

Public Transportation System Just Around the Bend

by K_Guice

With over 70,000 residents in Bend, it is no surprise that there has been an outcry from the community for public transportation. It is an issue that has become more prevalent as gas prices rise and the city continues to grow.

After facing heavy criticism in the past for not offering a transit system to keep up with the city's rapid growth; the city council met on June 5 giving the okay for work to begin on the first fixed-route transportation system. Buses are expected to roll out in the fall.

At the helm of the much-awaited project is Heather Ornelas. She is Bend's first public transportation mobility manager. Hiring Ornelas was a big step towards making the transportation system a reality. "It's time for this," Ornelas explained. "It is an extremely large city to not have a fixed transit system."

She has been working on the plan and on purchasing six used vehicles for the first year of operations, as well as a spare vehicle or two if the budget allows for it.

Funding has long been a key issue in creating a fixed-route bus system. While Bend residents have called for a transit service, voters have rejected efforts to fund such programs. So, Ornelas has been given the task of making the city's transit dollars go farther.

"The plan does preserve Dial-a-Ride (DAR)," according to Ornelas. However, it will be limited to area seniors and the disabled. Reducing DAR allows for the city to use those funds to create the new bus routes.

"I have the same money I had before," Ornelas said. "We are implementing six regular and two tripper routes." Tripper refers to routes that would run only during peak hours to certain locations, like area high schools and the senior center. Ornelas says it is a cost-effective way to get some level of service out to areas that wouldn't otherwise receive it.

According to the Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates report recently reviewed by the council, it recommended that the transit service should run every 30 minutes for 12 hours a day on weekdays and possibly every hour on Saturdays. The recommended fare of \$1.50 would bring in an estimated \$250,000 in annual revenues. However, that would leave more than \$1 million in yearly operating cost to be covered by other city funding sources.

The plan is still in its development phase, but Ornelas says she has already heard people saying that itâ€™s not enough. Not only are some Bend residents concerned there arenâ€™t enough routes in the city itself, they are concerned it doesnâ€™t address those living in outlying areas.

â€œMy response? This does so much more than we are doing now and we are using the same amount of money,â€• Ornelas replies. With the current DAR system 104,000 riders use public transit yearly. â€œWe are expecting 200- to 250,000 with the fixed route, depending on ridership,â€• she added.

Ornelas acknowledges that it doesnâ€™t cover the entire city, but says there has to be a starting point. â€œAm I concerned? I wanted to find ways to help those who fall through the cracks. And while you canâ€™t help every person, you help as many as you can,â€• Ornelas stated.

Right now, she says her job at hand is to do more with the money she has in her budget. â€œDown the line, I would like to see the people and city bound together to do more,â€• she said.

As for people in outlying areas, Ornelas said, â€œWorking at connecting this county is extremely important, but it wonâ€™t matter if you get people to Bend if you donâ€™t have a way to get people around Bend.â€•

However, Ornelas is working with Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council (COIC) on the Deschutes County Transportation Coordination Project. Also in the preliminary stages, the project team includes representatives from each of the local governments and unincorporated communities in Deschutes County. In addition, there are representatives from social services, non-profit organizations, state government, private business, existing transportation providers, and potential transportation users.

Andrew Spreadborough is the Program Administrator for the COIC project. He says, â€œItâ€™s a good step in the direction that everyone wants to go.â€•

â€œTheir transit system is critical, but we have to find a way to get people to Bend,â€• he says. As Central Oregon faces rapid growth, the need for transportation services within and among communities is increasing proportionately.

There is not only a necessity in the amount of transportation available but also having options to meet a wide variety of needs including those of seniors, people with disabilities and other residents without the means of personal transportation.

Spreadborough says the region is rapidly changing due to people moving further out in search of affordable housing. "The end result is longer commute times with the bulk of jobs in the Bend area," he adds.

Factor in fuel costs, and many residents have a problem on their hands. They can't afford to commute. Spreadborough says it is a huge barrier for businesses looking to recruit and retain workers.

"There are a lot of services that already offer rides, from DAR to some business shuttles," Spreadborough said. "Ultimately, this is a complimentary effort."

"We want the people involved in the process, they help develop a vision," Spreadborough said. That is a message that Ornelas also wants to spread to the people of Bend. "The public is encouraged to come out! we will have transit related items on nearly every city agenda."

"Keep an eye on what's happening, participate," Ornelas said. "There is a lot of work between a plan and when a bus runs."

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