

Rural Public Transit Works!

AFTER

Everyone knows the value of public transit in our bigger cities, like Portland, Salem, Eugene and Medford. But we rarely hear how valuable the service is to rural Oregonians. Recently, one service in eastern Oregon saw an 11 percent increase in riders in just one year – that’s a value anyone can relate to!

In 2014, the Harney County Dial-A-Ride service received extra funding approved by the Oregon Legislature and distributed by the Oregon Department of Transportation’s Rail & Public Transit Division. Before appropriating the funds, Dial-A-Ride decided to survey area residents, including current riders, on what changes the service might make to improve options and connections.

The survey offered four options:

- Expanding hours from 7:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. to 7 a.m. – 7 p.m., Monday – Friday.
- Adding Sunday service from 8 a.m. – 2 p.m.
- Adding one more bus to facilitate more rides on Saturday.
- Adding a route to John Day once per week.

The result was 297 for expanded hours; 274 for Sunday; 277 for more availability on Saturday; 186 for a John Day route. The team chose to implement the top three options – and it was so successful they needed an additional dispatcher and had to extend the new Sunday end time to 3 p.m.

“The extra hour made a huge difference in meeting the community need,” Dial-A-Ride’s Angela Lambord told Harney County Commissioner Pete Runnels recently. “Now, we are hoping the additional fares and medical rides will help us cover the expense of the days added because it has been great for our community.”

Lambord said the current issues center on equipment, and she’s planning to write several grants after the first of the year seeking help for maintenance.

In the meantime, unique stories keep coming in about the people the county-wide service is helping. Recently, an elderly rider came in from further out of town for surgery. Several other seniors now have transportation where none existed before. Another rider was able to use the bus to get to her job when she was unable to drive for a month.

All of these extensions are adding up. Prior to the 7-days-per-week schedule, from July 1 – September 30, 2014, the service provided 9,604 one-way rides, 3,087 of which were elderly and disabled rides. During that same time period in 2015 – after the 7-day schedule was implemented – the service provided 10,668 one-way rides, 4,135 of which were elderly and disabled rides. In one year, ridership increased more than 11 percent.

“For our little fleet of six, the thousand rides a quarter increase is a big deal,” Lambord said.

And it’s a big deal for riders to have the Harney County Dial-A-Ride – especially the county’s aging population.

“Seniors are staying and living their lives in rural parts of Oregon; they have all of the needs of seniors in urban areas yet fewer services,” Lambord said. “Getting to them often takes creativity and partnerships, but our transportation system is a lifeline.”

Lambord also noted the importance of good transportation options for low-income families and people living on the fringes of society, facing mental health and financial challenges.

“All of these people have needs and without public transportation, helping them would be a huge burden on other resources.”