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Cash-strapped Citrus County Transit will bring in a new source of income to the county and a new look for one of its buses soon with a "shrinkwrap" design aimed at promoting voting in the upcoming election. Supervisor of Elections Susan Gill said the patriotic design cost nearly \$4,500, and will cost another \$500 a month to maintain. She said 40 percent of that monthly fee comes back to the county. A state voters' education grant helped pay for the design. The transit system serves those who are termed transportation disadvantaged.

County's transportation needs are on the road again

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Chronicle

The small county transit bus was loading with a handful of passengers that morning, if three passengers can be called a handful.

These young people had been picked up an hour or more earlier on the east side of the county and brought to the central bus service hub in Lecanto to wait for a while before setting off on the next leg of their journey across the county in another bus.

These two young men and a young woman were on their way to work, all part-time school-to-work jobs. The young men work at the *Chronicle*, and the woman works at Crystal River Health and Rehabilitation Center.

If their jobs were full-time, the transit system wouldn't work well for them, because the county bus service makes its latest pickups at 2 in the afternoon.

After dropping off those three

- **WHAT:** Citrus County Transit
- **WHEN:** Office hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Closed for certain holidays. Buses make last daily pickups at 2 p.m.
- **PHONE:** 527-7630
- **RESERVATIONS:** Required by noon, one business day prior to needed day/time.

passengers, driver Dee Canfield drove to the homes of five elderly passengers on the northwest side of the county. One man went to a grocery store, and one woman was set off at the Lecanto Senior Center, which offers activities and congregate dining. The others were brought to the bus office in Lecanto, just off County Road 491 in the old county government complex.

From there, like the early morning passengers, they would be transferred to their ultimate destinations that day, typically for shopping or doctor's appointments.

What might take one or two hours using a car can take the better part of a day, with either long waits all around or, if time is short, abbreviated stops.

This arrangement, though time-consuming and fraught with inconveniences, is nonetheless close to vital for some users, a door-to-door service that offers transportation to people who otherwise would not be able to afford a taxi and who would be stranded in their homes without the service.

Fielding 19 buses and 13 full-time drivers, rides must be arranged at least 24 hours in advance. In some hard-to-reach areas of the county, the service is available only on selected days, some on Tuesdays and Thursdays and others on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Because of its limitations, this system only minimally meets the multiple transportation needs of what government calls the transportation disadvantaged in the county.

NEEDS

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Whenever planners and people involved in the problems of the county get to talking about what this county needs the most, transportation is usually at the top of the list.

There is an increasing number of people who can no longer safely drive, or who can't afford to pay for, insure and keep up a car of their own, and there are also those who in other ways are incompetent or physically unable to operate a motor vehicle.

As the baby boom bubble matures toward a bursting point, Citrus County will be filled with retirees who will eventually have to rely on others for transportation.

There are already working people in this county who would gladly use a reliable public system of transport, one that operated from at least dawn to dusk and regularly traveled the highways and byways of Citrus County.

That ideal situation is unlikely to become a reality in the foreseeable future, says Anne Westbrook, who has on her long list of duties responsibility for the county transportation program.

“Last year, we had 2,501 no-shows. Each trip costs us \$10.”

Anne Westbrook
head of Citrus County's social services.

Westbrook, who heads the social services arm of county government, said the county recognizes and is exploring possible solutions to the many transportation-related problems and needs of residents, which she says county government is anxious to help solve.

She said, however, that the challenges are considerable.

The size of the county and the scattered population, she said, pose a great challenge to transportation planners.

“The people we serve today, some of them aren't able to walk even a block to get to the bus. They need door-to-door service,” she said.

“We tried a fixed route once, but it didn't work out. It's difficult to have a fixed-route system because we are so rural.

“Then there's the issue of funding our current program, on top of any plans to expand the services provided,” she added. “There's not enough funding for the transportation

State and federal departments of transportation sources chip in another 14 percent, she said, and a combination of other sources, including the state's vocational rehabilitation program, the state-federal MedWaiver program and the county's veterans office (for a once-weekly trip to the VA hospital in Gainesville) kicks in another 12 percent of the transportation costs.

Fares paid by riders represent only 3 percent of the budget.

Another, less serious problem, she said, comes from what she called lost trips, when a bus comes to a person's door and the person has perhaps forgotten or found another ride and is not there.

“Last year, we had 2,501 no-shows. Each trip costs us \$10.”

Westbrook said a survey a year ago in June clearly told county transportation planners what riders wanted: extended hours of service and weekend service.

“We are looking at ways to do those things; we are looking at all the options,” she said. “We are buying new software to make our service more efficient, and that will help some, I'm sure. We know there are plenty of needs out there, and we are trying our best to meet them.”

disadvantaged.” (See Sen. Richard Mitchell's report in today's Commentary section.)

“Last year, for example, we made 5,500 trips over and above the funding we had to run the service, \$167,219. That means that almost one quarter of all our trips were not funded by transportation disadvantaged funding.”

She said state-provided transportation disadvantaged funding represented 14.5 percent of last year's \$1.25 million budget for public transportation in the county.

She said Medicaid funding, which helps pay for many who rely on the county's transit system, provides the largest single chunk of money, 36 percent of the budget.

The county, she said, provides 20 percent of the transportation budget, which is used to obtain matching funds from state and federal sources and to subsidize the service.

DISADVANTAGE

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cies for transportation to specific, eligible program activities.

However, the funding provided by the commission through the Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund has been instrumental in meeting those trip needs that are not sponsored by any other funding source.

Citrus County Transit continues to make progress in its reported performance measure in the areas of safety, service effectiveness and cost efficiency.

The number of accidents per 100,000 miles traveled has decreased dramatically, and the number of miles traveled between road calls remains consistent with statewide averages.

The number of trips taken by passengers increased significantly during this past year, while the trips per driver hour actually decreased slightly. Citrus County also operates below state averages for the cost per para-transit trip and cost per driver hour.

Like many other Florida counties, however, this funding source is limited and has not been increased by the Legislature in eight years, requiring counties like Citrus

to deny trips to many residents who need them.

They are struggling with keeping up with the unmet needs for a growing senior and disabled population. The requested additional funding will certainly assist in addressing these needs.

Citrus County reported to the Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged in 2001 that 1,500 trips had been documented as not being provided when requested.

This was a 2,400 percent increase from the previous year.

This type of increase is a growing trend statewide, according to the commission. Based on these statewide trends, the commission has worked aggressively with the Legislature to address this financial shortfall.

For the past three years, I have filed legislation to increase the amount of funds available to the commission. This year, Rep. Ron Greenstein and I got this legislation passed.

The decision to provide additional funding of \$9 million per year currently rests with the Legislature when it reconvenes for a special session on the state budget.

According to the commission's last statewide plan, published by the University of South Florida, Center for Urban Transportation Research, the

potential transportation disadvantaged population for Citrus County is 66,752.

This includes the elderly, persons with disabilities, low income and children at risk.

According to the 2001 data provided by Citrus County, they were only able to meet 27 percent of the estimated needs due to the lack of resources.

Should the special session of the 2002 Legislature accept the House proposal that would increase the Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund by approximately \$9 million, Citrus County would receive more than \$77,000 in additional funds that would begin to address some of the unmet transportation needs. It is estimated this could possibly provide an additional 7,696 trips in this community.

State Sen. Richard Mitchell, D-Jasper, is the senate's Democratic Whip and sits on a number of committees including the senate's transportation committee. He represents a portion of Citrus County in addition to several other counties. For more information from the Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged, contact Jo Ann Hutchinson, executive director, at (850) 410-5715, or Citrus County Transit Manager Dan Greenough at 527-7630.

The disadvantaged transportation program needs a boost

RICHARD MITCHELL
Special to the Chronicle

Citrus County Transit has been Citrus County's designated Community Transportation Coordinator, serving the community's transportation disadvantaged, since October 1990.

Through the leadership of the Board of County Commissioners, the local Coordinating Board, the local planning agency and the citizens of this community, many strides have been made to provide essential transportation services for the community's seniors, persons with disabilities, low income and others to medical care, work and other daily activities.

Without this transportation service, Citrus County's most vulnerable citizens would not be able to receive adequate health care, go to work, obtain educational opportunities or enjoy the quality of life that those with transportation enjoy.

Citrus County Transit contracts with Medical Transport Services for the delivery of Medicaid services, and also coordinates with other local entities such as the Key Training Center, local WAGES Board, The Older Americans Act Grant Program and Veterans Programs.

They are funded by several agen-

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Most of us know the expenses of operating our own vehicles, such as payments, insurance, gas and maintenance. It can be a great struggle for the working person to keep a vehicle on the road while maintaining other living expenses. Gasoline is expensive and is very hard to budget — what with rising and falling prices — into a fixed or low income. Auto repairs can cause a family to go without something vital because of priorities.

From our limited experience here with the homeless shelter,

transportation can cause a number of problems. Because of the small window of time during the day, it becomes virtually impossible for a full-time worker to use our County Transit System. Our county is vast and the employers as well as the client who might have to travel often require transportation. The clients often find themselves in a Catch 22, where they need the job to be able to purchase a vehicle, but cannot get the job without it.

Elderly who are on fixed incomes or who do not have the physical capabilities to drive need a mode that helps them outside of the hours now offered.

There are people who are in

the court system who cannot drive again. Those with driving under the influence convictions, although bad, need to work, too, or they become a welfare recipient because they cannot work. Deadbeat moms and dads, who owe child support, cannot stop being deadbeats when their driver's license is taken away.

The list of people trying to rehabilitate their lives and need to keep appointments becomes even greater for the lack of transportation. Pregnant women who need to keep medical and WIC appointments. Educational, like finishing high school, G.E.D.s and community college. Counseling of all types, such as anger man-

agement, marital, mental health and financial.

If we are truly looking for planned economic growth, we must support the working-class and elderly who are on fixed incomes. This is part of the "economic food chain" that should not be overlooked. The time is long overdue to be aggressive about appointing committees to find alternative modes of transportation and possible funding, and report back to the community with their findings.

DuWayne Sipper is the director of The Path of Citrus County, a Christian-based homeless shelter.

Public transit vital to the elderly and working class

DuWAYNE SIPPER
Special to the Chronicle

There is a quote from the Bible that talks about how each one of us affects each other, no matter what we do or don't do.

It says "from the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love." This quote is a perfect example of how, by helping others, we help ourselves for everyone's benefit.

Our county, from the top to the working class citizens, has been painfully aware of the lack of public transportation in Citrus County for some time now. In working on a homeless priority list with Joe Monroe, the director of Housing Services, transportation consistently showed up as a reason to help keep people homeless or near homeless in our county. Our current system runs in a window during the day, and you need a 24-hour phone call to reserve the transit.

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