

Transit agencies consider combining

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MONTPELIER – Officials of two public transit agencies are looking to join forces in order to make services more efficient and create a regional funding source.

Green Mountain Transit Agency and Chittenden County Transportation Authority are exploring the idea of combining their businesses, which are both managed by CCTA. Company representatives presented their ideas to Montpelier officials last week.

The public transit folks are talking with officials from municipalities who receive services from the public transportation companies, the state and others who would be affected by such changes. GMTA, based in Berlin, offers transportation services to Washington County and the towns of Orange, Williamstown and Washington in Orange County.

“Everything you have to do to run and operate a transit agency, we have to do twice,” said Chris Cole, executive director of GMTA and general manager for CCTA. “In looking at our own internal structure, we see a lot of waste going on. For that reason we’d like to join the two agencies... so the taxpayers get a better value for their tax dollars.”

A change in the current funding structure, which includes mostly federal monies contingent upon local matches, would require legislative action, according to Nancy Wasserman, chairman of the GMTA board.

“Without regional funding, the state of Vermont is not going to be able to start some successful commuter services that would be well used,” said Cole. “It’s time that the state of Vermont organized its governing structure in a way that matches the services being offered.”

For the last few decades, funding for public transportation has come partially from soliciting local municipalities for a portion of the operating funds. Those funds are contingent upon voter approval at annual town meeting and make up 9 percent of the total operating expenses. according to Wasserman, who says as many as 20 towns have contributed in the region.

Officials of the transportation agencies are not clear on what a regional funding source would look like. It could mean earmarking state transportation funds or creating a regional entity through which funding would be distributed.

“If you’re going to provide good public transit for the state, you need to look at a greater region than what we have now,” said Wasserman. “It needs to be funded by government in a logical way.”

The LINK express operated by CCTA between Montpelier and Burlington is a successful example of how combining public transportation agencies can serve a greater portion of the state. With the price of gasoline fluctuating in such an extreme manner, commuters have taken advantage of public transportation more this year.

“That’s been wildly successful and ridership doubles every year,” said Wasserman about the LINK express to and from Montpelier, which has seen at least a 70 percent increase in riders over this time last year.

By combining forces, CCTA and GMTA are looking to provide more viable public transportation opportunities. In order to make that successful, the funding needs to also be combined to successfully represent and service the region.

“We know that we’re working with something that’s a little bit broken,” said Wasserman. “We know what we want to have as an outcome for service... We’re opening up the discussion and we’re trying to do it with all the parties that care about this.”