public Transit Advisory Council Chair Mary Ann Hayes primarily led the meeting held at Cary Medical Center's Chan Center after a brief introduction from Cary Public Relations Director Bill Flagg and Limestone Economic Development Coordinator Dennis McCartney.

“Obviously transportation is a big issue for healthcare and many other organizations,” said Flagg before introducing McCartney, “and many other organizations.”

McCartney explained that he and Flagg have begun collaborating a great deal since both Caribou and Limestone were deemed “Age Friendly Communities” by AARP, a distinction that indicates a municipality is dedicated to the well-being of its senior residents.

“What Bill and I have been collaborating on recently is the part of the program that determines the community’s needs,” McCartney said. A recent poll asking Limestone about the town’s greatest needs indicated “the number one thing is better transportation, whether it’s for seniors or for people who need a ride to work because they don’t have a car.”

Limestone has no public transportation, which he said is having a negative impact on property sales in town.

“A lot of real estate is available,” he said, “but there’s no way to fill it because people don’t have a way to get to their jobs.”

McCartney said that while he would like to see DOT become aware of what Limestone faces, his primary goal is to see the entire county better served in terms of public transit, particularly the areas north of Caribou and Limestone.

Other meeting participants included representatives of Caribou and Limestone Age-Friendly Community Committees, the Aroostook Agency on Aging, Cary Medical Center, the Northern Maine Development Commission, and the Aroostook County Transportation System (ARTS).

They spent the bulk of the meeting examining five proposed categories and several strategies within those categories for improving statewide transit. After lengthy discussion, participants used a remote device to rank the categories and strategies in terms of the highest priority for the MDOT.

The five categories were, Rider Information Systems; Transit Provider Infrastructure; Last Mile and Local Rides Off Transit Routes; Partnerships; and Funding.

Among strategies discussed under Rider Information, were online trip planners, mobility navigators available to answer questions via phone call, the implementation of travel training programs that teach rural residents how to ride the bus, and general publicity of transit services. Those in attendance voted that publicity should be treated as the top priority in this section.

Infrastructure strategies included replacing old buses and vans, electronic fare collection systems, implementation of a real-time vehicle locator, and equipping buses and vans with bike racks. Participants overwhelmingly favored replacing old buses and vans as the top priority in this category.

Last mile strategy options included supporting grassroots volunteer networks to fill in the gaps, recruiting volunteer drivers, having transit providers take on micro-transit last mile services, and encouraging businesses such as Uber and Lyft to recruit local drivers. In this category, grassroots volunteer networks were ranked as the highest priority.

Partnerships strategies consisted of building a multi-sector mobility network to organize transit systems, having medical professionals schedule appointments with ridesharing in mind, encouraging more employer sponsored commuter runs, designing walkable, transit-friendly neighborhoods, and having a regional mobility network. The multi-sector and regional mobility network choices were closely tied for the top priority.

When it came to funding, participants discussed pursuing federal grants, increasing state support for transit, increasing municipal and county support, and growing donation programs. Attendants ranked federal funding as the top priority.

Among all the categories, they ranked partnerships as the most important.

In terms of local needs, one participant stated that the current Aroostook County Transportation System schedule can make it difficult for many rural residents in northern Maine to make appointments.

Joy Barresi Saucier, executive director of the Aroostook Agency on Aging, asked how the ARTS schedule impacts access to food. Ken Murchison, director of the Caribou Bread of Life Soup Kitchen, said that with kitchen typically open from 4-6 p.m., many who use ARTS for transportation have “already been downtown and had their ride home” before the kitchen opens.

“We try to schedule one day a week to be open at noon,” he said, “which worked for a minute when we advertised hard and put the word out there.”

But then the traffic quickly declined after they cut the advertising.

He added that he has “nothing but praise” for the ARTS program and has witnessed drivers help passengers get into their walkers or wheelchairs and made sure they were able to access their homes after being dropped off.

“They’re doing their job for sure,” Murchison said.

Barresi Saucier then asked McCartney about Limestone residents’ access to food.

“The Methodist Church in Limestone offers a free meal once a month,” said McCartney, “and there’s maybe a dozen people there. The room should be packed, but a lot of people don’t have a way to get there.”

Looking to the future, McCartney said he envisions a local program which would help Limestone residents travel to either the church, Caribou, or Presque Isle so they could have access to food.

Barresi Saucier recalled attending a senior club in Easton where the members were bemoaning the small attendance and started talking about

coordinating within their own network to get more people to the events.

McCartney agreed that communication and “getting the word out” is crucial, and that “now, it’s a matter of taking care of the logistics.”

Flagg suggested state-funded incentives for communities that go out of their way to purchase a van dedicated to transporting residents, possibly by “matching investments made by that local community.”

MDOT officials paid close attention and wrote down many of the concerns and suggestions raised at the meeting before adjournment. They also are seeking community feedback via a long-range transportation survey that can be taken online at mainedot.com/longrangeplan.

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Central Maine age-friendly group discusses statewide transit shortcomings

Published by Kennebec Journal, Morning Sentinel on 12/03/2018

BY **SAM SHEPHERD**

HALLOWELL — Funding and availability of service in rural areas of the state are the biggest setbacks for public transit in Maine.

That was the message from representatives of central Maine community groups at the Maine Department of Transportation's public transit forum Friday at the Cohen Community Center.

The forum to gather input for the next "Long-Range Transportation Plan" was hosted by age-friendly groups from Hallowell, Gardiner, Augusta, Readfield and Spectrum Generations, a central Maine agency committed to improving the quality of life for older and disabled Mainers.

Mary Ann Hayes, Multimodal Planning Division Manager at the DOT, said input gathered at the forum will inform a five-year local plan for statewide transit and the long-range plan that, when completed, would run until 2050.

At the start of the meeting, Hayes listed a number of areas of concern from previous forums. She said Maine's sprawled development, aging equipment, and lack of publicity, adequate funding and drivers have hampered public transit in Maine.

Many of the forum's 30 attendees were focused on the availability of transportation for seniors who could be isolated in their homes without access to community events or shopping areas. Mary Ann Zagaria, a member of Hallowell's All Age Friendly Committee, said communities should focus on public transportation to help seniors age in place and be active within the municipality.

“I think transportation is the underlying factor,” she said. “Transportation is absolutely that connector.”

Aside from funding being tight, bus services also fall short of taking users all the way home, what Hayes call “the last mile.” Some services are not allowed to deviate from their routes, Hayes said, even if a user lives a quarter mile off of it.

Some grassroots groups try to fill that need, but operate on donations. One example of grassroots effort is nonprofit Neighbors Driving Neighbors, which offers residents of Belgrade, Fayette, Mount Vernon, Rome and Vienna free rides.

Near the end of the forum, attendees ranked priorities for statewide transit. Pursuing increased funding from private, state and county government was voted the top priority and second with increasing partnerships with businesses and medical centers.

Other important priorities were increasing publicity for transit services, replacing old vehicles, making transit passes available instead of only taking cash and supporting grassroots efforts to fill gaps in “last mile” coverage.

State Rep. Charlotte Warren, who represents Hallowell, Farmingdale and West Gardiner, attended the forum. She pledged support for a transportation bond and also floated a public/private partnership for public transportation with the Maine Department of Transportation as the “backbone” overseeing the operation, something they are not doing currently.

“We’re all aware that (public transportation) is an issue,” she said. “We have to have something that goes above (local groups).”

Warren also urged forum attendees to come to Legislative hearings about transit matters.

Jim Wood, transportation development director for the Kennebec Valley Community Action Program, said their transportation projects have suffered from a lack of funding and volunteers. He said the Kennebec Explorer and Somerset Explorer costs the program \$9 per passenger — while only charging \$1.25 per ride. Compounding that, demand is growing

in rural parts of their coverage area. Also, the cost to operate a Kennebec Explorer bus with a full-time driver is about \$75,000.

“You’re not going to do it (public transit in Maine) with subsidies,” Wood told another attendee when asked about keeping cost per passenger down.

He said tight funding for the program creates a need for volunteer drivers for their MaineCare Transportation program. Wood said the group has 90 volunteers, but it needs about 130.

Forum attendees floated giving volunteers an insurance or tax break to drum up numbers, but Wood said that it would become legally foggy to give benefits to a volunteer without employing them. Volunteers are reimbursed 41 cents per mile, he said.

Maggie Warren, a member of Hallowell’s All Age Friendly Committee, mentioned using often-dormant school buses to transport seniors around. Hayes said school boards could make a policy change that allows those buses to be used if the buses were owned by the school system.

“We’ve got (the buses),” Warren said. “It’s just the policy that keeps us divided.”

Sara Grant, chairwoman of the Augusta Age Friendly Committee, said the forum was a success and a good step toward finding a solution to the transit problem in Maine.

“It’s good that we’re making progress and (finding) solutions,” she said after the forum.

The final transit forum will be in Bangor on Dec. 4.

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Bethel

Bethel Citizen - 12/20/2018

Forum discusses future of transportation

By SAMUEL WHEELER
AL CRESSY

BETHEL — On Nov. 15 the Maine Department of Transportation, Western Maine Transportation Services, Community Concepts and the Bethel Region Age-Friendly Community Initiative N2N volunteer driver program hosted a regional Public Transit Forum to allow western Maine residents to assist in improving transportation opportunities for the state and the region.

The Bethel forum, one of six such gatherings conducted throughout the state, was designed to provide MDOT with input from this area's residents. Fifteen individuals

attended the forum.

MDOT is currently reviewing all of the input gained from its outreach conducted during 2018 and is drafting a Locally Coordinated Transit Plan (LCP), which is strictly transit focused. The draft LCP will go to the Public Transit Advisory Council for review and is expected to be adopted by MDOT in January.

In parallel with the LCP effort is the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRP), which will cover the entire transportation system in Maine, from transit of all kinds to roads and bridges.

Feeding into this plan is an online survey available at www.mainedot.gov/longrangeplan/. The input from this survey will help shape the direction of Maine's transportation

By CRAIG ZURHORST
WMTS

The Bethel forum presented an opportunity for Western Maine Transportation Services to unveil its new Mountain Express bus shuttle program, which will run from Dec. 1 through April 7.

The Mountain Express is scheduled to accommodate Sunday River Ski Resort and Bethel hospitality workers, but is always open to the general public. The two new Mountain Express bus routes will offer two round-trips daily, originating from Lewiston-Auburn and Dixfield, respectively, and will provide seven-day-a-week service for nominal fares.

The bus routes will complement the existing free Mountain Explorer bus service between Sunday River and Bethel. This season the Mountain Explorer, with full service beginning Dec. 26, will again offer Flex-Route service up to ¼ miles off-route on public roads.

Printable schedules for both the Mountain Express and Mountain Explorer bus services are available at www.mountainexplorer.org.

Already in operation are the Field House Shuttle and Telstar Shuttle services. Operated with Gould and Telstar students in mind. These two services are also open to the public.

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system, now and in the future. Citizens are encouraged to participate in the survey by telling MDOT how they think various trends and issues such as climate, safety, technology, tourism, and changing demographics will impact the transportation system of the future.

During the Bethel forum, MDOT's Multimodal Planning Division Manager Mary Ann Hayes outlined what the MDOT has been hearing in regards to public transportation throughout the state.

Bus? What bus?

A few consistent responses were that many people did not know that their area offered any sort of bus service. Other responses were that people were nervous about trying public transportation and that many of the buses and vans needed to be either repaired or replaced.

One of the most discussed points was the need for "last mile" services. Last mile services would aid people who live off the designated bus stops and who are unable to use public transportation for the last leg of their trip.

Hayes laid out a number of different strategies in MDOT's presentation on what can be done to solve

some of these issues. Those attending were asked to participate in an interactive survey that addressed several categories: rider information systems, funding, partnerships, last mile and local rides off transit routes and transit provider infrastructure.

Seventy-five percent of the attendees thought having instructions on how to utilize bus services and online trip planners would serve best for rider information systems. Under infrastructure, replacing old buses and vans led the way with 36 percent of the vote, and adding electronic fare collection systems followed with 28 percent.

Arguably one of the most important categories, last mile service and off transit routes, was split almost evenly among three categories. Grassroots volunteer networks and adding micro-transit last mile services both racked up 28 percent of the vote. The leading priority was recruiting volunteer drivers, which earned 36 percent of the vote.

Development

The final two categories "partnerships" and "funding" focused more on the development of transportation systems and obtaining the necessary funding

to accomplish this. Under partnership, 39 percent of people felt that doing more employer sponsored runs would be the most effective, and 31 percent prioritized that medical providers schedule appointments that coordinate with rideshare.

According to MDOT, the Legislature only appropriates about \$1/person for public transportation, one of the lowest amounts in the nation. Therefore, services are quite limited. Should more funding be appropriated at the state, county or local government levels? Responding to the funding challenge, attendees felt that receiving more support from the state was the best option (41 percent). Receiving funding from towns and counties came in second with 33 percent of the vote.

On a regional basis, a key outcome of the forum was the recognition by WMTS, CC and N2N that opportunities exist for collaboration between the two transit providers (WMTS and CC) and the Bethel region N2N volunteer driver program to enhance already existing last mile services. swheeler@bethelcitizen.com

Mike's Appli
Over