

Voices from the Crowd: Columbia County Needs Public Transit

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Transit Administrator Columbia
County Rider Transportation

This is a response to a letter that was printed in the Opinion Page of the Spotlight News Paper on Wednesday, November 2, 2011 regarding one person's question about public transit services in Columbia County. The person stated that "The Columbia County Rider is not a necessity". "Is it just a pet project of our Commissioners?" "Something that they can put their stamp on".

In terms of value for the Citizens of Columbia County, I get calls every day asking about how we can increase our service to meet the rising demand from our residents. I am getting more and more calls from employees seeking information as to how they can get to work using our system. Our services have grown from a fledgling senior system that was started in the 70's by a very dedicated group of senior citizens, to a system that provides expanded service for commuters, seniors and the disabled, students and the general public. Transit services, especially in hard economic times are extremely important because those services are efficient and economical and they provide options in an ever increasing atmosphere of limitations. Below are a few facts that citizens might be interested to know about their transit system.

No. 1.: In FY 2009/10 Columbia County Rider provided 81,247 rides, in 2010/2011 we provide 91,633 rides. This represents a 12% increase in ridership in the last two years. In the first four months of the current fiscal

year we have provided 32,020 rides. If we keep up this pace, we expect that we will be providing 100,000 rides by the end of the year.

According to the State of Oregon Employment Department, Research Section, of the 21,719 workers in 2009, the most recent data available, 73.8% (16,002) of our county residents commute outside of the county to work, 26.3% (5,717) of county residents work within Columbia County and 36.6% (3,300) of the county's jobs are held by non-residents. The percentage of people who live in Columbia County and commute outside the county for work has increased, from 69.5% in 2007, 71.2% in 2008, to 73.7% in 2009. The Rider system has provided much needed transit options for those who do have to commute.

Columbia County Rider is given a small cash contribution (\$30,000) from the County General fund as the County's contribution for transit services. We also apply for and obtain community contributions from the communities we serve, i.e., St. Helens, Scappoose, Rainier and Vernonia in the form of cash or fuel, so that we can provide fixed and flex route service, and demand response service for our elderly/disabled populations and the general public.

With those local contributions, we are able to leverage grant funds, and bring back into the Columbia County Community approximately \$3 to \$3.5 million dollars to provide transit services. The rider system provides employment for a minimum of 22 employees. These are family-wage jobs with benefits.

No. 2.: The majority of the

funding that helps pay for public transit is provided through grants from the Oregon Department of Transportation, Public Transit Division and the Federal Transit Administration and other grant sources.

No. 3.: The third source of funding we have is provided by the fares that our riders pay to ride our system. This year these fares are projected to amount to approximately \$325,000. The fares we receive, in accordance with our grant requirements, cannot be used for purposes other than providing transit service operations. In plainer terms this means that we have to use these fares to directly offset the routes we run. We can't use them for new buildings, bus barns or office furniture, etc. Those of you who ride with us know that we have just updated our fare structure, and changed to a zone based system. This fare increase has allowed us to not have to cut back service levels at the current time and we hope that it will help us prevent huge service cuts in the future.

The one question that I am consistently asked when I talk to some groups, is "why do I constantly see buses running around with no riders on them"? The fact of the matter is that, these same people never comment on those times that they see the buses loaded with commuters going into Portland on a weekday morning or coming home in the evening. They don't look at those sites where our riders park their cars to even get a feel for the number of residents who use our service. One of those sites is at 1st & Prairie Street in Scappoose. On a typical day at that site there can be parked as many as 50-60 cars belonging

to those who use our public transit system. The several other stops we use that are located in St. Helens and Warren Baptist Church, provide park n ride stops, and they are heavily used by our riders.

The answer to this question, though, is one that those who don't use public transit never think about. When planning for transit use you have to gear your system to the type of rider you serve. We know that we have a huge number of riders that ride to jobs outside our county, 73.8% or 16,002 people (according to the 2009 stats previously mentioned). If we only had small buses we would need a huge number of them to provide the number of seats we need to transport all of these riders. This would cost an exorbitant amount of money and not provide good service to our riders, so we plan for those numbers and purchase the size of bus we need to provide the service. Now, are these riders on the bus all day? The answer is no, they use the bus at certain times of the day. For those times, when we don't need the bigger buses we do use our smaller more efficient buses to do the other types of transit services we provide, i.e., demand response service for elderly/disabled and other riders who have medical appointments in Portland, Longview and at the two local clinics, shopping and other appointments. We also try to do these services as efficiently as possible. Instead of making a trip to Portland for a medical appointment with only one passenger, we work to get as many people on the bus as possible. We are always looking at providing efficiencies in service and still provide a service that our riders can say serves them well.

In summary, I agree that law enforcement is important, but let's not be self serving and un-factual. And we should not forget that right now our Columbia County Community faces many challenges and there are other services out there that are just as worthy of our consideration as law enforcement and even public transit.

In Memory of... *continued from page 23*

Ezra L. Brewer

May 7, 1945-November 9, 2011



Zeke, as he was known to his family and friends, was born to Marvin and Annie Brewer in Forest Grove, OR on May 7, 1945. He spent his childhood in Vernonia, Corvallis and Reith. At age 17 he joined the Army and served in Vietnam.

After being discharged from the Army he settled in Vernonia where he met and married Marie Atkins. They had two daughters, Shawn and Yvette. Zeke and Marie later divorced. Zeke married Karen Marie Biros and they had a daughter, Tamara.

Zeke worked for Crown Zellerbach for many years and later was transferred to Wauna. The family moved to Westport, Clatskanie and Kelso, WA.

After retiring, Zeke enjoyed fishing and spending time with his grandchildren. He lost his battle with cancer on November 9, 2011 at home.

Zeke is survived by his sister Laura, brothers John and MC, half brother Robert, three daughters, two step children—Andy and Crystal, his wife, several grandchildren, one great grandson, many nieces and nephews, his beloved friend Wanita and dear friend Ben.

A graveside service with Military Honors was held November 28, 2011 at 1:00 PM at the Vernonia Memorial Cemetery. Arrangements are being handled by Groulx Family Mortuary in Rainier, OR.

Vernonia's Voice is published twice each month on the 2nd and 4th Tuesday. Look for our next issue December 27th.

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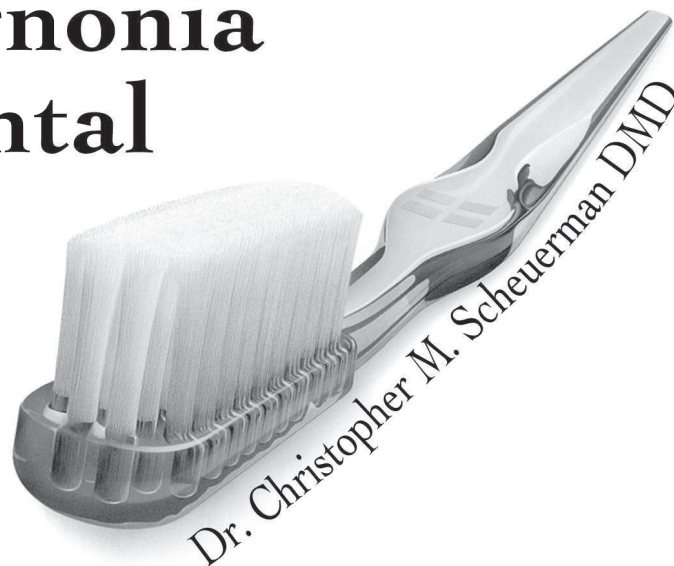


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