

People Mover awarded \$137K in funding for rural transportation through the CARES Act

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

The Grant County People Mover public transit service will receive \$137,000 in funding through the Oregon Department of Transportation to support rural transportation allocated through the Coronavirus, Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which Congress approved last month.

People Mover Executive Director Angie Jones said ODOT moved quickly to put grants in place.

"This will help us cover losses that we have incurred and are going to incur in the future," said Jones.

Jones said ridership numbers have dramatically decreased due to the stay-at-home orders. She said the service has been delivering groceries and food boxes on the Grant County Food Bank's monthly distribution day, which has kept her staff busy and averted layoffs.

Jones said in February, before the shutdown, there were 3,839 total passengers. But in March, as the social distancing orders took effect, they dropped to 2,862. Jones said she anticipates lower ridership numbers in April, the first month without students.

Jones said People Mover was steadily increasing ridership before the shutdown and adding more services and additional routes.

"For us, our grant funding has a lot to do with our ridership numbers," Jones said.

She said there is a base amount of funding the transportation district receives, which depends on the amount the federal government allocates to the state, but additional grant money, based on ridership, is in jeopardy.

"We are the county public transportation service," Jones said. "It concerns me because we don't want to have to cut services."

Jones said the People



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell
People Mover bus driver Frank Bingham, right, assists Robin Dahl into the bus at Valley View Assisted Living Friday. The People Mover recently received funding through the CARES Act.



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell
People Mover driver Frank Bingham jokes with a Valley View resident Friday while waiting to take another resident to an appointment at Blue Mountain Hospital.

Mover is an essential service to the community and not just for seniors and the disabled.

"It is an essential lifeline to a lot of folks," she said.

Jones said the service provided an opportunity, before social distancing, for kids from Prairie City and Mt. Vernon to come to John Day to attend Boy Scouts and events

at the art center.

Jones said, before the schools closed, the service was picking up 44 kids a day between Prairie City and Mt. Vernon so kids could attend school in John Day.

Longtime People Mover rider Bob Stewart, an 81-year-old former Marine who lives alone, said the People Mover has been "a blessing."

Stewart said a few years

ago when he had a medical emergency, he called the People Mover to get him to the emergency room instead of 911.

Stewart said the isolation with the shelter-in-place orders have been frustrating.

"I'm sick of being stuck in the house," he said.

However, he said he has adapted and likes to read, and overall the social distancing has been tolerable.

Robin Dahl, a resident at Valley View Assisted Living who took the People Mover to an appointment at the hospital Friday, said the service is reliable. But the People Mover, except for Friday, has not been going to Valley View to avoid the vulnerable population, according to driver Frank Bingham.

Bingham said, prior to the shutdown, the People Mover would take groups of seniors on outings to various destinations in and around John Day.

Patty Blasier, a longtime rider, said the service takes her everywhere, including appointments with a medical specialist in Bend.

"Without the People Mover, I'd be stuck," Blasier said. "Plus, I met a lot of my friends on the bus."

EOC distributes personal protective equipment

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

The Grant County Health Department, in an April 20 press release, said that a total of 50 COVID-19 tests have been administered in the county, with one pending results, 45 negatives and three "untestable specimens."

The untestable specimens, according to the press release, were packed properly on dry ice; however, by the time the courier delivered the samples to the lab, the dry ice evaporated.

Health Department Administrator Kimberly Lindsay said one patient retested while the other two declined.

Statewide, the Oregon Health Authority said the death toll as of 8 a.m. Monday is 75 with 1,956 positive cases.

Sam Palmer, EOC public information officer, said in an April 9 email that the EOC has been very busy, and it is hard to get answers from others to provide in-depth explanations, but that he would do his best to provide information.

He said the call volume for the EOC changes and that he does not have the specific number of how many calls the center has received.

Palmer said the number of volunteers has fluctuated.

"The EOC has a fluctuating volunteer force; we are gearing up to help at the food bank with volunteers, then it will drop back down unless something else happens," he said.

In a follow-up email, when asked how many volunteers the EOC would have at the Food Bank, Palmer replied that Tom Sutton is in charge of the food bank and he did not know. He said he planned on volunteering,

but he was not sure who else would be there and that he did not ask.

The Eagle emailed questions to Palmer April 16, and Palmer replied April 18: "I have been extremely busy working on other things going on in the county. I will do my best to get you updated as soon as I can."

He had not responded as of Tuesday morning.

County Judge Scott Myers emailed a copy of the EOC's inventory of personal protective equipment on Friday.

There are 300 regular-sized N95 masks across the county, with no backup supply at the EOC. Twenty went to Prairie City with an additional 40 allocated

to Prairie City's fire chief. Fire departments in Canyon City, Seneca, Granite and Monument each received 20 masks while Dayville and Long Creek each received a supply of 30. Blue Mountain Hospital and Valley View did not receive any. On April 15, the county sent Juniper Ridge Acute Care Facility 15 masks and five to Michael Desjardin's dental office in John Day.

There are 300 multilayered procedure masks in the county with 150 at Blue Mountain Hospital and the other half at the EOC. The hospital received 350 white procedure masks April 9.

Sixty face shields came into the EOC March 26. Prairie City's fire chief received five. The county delivered 10 masks each to fire departments in Canyon City, Dayville, John Day, Long Creek, Monument and Mt. Vernon.

On standby, the EOC has 678 white regular N95 masks and 140 with respirators. They have 20 blue, large N95 masks, and 650 procedure masks.



Eagle file photo
County Commissioner Sam Palmer during Grant County Court Jan. 22.

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Kim Kell • 541-575-0710
kim@bmeagle.com