

MRVPD Steering Committee discusses public transit

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By Kara Herlihy

The future of public transit in The Valley is “bleak” according to The Valley’s service provider Chris Cole.

The Mad River Planning District Steering Committee met with Cole and other representatives from the Green Mountain Transit Agency (GMTA) to discuss the future of public transportation in The Valley at their June 19 meeting.

When asked what Valley residents could expect for service in the fall and winter of 2008/09, GMTA director Chris Cole said, “The public transit picture is bleak in Vermont” and the services offered will depend on local funding.

Struggling To Sustain

Cole said that of the MadBus’ many routes, there are two that are underperforming: The Valley Floor and the Saturday night service. Cole said the aforementioned routes have the lowest ridership and are therefore struggling to sustain funding.

GMTA has until August to submit a CMAQ grant application to VTrans for funding to move forward with a Valley commuter route. To apply for the CMAQ grant, GMTA needs a written commitment from one or more Valley towns for a three-year commitment to contribute the remaining 20 percent local match (approximately \$30,000). A commuter route would link The Valley with Montpelier and/or Waterbury.

If the CMAQ funding is not awarded for a commuter, but a written commitment from Valley towns is provided, GMTA “will begin investigating the feasibility of diverting funding from winter service to year-round service,” according to a GMTA memo from Cole. “We estimate the local funding needed to supplement existing funds used for year-round service to be approximately \$15,000,” he continued.

Local Match

“Before GMTA can move forward with applying for the grant, the source of that local match must be identified,” Cole continued.

GMTA is funded with a mix of federal, state and local money. Currently, the local funds from The Valley are being provided by Sugarbush (\$67,500), the Valley Chamber of Commerce (\$9,440), and the towns of Fayston (\$588), Waitsfield (\$923) and Warren (\$943), according to GMTA.

“We’re in a tight situation,” Cole added. “We need to examine what we can do differently so riders can utilize the service,” he said.

Diverting Funds

The Valley Floor route currently costs \$70,000 to operate during the winter months. Cole said that GMTA is currently brainstorming ways to sustain the service year round -- which may include diverting funds from the winter service and putting them towards a year-round commuter route.

Steering Committee member and Warren Select Board chair Burt Bauchner said, “The world is a different place now, and we have to do something more creative here.”

Sugarbush president Win Smith asked Cole what GMTA needed to sustain service in The Valley. Cole said one of the big items would be a bus depot, most likely located on the mountain, to store and maintain the busses.

Vast Interest

A memo to the steering committee from Cole reads, “GMTA is aware of the vast interest in The Valley for year-round public transportation. In order to address that interest, the GMTA board of directors directed staff at the May board meeting to again submit a CMAQ grant application for a commuter route to serve the Mad River Valley.”

The memo continues, “The Route 100 commuter was initially funded with the same CMAQ funds we seek to use on a Mad River Valley commuter route.... The demographic data for a Mad River Valley commuter route does not suggest that its ridership would surpass that of the Route 100 commuter, which makes it quite likely that its performance would be less favorable than that of the Route 100 commuter.”

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Cole also mentioned the need for a local match for a CMAQ grant; currently, CMAQ grants cover 80 percent of the net cost, while the remaining 20 percent would be left for the local match.

Joint Venture

Smith also asked about the possibility of a joint venture with GMTA to share the land space and use the value of that land to cover the 20 percent needed for a local match.

“Well-established resorts have continual shuttle services; people don’t like driving in the snow,” Smith said. He continued, saying that the need for public transportation to prevent drinking and driving is crucial in the winter months. “Two glasses of wine over two hours and you’re toast,” he said.

GMTA is currently working on their fourth application for a CMAQ grant for Valley service. The previous applications “were not funded because the projected ridership on the commuter routes were deemed insufficient to warrant the expenditure and other routes throughout the state offered greater ridership potential,” according to Cole’s memo.

Local Funds

If the CMAQ funding is awarded, a Valley commuter route could be operational by July 2009. The local match is anticipated to equal approximately \$30,000 per year for the three-year grant period.

Cole continued, “If GMTA is not awarded CMAQ funding, but we receive a written commitment to provide the necessary local funds for year-round service for one or more of The Valley towns, GMTA will begin investigating the feasibility of diverting funding from the winter service to year-round service. GMTA uses a fair share equation to determine the amount due from communities for the service they receive and we generally look to communities to provide 10 percent of the cost of the service. Using this method, we estimate the local funding needed to supplement existing funds used for year-round service to be approximately \$15,000.”

Waitsfield Select Board member Bill Parker agreed to work with Sugarbush and GMTA on further exploring how to accomplish a year-round commuter route for The Valley, including looking at the work data from the most current U.S. census to somehow ascertain ridership numbers.