

Bus study looks down the road

Officials are examining the growing need for transit service

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By Janice Crompton, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Even as officials from the Allegheny County Port Authority are being assailed by riders angry about proposed fare hikes and service cuts, officials in Washington County have quietly been gathering data on what's available now so they can determine what transit service residents will need in the future.

In the end, officials believe the Washington County transit study may result in new bus services, including a possible daily express from Washington to Pittsburgh.

"We wanted to determine if there were unmet needs out there and what kind of services can be provided to meet those needs," said Sheila J. Gombita, executive director of the Washington County Transportation Authority, which is spearheading the study.

Ms. Gombita said the study will develop strategies to improve the efficiency of transit service, explore cooperation between service providers, and identify possible funding for new transit services.

The study also will address mobility needs for seniors, those with disabilities, and low-income residents, along with transit for major destinations in the county, such as colleges, office and industrial parks, and entertainment venues, including The Meadows.

"I think there is going to be a lot of places people will need to get to, not just for jobs, but for pleasure as well," Ms. Gombita said.

Along with the WCTA, the study is being sponsored by the city of Washington, GG&C Bus Co., and the Mid Mon Valley Transit Authority, in cooperation with the state Department of Transportation, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, and the county planning department. It should be completed by October, and the \$250,000 cost is being funded through state and federal grants.

Port Authority's announced service cuts will have little effect on Washington County, except in McDonald, where a bus route to Pittsburgh is expected to be eliminated. The Port Authority offers no other services in Washington County.



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A GG&C Bus Co. bus drives down Liberty Avenue in Downtown Pittsburgh on one of six round-trip daily runs the company offers from Washington.

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Dave Good, GG&C's director of grants and government relations, said his company has been considering a change to its daily fixed route schedule to Pittsburgh but wanted to see the results of the study first.

"We think there's a need there," he said. "We need to see how much of a need there is."

Mr. Good said the company, located in Canton, is considering an option to offer daily express service from park and ride lots near the Jessop and Beau Street exits of Interstate 70 and on Route 519 near the Houston exit of Interstate 79 into Pittsburgh.

The lots were built by PennDOT and are used by commuters who carpool to work.

Mr. Good said GG&C already has discussed leasing fees with the Port Authority for use of its West Busway into Pittsburgh.

"The Port Authority has been very open to us and helpful," Mr. Good said.

The fees would be paid through federal mass transit grants allocated to the city of Washington, which contracts with GG&C for its transportation needs. The company has been providing transit services in Washington since it was founded in the 1970s by Mr. Good's father, William C. Good, along with Wendel Gower and William Clark. It was purchased in 2004 by John Lenzner.

The company currently provides six round-trip daily commutes into Pittsburgh along the Route 19 corridor, but the buses cover a multitude of communities, from Washington to Canonsburg to Peters, resulting in trips to Downtown Pittsburgh that can take nearly two hours.

GG&C also provides daily service in Washington, including free service for seniors during off-peak hours, thanks to state lottery funding. The company operates four full-size and several mini-buses.

Mr. Good said the company hadn't previously provided express service to Pittsburgh because transportation needs in the community weren't clear. He said he is looking forward to the results of the study.

"We were interested in improving our transit system, but we want to see what the study brings out," he said.

The Mid Mon Valley Transit Authority provides 21 round-trip commutes to Pittsburgh beginning at 4:50 a.m. daily. The service is provided throughout the Mon Valley, including portions of Washington, Fayette, Allegheny and Westmoreland counties.

Executive Director Valerie Kissell said the authority provided more than 340,000 trips during the last fiscal year, and the service is becoming more popular.

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"We see an increase in our ridership year after year, which is very positive," she said.

Now in its 20th year, the Mid Mon Valley authority evaluates routes on an annual basis as demographics and population change, Ms. Kissell said. A special route recently was added to connect California to Pittsburgh, and services are provided from as far away as Fayette City to Finleyville, she said.

The transit authority is funded through federal, state and local grants, and no fare increases or cutbacks are planned, Ms. Kissell said.

"We're going to continue to provide our service like we always have," she said.

Ms. Kissell said the authority is anxious to see the results of the study, which she said will be a way for residents to "have a voice in the way transportation service is provided in Washington County."

Ms. Kissell and Ms. Gombita said public input would be an essential element to the study. They are encouraging residents to log on to the project Web site, which is supposed to be up and running this week at www.spcregion.org/wcts. Residents can offer comments and track the progress of the study.

Public meetings to gather input also will be scheduled this summer at several locations in the county, and Ms. Gombita said newsletters will be distributed via postal and electronic mail to help get the word out.

For information about bus fares and schedules, visit www.ggcbusride.com or www.mmvta.com.