

Formulating the future of transit

Community meeting offers opportunity to give input on a new plan

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

People who lack cars in urban areas are typically not far from cabs, ride share options or public transit.

But rural residents without a vehicle face an uphill battle. Simple tasks, such as going to a grocery store or work, often involve planning and coordination.

The Grand Ronde Tribe has funded regular bus service from Grand Ronde to the coast, McMinnville and Salem since 2007 to help with area transportation gaps. A meeting was held Wednesday, Jan. 24, at the Community Center to gather input on the future of the Tribe's transportation plan. Although the crowd was small, ideas were not in short supply.

Workshop goals included discussing transportation needs, gaps in transit service and mobility challenges of Tribal and community members, especially seniors and people with disabilities.

Tribal member Veronica Gaston, Tribal Elder and Transit Plan Project Advisory Committee member Louise Coulson and interim Tribal Employment Rights Office Director John Mercier attended.

An increased number of bus stops, bus shelters to shield riders from the weather and a local connector service to transport people within the community were three of the main suggestions offered at the meeting.

"There are some events I would love to go to, but I can't make it up there," Gaston said. "I know our Elders would appreciate having a bus stop at the Elders Activity Center, too."

Coulson said that offering routes that coordinated with shifts at Spirit Mountain Casino would be helpful.

"Because I go to the casino a lot and talk to employees, I know that many of them ride the bus and are not yet used to the new system," she said.

"The casino is the largest employer in the region, so why not tailor the transit system toward that?" Yamhill County Developmental Disability Services Program Manager Paul Partridge said. "It's an area for exploration and coordination. ... You might be able to solve a problem by doing that."

Tribal Planning and Grants Manager Kim Rogers said those in attendance provided good input.

"The suggestions to add more stops here in Grand Ronde and to look at some kind of local connector service to get people around the community will of course have some cost and we will see where we end up on what services we can afford," he said.

The Tribe hired Kittleson & Associates of Portland to assist with updating its 2007 Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan, creating a new one and combining the two into an overall Transpor-



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal member Veronica Gaston, right, gives input during the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde 2018 Transit Plan Community Workshop held in the Tribal Community Center on Wednesday, Feb. 24.

tation Plan.

Senior Engineer Zachary Horowitz discussed the background of the plan, work-to-date and future goals.

"We're trying to find out the needs of the community," he said. "Where we are going, for what reason and what we can do better. We want to gather as much information as possible and figure out the best use of Tribal money for the Grand Ronde community."

Part of the firm's research efforts have focused on where people in the Grand Ronde and Fort Hill areas work. These include Grand Ronde, Salem, Multnomah County, McMinnville, Washington County, Yamhill County, Polk County, Dallas, Sheridan and Benton County. Of these locations, Multnomah and Benton counties and Dallas do not have direct transit service.

"We wanted to develop a real sense of where people in this area work," Horowitz said. "It is pretty underserved by transit. In a lot of cases people drive up to 60 miles one way to go to work. Gas is cheaper now than in the past few years, but transit is a really viable option for several reasons."

History of public transit

On July 27, the Salem Area Mass Transit District Board of Directors voted to end the Cherriots 2X service between Salem and Grand Ronde at the end of 2017.

The route had provided public transit service from Spirit Mountain Casino to Salem eight times daily Monday through Friday starting at 7:30 a.m. and running through 11:30 p.m.

The Salem Area Mass Transit District operated the bus service between Grand Ronde and Salem since 2009 through a contract with the Tribe.

Funding for bus service comes primarily from federal Tribal transit dollars provided through the Tribe's federal and state transit grants from the Federal Transit Administration and the Oregon Department of Transportation. The Transit District agreed to cover the

cost of one of the round-trips.

When the Tribe recently requested new proposals for the same route, the Salem Area Mass Transit District decided not to bid again, citing declining ridership.

The Tribe began working with the Tillamook County Transportation District to provide service between Grand Ronde and Salem. It was a logical choice as the Tillamook transit district already operated the Coastal Connector that ran from Lincoln City to Grand Ronde three times daily and on to Salem on Saturday and Sunday.

Starting Dec. 30, 2017, the Coastal Connector (60x) began service to Salem three times daily, as well as on the weekends. On Jan. 2, the Grand Ronde Express (70x) began operating four round trips a day between the Tribal campus, the

casino and Salem. The cost is \$3 for a regular fare, and \$1.50 for a reduced rate. Tribal members with ID ride free on both. Bus stops include the Grand Ronde Community Center, Grand Ronde Road and South Street and Spirit Mountain Casino.

The routes are contracted with the Tillamook County Transportation District, using the Tribe's state and federal transit funding. The Coastal Connector route also includes the Siletz Tribe as a partner.

The next steps in the new transit plan process include creating a vision and goals memo, a public survey, needs assessments, recommendation, draft plan and then a final plan/community meeting in September.

Contact Rogers at kim.rogers@grandronde.org or 503-879-2250 to provide input on the transit plan. ■

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