



Okaloosa County Transit System is a Keeper

As your County Commissioner I have tried from time to time to share the workings of your County government in more depth on selective issues. Upon taking office, I sought to identify areas we as a community can most efficiently improve upon critical services while keeping true to the shared values of Northwest Florida. One area that I have found often to have confusing or conflicting information is concerning our Okaloosa County Transportation System. I hope that by sharing what I have learned about this system will allow the citizens to be able to discuss their views with the County Commission on this important issue.

We actually have not one, but two interrelated public transportation systems. Okaloosa County operates ten fixed bus routes, including five that serve the greater Fort Walton Beach area, four that serve the Okaloosa Island and Destin Tourism area, as well as a connector between Crestview and Fort Walton Beach. In addition, our county provides for a “paratransit” system where the customers can call in advance to set up an appointed time for service and are willing to pay more for this service.

Both of these systems frequently serve the same individuals, many of whom are working families employed to provide services to our vital hospitality industry. Riders also include the most vulnerable citizens in our county—those without sight, the disabled who are either mentally or physically challenged, and the elderly who can no longer drive. Other reasons for using public transportation include trips to buy groceries, shopping, education, day care and recreation. In short, our public transportation allows many of our fellow citizens to remain independent, employed or both. For these families, the elimination of these services would be catastrophic.

Although most citizens I speak with understand the important function provided by the public transportation system in our county, many have voiced concerns over the cost and utilization of the system. To this end, we have endeavored to identify a new, more efficient and cost saving system to address the usage and cost for the system while still providing this valuable service to our citizens.

The number of riders last year on our fixed bus routes was just under 150,000 rides, while the paratransit system provided 88,736 rides. Over half of these paratransit system rides, 47,477, were for medical trips and 27,984 were for employment. And we are exceeding these numbers so far in 2015.

But what about the funding? First of all it is critical to understand that having both of these two complimentary systems are necessary to obtain the state and federal funds that provide a very large portion of the funding for our system. The bulk of the revenue that pay for our system comes from federal and state grants that include: Urbanized Area Grants, Rural Area Grants, Transit Corridor Program, Transportation Disadvantaged Trip and Equipment Grant, Public Transportation Block Grants. Additionally, the following moneys help pay for our transportation system: Non-

Emergency Medical Transportation, Older Americans Act, Vocational Rehabilitation, Access2Care and Bus Advertising Proceeds.

The total cost of the Okaloosa County Transit system for fiscal year 2016 is \$ 2.6 million while the amount that comes from the Okaloosa County budget for fiscal year 2016 is only \$224,612 which is the required amount to receive the match for state and federal funds. Not a bad deal when you see the entire picture.

Based upon the input from county citizens regarding the public transportation system, the county has embarked on ways to improve the efficiencies of the system and to make it more available to all of our citizens. An outcome of last year's hearing before the Board of County Commission was a desire to work with our municipalities to create a more cooperative system fiscally as well as more user friendly. As the liaison for this committee, we have successfully come up with some ways to improve the system. One improvement has been the agreement for some of the cities involved to create covered bus stops for the routes. Another improvement is that we are working with Destin to place more stops in heavily used shopping and entertainment districts to make the system more available to tourists and locals alike, and also to reduce traffic in Destin.

Perhaps most importantly, the County Commission has voted to transfer the contract for provision of the Okaloosa County Transportation System to the company (Murati) that manages the transportation system for Disney World in Orlando. The goal is to provide this valuable service as efficiently as possible with the introduction of private sector elements to best serve our community. With this new partnership with a world renowned private sector leader in transportation efficiency, we have full confidence that our transportation system will become close to or entirely self-sufficient. The County Commission believes that we need to provide this valuable service as efficiently as possible, and it continues to be our hope that over time the system will become close to or entirely self-sufficient without any funding from general revenue paid for by advertising.

I would be remiss if I did not give thanks and credit to Ruth Lovejoy, Executive Director of Elder Services for her vision twenty years ago to create this transportation service for our county. She has been a champion for those most vulnerable who walk among us.

In closing, I thank you for the opportunity to serve as your County Commissioner and would appreciate any thoughts you may have to continue to improve our Okaloosa County Transportation System. I can be reached at cketchel@co.okaloosa.fl.us or by calling 850-651-7105.

My Sincere Thanks,

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