

Elders take the 2X to Salem

By Ron Karten

Smoke signals staff writer

As the morning sun pushed through the clouds and children stepped off the bus at Willamina Middle School at Grand Ronde, 12 Tribal Elders made their way to Spirit Mountain Casino's main entrance to catch the Cherriots 2X bus to Salem.

"Today's the day the Elders go to the city," said community Elder Regina Wheeler (Yakama), tongue in cheek. "They let us off the reservation."

Jency Rosasco, a Transit District Outreach assistant, also arrived to catch the bus.

"I live out here," Rosasco said, but she also was on assignment. "I'm trying to make this day as enjoyable as possible for the Elders."

Looking back, her efforts paid off.

"I loved the trip," said Tribal Elder Laura Lund. "With the (graduated) seats, you could see everybody on the bus and look out the windows."

"They ride really good," Regina Wheeler said of the bus.

"The people were so helpful," said Tribal Elder and former Tribal Chairwoman Kathryn Harrison. "Now, I know where I can sit and fold up my walker, and have a place for it. That's what I was worried about it."

The day also was about saving the bus route, established in January 2009. It is still running short of the number of riders needed to make a financial go of it, said Janice Ellis, grants administrator and financial analyst for Cherriots, who organized the trip for the transit service.

"We have a lot of people who ride from Salem to Grand Ronde, but we're trying to increase the number from Grand Ronde to Salem," Ellis said.

"We want to encourage more people from the Valley to take the bus to go shopping in Salem, or for those going to Chemeketa, to take the bus to Salem where they can transfer to Chemeketa Community College."

With 12 Elders and another unrelated rider, the bus heading south was more than halfway to the level of fares that Cherriots has set as a benchmark for a successful service, according to Cherriots Director of Finance Pat Mercier. She previously was finance officer for the Grand Ronde Tribe.

With seating for about 32 on each bus, depending on the number of wheelchair riders, the company's budget assumptions anticipate carrying 20 riders per trip; and that depends on the fare schedule.

"We'd need fewer riders if more were paying by the ride or with a daily pass," said Mercier.

In support of that effort, the Tribal Council through Spirit Mountain Casino funded all rides between Salem and Grand Ronde for the entire month of April.

It's been a success, said Mercier. "Through the 16th, we had almost 1,600 riders, and that would normally represent almost a month's worth."



Courtesy of Salem Area Transit



Photo by Ron Karten

Above, Tribal Elders board the Cherriots bus in front of Mission Mill Museum on Tuesday, Feb. 13, during a get-acquainted trip to Salem on the transit service. Left, Tribal Elders, from left, Gladys Hobbs, Louise Coulson and Violet Folden take a tour of the Mission Mill. It remains as it was when still an active woolen mill and, once a year, the museum revs it all up again for a day.

Public transportation also offers Tribal Elders the convenience and environmental advantages of riding one bus instead of eight to 12 individual cars for the round trip.

"A part of our goal in honor of Earth Day (April 22)," said Ellis.

And once on the bus, the trip is also easier.

"I think it's a lot of fun to ride the bus," said Tribal Elder Cherie Butler, "and leave the driving to them."

And there are new worlds that a short bus ride can open up.

On Tuesday, April 13, for all these Elders, the bus meant morning tours of the Mission Mill Museum's "Facing Statehood" exhibit and the woolen mill's former operations center.

Nearly everybody was surprised, and pleasantly so, to learn that Mission Mill was the forerunner to Pendleton Woolen Mills. The Tribe, of course, makes gifts of Pendleton blankets all the time.

"I didn't know that this was the starting place of the Pendleton Woolen Mills," said Tribal Elder Duane Wheeler.

"Most of all," said Kathryn Harrison, "I learned that the Pendleton Woolen Mill started there, and that it starts up again once a year. I hope I can get a look at it next time, from sheep shearing to the end of the process."

And there were the little details, too.

"They had a guy that ran the

shop," said Regina Wheeler, "and he had a little mouse as a pet."

"I didn't expect to see so many pictures of my ancestors," said Laura Lund of the "Statehood" exhibit. "I loved the trip. I know I'm taking my grandkids over there. They like history. There are so many things to see that I never got to go to before."

Cherie Butler was surprised to see a picture of her grandfather.

"This was the best trip we've gone on," said Lund. "This time, we got a tour, and that really helped."

"The bus people really waited on us," said Duane Wheeler. "They explained everything to you."

In addition to Rosasco, Cherriots provided Ellis and Outreach representatives Michele Brosnan and Lisa Carignan, who helped the Elders every step of the way.

Mission Mill Executive Director Peter Booth spent more than an hour with the Elders, leading a tour and opening up to them his encyclopedic knowledge of Oregon's pre-statehood period. He described the history behind many mill exhibits.

Until this tour, it was a pretty well-kept secret, for example, that Abraham Lincoln was first offered the job of Oregon territorial governor.

Booth credited Tribal Cultural Resources staffers for their perspectives and translations of titles for many parts of the exhibit.

The outing, funded by the Grand

Ronde Tribe, is part of a full-court press on the part of the Tribe and the transit district to fill up the buses between Salem and Grand Ronde. Currently, Cherriots runs 10 each day, each with a short stop at the Park & Ride in Rickreall.

The depth of the problem could be seen in Rickreall that day. Nobody came out to park and ride on the 8:30 a.m. run.

"We've applied for a grant to improve the park and ride at the fairgrounds in Rickreall," said Ellis. That decision will be announced in August.

Still, said Cherie Butler, "I don't think there was a person that wasn't feeling really good about the trip. We'll have some more like that."

Cherriots initiated the idea. Mercier came to a General Council meeting with the promotion idea. With Tribal Council's approval, Mercier went to the Elders where the outing was planned, according to Tribal Elder Gladys Hobbs, who coordinated the planning from the Elders' side. She also went on the trip with her husband, Russ.

"My sisters live in Salem," said Tribal Elder Louise Coulson. "I could ride the bus in and they could pick me up. We already talked about going in and having lunch."

"It's about getting over the fright of getting lost," said Regina Wheeler, "but everybody helped us."

"I really felt free," said Harrison. ■