

Voters could decide bus future

Funding decisions could rest with area residents

By BERTRAM RANTIN

brantin@thestate.com

CMRTA'S FUTURE

Richland and Lexington county voters could take their first official stance for — or against — public transportation as early as this November.

But before they do, the county councils in both areas must approve separate ballot questions asking residents to support the region's transit system with their pocketbooks and their hearts.

The Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority on Friday is poised to approve a resolution asking Richland County Council to place a transportation sales tax referendum question on the November ballot.

Lexington County voters, meanwhile, would be asked to formally endorse the CMRTA, essentially authorizing lawmakers to seek funding sources for the financially troubled system.

"We're a regional bus system and we serve the citizens of both Richland and Lexington counties. We need the entire community to come together and support this initiative," CMRTA spokeswoman Brittany Doten said.

CMRTA has operated mostly with start-up funds from SCANA, which ran the area's bus system until 1992. But those funds are quickly depleting, and that's left transportation officials looking for alternative sources. Without them, the bus system faces a significant reduction in service as early as next year.

The area is not the first to face a crossroads with its transit service. Charleston County voters approved a half-penny-on-the-dollar sales tax in 2004 after turning down two previous proposals. Nationwide, no public transit system operates without the assistance of outside funding.

In a series of public hearings in Richland and Lexington counties last week, residents spoke about the need to save the bus system, in part by winning over those who never use it.

“We always talk about bearing each other’s burdens. Now it’s time to practice what we preach,” said Columbia’s Ben Cook, one of about 200 people at the last of the three hearings Saturday morning at the Richland County Public Library.

But some residents say the CMRTA is not totally blameless for the problems, adding officials should not have waited until cutbacks were imminent.

“Why did it take CMRTA two years to ring the fire alarms?” Columbia’s Dale Wolthoff, a regular bus rider, asked during Saturday’s hearing.

Others don’t want to point fingers but just want to find a solution. “We need to help them so they can help us,” Saleem B. Muhammad said.

Pending a favorable vote Friday, CMRTA will ask the Richland and Lexington councils to consider the November ballot questions at their June 20 meetings. By state law, counties have until Aug. 14 to formulate and add November ballot questions, and CMRTA wants to ensure each county has time for the necessary three readings.

CMRTA currently operates with an \$11 million annual budget. But officials say they need \$25 million to meet riders’ needs and grow the current bus system.

If approved, a penny sales tax alone in Richland County could go a long way toward reviving the financially troubled system. But while a 1-cent tax is projected to raise \$67 million, only a fourth of that would be dedicated to public transit. The rest would be designated for county highway improvements.

CMRTA officials say that, while the goal is to expand the entire system, there may be no choice but to target it to those areas where there is community support.

CMRTA bus driver Reggie Bowers, who came to Saturday’s hearing, hopes it doesn’t come to that. He hopes everyone will get behind the bus system whether they ride it or not.

“If your neighbor’s house is burning down, grab a water hose. Yours may be next,” Bowers said.

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