

# Columbia County Evaluates Public Transportation

*A new Community-Wide Plan includes ideas for expansion, but funding is an issue*

By Scott Laird

Public transportation in Columbia County? Some people thought it would never work. But over the last few years, ridership on the Columbia County Rider has increased dramatically, and plans are underway for even more expansion. But according to Henry Heimuller, Transit Coordinator for the county, availability of funding is crucial to making expansion possible.

The Columbia County Transit Division has been undertaking a comprehensive review of the current system and has been developing proposed changes. Those proposed changes will take the shape of the Columbia County Community-Wide Transit Plan Update. As part of that plan, the County is also recommending a US 30 Transit Improvements Project. Heimuller says the current review will lead to a five- to ten-year implementation plan. One small part of the proposed service increases would include service to and from Vernonia to Scappoose/St. Helens, to Clatskanie and to Hillsboro. Fare simplification is also part of the proposed plan.

Service within the county and to surrounding counties is currently provided by Columbia County Rider, a service of the Transit Division. In Vernonia, only Dial-a Ride, on-demand service is currently provided.

The US 30 Access Plan includes examining sites for specific stops and Park and Ride locations, and recommended improvements, like shelters and sidewalks, at each stop.

Last fall, the Transit Division collected data through phone interviews and rider surveys. After compiling that data, they developed a series of preliminary recommendations for changes in service and fees, which they have taken on the road in several public meetings and through a questionnaire, getting feedback on those recommendations.



Columbia County is evaluating its current transportation service and looking for ways to increase service

“One of the things people in Vernonia said they wanted was a fixed-route service to PCC Rock Creek and to connect with the Tri-Met MAX at Willow Creek,” said Heimuller. “And we proposed that as a start-up service this year. But it all comes down to funding.” The money was just not available, Heimuller explained. “But we were very encouraged by the numbers of people who said they would ride,” said Heimuller. “We’re not going to give up on it.”

The county has found ways to make some improvements and expansions to service. They have been developing two Transit Centers in Clatskanie and Rainier and are in the process of acquiring a property to develop a hub near St. Helens, which would include administration offices, a fleet maintenance facility, and access for Park and Ride. “Our full operations will be out of that spot,” said Heimuller. Applications for Federal Stimulus Funds are being prepared to secure funding for these and other expansion projects.

Another success has been the creation of Flex Route service in

St. Helens and Scappoose-- buses that run a set route to frequently visited local destinations with scheduled stops and on a fixed time schedule. These buses have the ability to travel a short distance off the route to pick up handicapped or elderly riders.

Columbia County Rider has also secured a number of large passenger buses for the fixed routes they run along highway 30 to Portland. Ridership has increased significantly on those routes.

Partnerships with Greyhound, Sunset Empire Transportation, Tillamook and Lincoln Counties, and Tri-Met are already happening, or are in the planning stages. “We’re going to be talking about things like fare reciprocity, so someone could ride through all the systems on one pass,” said Heimuller. “Everybody’s trying to do more services with less money, and we’re also looking at things a little more regionally to see how we can help the whole system.”

But of course, it all comes down to finding funding to make expansions. And sometimes available funding is very specific about what it can be used for. “The problem with grant funding is that it’s all capital dollars, for capital projects. There’s nothing for operations. I’m saying ‘Ok, give us buses, but if we don’t have the fuel, or money to hire a driver, what can we do?’”

“It’s very frustrating sometimes, because oftentimes you can see a real need, not a desire, but a true need, and the dollars are just not there,” says Heimuller. “So you have to put that on the list and say, ‘As soon as something comes up,’ and hope it’s something you can do in the future.”

But Heimuller and Columbia County appear to be making the most of their resources, especially on a regional level. “We are looking at how we can utilize all services that are available in the region to try to get people from point A to point B. And we want to be the model for that. And I mean, not just Columbia County, but up here in the northwest corner of the state.”

## Preschool Teacher (continued from front page)

And home-baked cookies, muffins and donuts!

Kala’s and Chris’s roots and connections run deep in Vernonia. Kala’s family has been here since 1887, and Chris’s grandmother graduated from Vernonia’s schools in 1928. They went to kindergarten together and the house they live in was built by their third grade teacher-- they bought it from a couple of their high school teachers. “It’s one of the fun things about this-- Chris and I know the history of Vernonia, but we still get to connect to the younger families and get to know the kids.”

While her students are in school, Cota also stresses social skills: “Learning how to stand in line to wash your hands without pushing the kid in front of you. Learning how to sit down at circle time and give somebody some space, and how to push your chair in-- the little, simple things,” says Cota. “I think that parents give their children a gift by helping them learn self-control and by putting them in situations where they have to learn to entertain themselves.”

Cota started providing child care just after her daughter Kristin was born. She had been working

in the banking industry and she and Chris decided that it would be better if she stayed home with their newborn daughter and their four year old son, Kyle. “We sat down and decided that if I could stay home for the first five years and provide child care and get by, that would be worth it. And here I am, twenty years later.”

After three years of providing child care, Cota started teaching preschool. She spent nine years earning an Associates Degree in Early Childhood Education, slowly picking up credits when she could fit them in. “I think I’m PCC’s longest attending student” she jokes.

When Kristin graduated from high school three years ago, Cota finally cut back and went to just offering preschool. “I would have kids here from six o’clock in the morning, until six in the evening. When you are a child care provider, you have to have your family behind you 110%,” said Cota. “My kids had to share my attention, so this has to be something your whole family is behind. And Chris has given up his garage for twenty years!”

But Cota also sees the value in the opportunity she has been given. “I’m grateful to every parent who left their child with me, who trusts me to teach or take care of their child, because it allowed me the opportunity to stay home and find my niche.”

Cota enjoys the connections she’s made with Vernonia’s families, the social interaction that happens between the parents of her students and the role she’s played in the children’s early development. “The kids want to come back up sometimes and just stop by and check it out. They always say, ‘It’s so much smaller than I remember,’ and I say, ‘It’s because you were smaller,’” laughs Cota. “My mother taught preschool here for ten years and so a lot of the parents I have now, my mom had in preschool,” says Cota.

It just goes to show what can happen over twenty years.

Cota wanted to let parents know that she has a few openings for fall classes for the 2009/2010 school year. “I would encourage the parents to call and come for a personal visit. I prefer to have the children see the preschool environment with the comfort of their parents and without so much chaos. It can be a little overwhelming at times, but always lots of fun.”

It’s also a place filled with love for children and a desire to help them learn-- by having fun.



Kala Cota is still teaching preschool in Vernonia after twenty years

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