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TOP STORY

From Benton Harbor to South Bend and back

Study proposes transit system to connect more people to destinations

By LOUISE WREGE - HP Staff Writer Sep 23, 2018



Riders board a Dial-A-Ride bus at the Twin Cities Area Transit in downtown Benton Harbor.

Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

Imagine getting on a public bus in Watervliet and riding it to South Bend with stops in Benton Harbor, St. Joseph, Berrien Springs and Niles.

Or imagine riding a public bus from Benton Harbor to the Michigan City, Ind., South Shore Line train station, where you can catch a train into Chicago to watch a White Sox game.

That could become a reality if Berrien County's four bus service providers merge into one entity, said Pat Brandstatter, chairman of the Transportation Steering Committee, which was put together in part by Michigan's Great Southwest Strategic Leadership Council (MGSSLC).

The recently released "Connect Berrien Transit Service Integration Plan" outlines how a countywide public transportation system, called GoBerrien, would be simpler and more efficient than the current service by four different providers.

"There are parts of the county that would be serviced by this that currently don't have any transportation," Brandstatter said.

The plan calls for a fixed route from Benton Harbor to South Bend to run seven days a week.

A fixed route from Benton Harbor to Michigan City via Red Arrow Highway would run three days a week – Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. This route would be coordinated with one that runs from New Buffalo to Niles on the same days.

Another fixed route from St. Joseph to Watervliet would run four days a week – Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays.

All of the fixed routes would have six round trips a day during the specified weekdays. On weekends, there would be four round trips on specified days.

Demand-response Dial-A-Ride service would be available to transport people to the fixed routes, said Brandstatter, president of Kruger Plastic Products in Bridgman.

In the Benton Harbor/St. Joseph area and the Niles/Buchanan area, demand-response service would be available seven days a week.

Demand-response service would be available three or four days a week in the other parts of the county, he said.

The study found that the plan would cost about \$6.3 million annually.

"The steering committee's goal has been not to figure out how to do it, but just to figure out what would be the best way with a reasonable amount of money to improve our transportation system county-wide and service the entire county," Brandstatter said.

Education the key

He said the next step is to educate the public about the need for a coordinated transportation system.

He said he didn't realize there was so much need until he started studying transportation a few years ago. Maps done by Be Healthy Berrien in 2015 show that there are pockets of people in Benton Harbor and Niles where 32 to 51 percent of residents have no access to a vehicle.

The problem becomes more obvious when looking at senior citizens. Those maps show that large numbers of senior citizens have no transportation in areas of St. Joseph, Royalton and Lincoln townships and in Bridgman.

The service plan was done in response to a 2014 study recommending that the county be served by one coordinated system, which would be easier for riders to understand and would be more efficient.

The county's bus systems are the Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority (TCATA), Berrien Bus, Niles Dial-A-Ride and Buchanan Dial-A-Ride.

Brandstatter said if the plan is implemented, it won't solve all of the county's transportation problems.

"This isn't going to be the silver bullet," he said. "But it begins to open up the possibility of private investment or private companies getting involved."

He said the proposal includes extending the routes into Indiana because surveys of residents found that was a need.

"If we were going to have a vibrant, effective system, we were going to need to connect those dots," he said.

The plan was put together by Nelson Nygaard, a California company that specializes in transportation and mobility for communities. Berrien County Manufacturers Council, Berrien County and Lakeland Health Foundation provided the local matching money to receive a \$200,000 grant from the Federal Transit Administration to pay for the study.

More about the study

The Connect Berrien study found:

- There are no connections between the county's urban areas of Niles and Benton Harbor.
- Many densely populated areas have no service, including Shoreham and Stevensville.
- Traveling across the county to medical appointments, shopping centers, employers and colleges is not well served.
- Berrien County is the only county in Michigan with four bus providers.

The study states that the GoBerrien proposal would make public transportation more convenient and would connect people to more places.

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Upcoming forums

Three forums are being held this week to help people better understand the possibilities and to answer questions about the "Connect Berrien Transit Service Integration Plan." The forums are:

- 5:30-7 p.m. Tuesday at Lake Township Hall, 3220 W. Shawnee Road, Bridgman.
- 3-4:30 p.m. and 5-6:30 p.m. Wednesday at Niles Library, 620 E. Main St., Niles.
- 5:30-7 p.m. Thursday at Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, 376 W. Main St., Suite 130, Benton Harbor.

MORE INFORMATION



BH officials want to keep bus system separate