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Ridership down, but system well-used

By Barbara S. Miller, Staff writer

Ridership on Washington County fixed-route bus lines is down, but participation in the Washington County Transportation Authority, known as Washington Rides, is above average for similarly sized systems, according to those who are studying public transportation needs.

GG&C operates two buses that make trips back and forth from Washington to Pittsburgh along Route 19. Mid-Mon Valley runs 11 buses along the Route 88 corridor.

"Ridership on fixed routes is declining 15 to 20 percent, while ridership on paratransit is increasing," reported Edward Abrams of Abrams-Cherwony & Associates, transportation engineers of Philadelphia, at an update on the study Thursday at a South Strabane Township fire hall.

One paratransit program that ranks first in the state in ridership is the Rural Persons with Disabilities transit program, with 37,829 trips last year, an increase of 3.4 percent.

Sheila Gombita, executive director of the Washington Transportation Authority, said Washington County passengers continue to make up almost 25 percent of the statewide total.

"Washington is a big, rural county," Gombita said before the meeting. "Canonsburg, for example, is not fixed by a fixed route commuter service. We also have a network of agencies helping to get us clientele. They're trying very hard to get transportation for these individuals."

Phillip M. Brown, manager of the Pittsburgh planning consultants of Gannett Fleming Inc. said data collected during the 2000 U.S. Census shows there are 89,000 work-related commutes daily in Washington County.

Nearly 23,000 of those trips are between Washington and communities in the Route 19-Interstate 79 corridor. About 4,522 trips go from communities north of Washington along the same corridor to Pittsburgh. More than 1,000 make the trip daily from the Mon Valley to Pittsburgh.

Very few commuters travel from the Mon Valley to Washington or from Washington County to Greene or Fayette counties or West Virginia, Brown said. Census takers do not document trips related to medical appointments or shopping.

Washington County Commission Co-Chairman Bracken Burns suggested that to reverse the trend of declining use of public transit, the study needs to focus on why people stopped riding buses.

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Because of increases in parking fees in Pittsburgh and skyrocketing gasoline prices, Burns said he could envision people ceasing to ride only if "they're hitch-hiking or dead."

Commission Co-Chairman Larry Maggi questioned how public transportation can meet the needs of prospective employees who will be working at The Meadows' temporary casino.

Harlan Shober, Chartiers Township supervisor, said his hope is for park-and-ride lots next to Interstate 79 with rail service sharing the same right of way, as he's seen in Virginia.

Although the \$250,000 transit study focuses on Washington County, the Mid-Mon Valley Transit Authority also serves riders from Fayette, Westmoreland and Allegheny counties.

When classes resume after spring break, California University will survey students, faculty and staff about their public transit needs.

Brown said the transit stakeholders will meet sometime in May, and the first meetings for public input are expected to be scheduled for this summer. The study is to be completed by October.