

Year-round transportation — what happened here?

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The Mad Bus's final run of the season is this weekend; here is why: money, local planning, and the rural nature of The Valley.

Current service provider Green Mountain Transit Agency (GMTA) reports that the possibility of year-round public transportation depends greatly on ridership potential and funding. According to GMTA representative Aaron Little GMTA could not estimate how much year-round Mad Bus service would cost for reasons including the ever-fluctuating fuel prices and operating expenses.

In the 2008 fiscal year, Sugarbush contributed \$67,500 toward the Mad Bus, while the Mad River Valley Chamber of Commerce contributed \$9,440 of the approximate \$350,000 seasonal operating cost.

Seasonal Public Transit

To pay for the seasonal public transit service GMTA relies on funding from Sugarbush and the local chamber along with funding from the state of Vermont and the federal government. GMTA is a subsidiary organization managed by the Chittenden County Transportation Authority (CCTA).

While The Valley is rural, the local economy -- however small in comparison to more metropolitan areas -- remains driven by the tourism economy. The number of visitors that The Valley draws each winter has been climbing recently, thanks to new development at Sugarbush, improved snowmaking and good natural snow. As gas prices climb and police vigilance in terms of driving under the influence increases, it makes sense for local planners to explore how to provide some form of year-round public transportation.

But where will that money come from? Sugarbush's contribution to public transportation has remained the same since the Mad Bus's inception, while the cost of lift tickets, accommodations and other amenities has gone up. The local share of the current seasonal service has likewise remained static.

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Sugarbush's 1983 Memorandum of Understanding, made with the U.S. Forest Service and the tri-town Mad River Valley Planning district, contains several appendices intended to regulate the rate of growth as it corresponds to increased traffic, patrons and a necessity for increased public transportation.

Sugarbush was to report to the Mad River Valley Planning District (MRVPD) on issues such as number of skiers per car, numbers of cars in lots at peak times, accounts of utilization of public transit system including ridership, number of trips, etc.

Until the early 1990s Sugarbush had its own seasonal bus service that ran from mountain to mountain and to their condominiums and accommodations.

Valley Transit System

In the early 1990s, a group of Valley residents got together to form a three-year pilot program with Valley-wide as well as commuter bus systems as the ultimate goal. Prior to that, a group of local businesses and others had a pilot program called the Fun Shuttle which ran only in the winter. Then the three-year pilot program was created by the Mad River Valley Transit Advisory Committee (TAC). The TAC worked with the MRVPD, Sugarbush and the chamber and contributed personal funds and countless hours working towards a cohesive year-round Valley transit system. Out of that work came a Short Range Transit Plan.

The group sought grants with an 80 percent federal, 10 percent state, and 10 percent local match. The TAC was initially denied by the Vermont Legislature because the state felt that the money was primarily benefiting the ski areas. TAC members testified before the Senate, ultimately convincing them that public transit was sorely needed and serviced the greater good rather than simply providing funds to the ski areas.

"First we were denied, and then we were able to convince the Senate that this grant funding was worthwhile," said TAC member Russ Bennett.

"Sugarbush was already spending money and with their funding and a local match we figured we could use that to provide a system that would serve the en-

Year-round transportation — what happened here? *(continued)*

tire Valley and not just the skiers, and that would be year round. In order for us to satisfy the grant criteria we had to have year-round service and it had to connect Moretown to Warren,” Bennett recalled.

With funding, the local group was able to procure buses, find a service provider and begin providing free transit. Known as Wheels, the service featured a local 496-RIDE phone number and had regular local routes.

“But as the cost of things went up, instead of changing the system or raising more money or have people pay for service, we allowed the year-round public transit system to disappear, kept Sugarbush’s service and just cut the rest of society out,” Bennett said.

The Ball Got Dropped

What followed, as the years went on, was a collapse of the movement as a result of lack of support from the MRVPD, the bus service provider, Central Vermont Transit Authority’s overall mismanagement, inadequate marketing and advertising and lack of accountability, according to Bennett.

The future of year-round public transportation is unknown. Cementing funds from the government for year-round service, or commuter service to Montpelier or Waterbury, while ridership potential remains lower than larger areas has proven difficult. That in combination with less focus from local planners spells a need for “thinking outside the box” according to state Representative Maxine Grad, D-Moretown.

What’s Next

In order to move the vision of public transit in The Valley into the future, Bennett thinks, “There needs to be management. We need a paradigm shift in thinking about transit. You should be able to get on a plane and get to Sugarbush without needing a car, through connected mass transit. It already exists in some format or another. We need to be planning for bus stops in future developments, and sidewalks. Maybe we should be looking at electric busses,” he said.

Grad agrees. She considers the lack of public transportation in The Valley a “public health risk.... It’s a huge issue in The Valley,” she continued.

That public health risk comes from increased incidences of DUI, the danger of undertaking alternative means of transportation such as biking and walking where there are no bike lanes or sidewalks, and the negative environmental impact of more cars on the road.

“From an economic development standpoint, [a public transit system] would have real value” Bennett said.

At Sugarbush

Sugarbush development representative Margo Wade said, “We continue to support local public transportation (the Mad Bus). Sugarbush provides about 80 percent of the local match for that system. We also submit an annual data report to the MRVPD in June where we track/report a bunch of related info/data as spelled out in the MOU. Sugarbush funds one-quarter of the annual MRVPD budget (Warren, Waitsfield and Fayston each also fund one-quarter).”

While locals can look “outside the box” for solutions, the problem of ridership numbers will remain a stumbling block, unless ridership can be dramatically increased. GMTA points to low ridership potential as the reason for lower funding to the rural Mad River Valley.

Problem Of Ridership And Numbers

The number of riders using the service in The Valley pales in comparison to other routes according to GMTA. GMTA representative Aaron Little said, “This service hasn’t been funded to-date because other routes that have been funded have the potential for greater ridership such as Rutland/Middlebury, Randolph/Dartmouth Hitchcock, St. Albans/Burlington.”

When asked if they had petitioned the legislature for funding, GMTA reported, “GMTA submitted a grant application to the Agency of Transportation for service from MRV to Waterbury in 2004 and applications for service from MRV to Montpelier in 2005 and 2006. Funding was not awarded for any of those grant applications. The areas that did receive funding were serving markets with higher ridership potential. The governor’s proposed budget for the 2009 fiscal year includes \$350,000 for new public transportation routes and GMTA staff anticipates, subject to Board approval, that it will submit a request for funding a commuter route from The Valley.”