

Buses' fate riding on public aid

By **BERTRAM RANTIN**

Columnist

Advocates of public transportation in the Midlands say saving and expanding the area's transit system will require the support of those who regularly ride the buses and those who don't.

But generating widespread support could be a challenge for transportation officials as they seek funding commitments from local governments.

The Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority soon is expected to ask Richland and Lexington county councils to approve November ballot issues that would give financial and political support to the bus system, which is running out of money.

For the 10,000 or so riders who use the buses each day, a positive vote is crucial.

The \$1.25 one-way fares are not enough to keep the buses up and running.

And that's unnerving to people like RTA bus driver **Douglas Taylor**, who fears many in the community are indifferent at best to bus service because they don't use it themselves.

"They don't ride the bus," he said. "Many don't want the bus."

Taylor realizes public transportation comes at a cost, but so do other services like police and fire protection.

"It's not designed to make money," Taylor said. "It's designed to provide a service."

That's the message RTA officials hope to get across if they're successful in getting the issue before voters.

"All we're asking is please let the people tell us," RTA executive director **Mitzi Javers** said last week after the first of three area public hearings on the bus system.

Since its creation in 1992, the RTA has operated mostly with startup funds from SCANA, which previously ran the bus system.

But those funds are quickly being depleted, and transportation officials say they must be replaced — or the bus system could face severe service cutbacks as early as next year.

To avoid that, they're proposing a 1-cent transportation sales tax in Richland County and a commitment for alternative funding searches in Lexington County. Lexington can't

consider a transportation tax referendum this year because it already has a 1-cent sales tax question on its November ballot.

“I favor the sales tax. I need my job,” Taylor said.

If the bus system were less than full speed, he said, he and many others might lose their jobs. And higher unemployment isn’t good for anyone.

“If I had to catch a cab to get to work, I couldn’t afford it.”

If the issue is brought before voters, Taylor and others directly affected likely won’t be alone in their campaign to save the system.

While the vocal majority at this week’s public hearings said they regularly ride the buses, many who don’t ride say they also recognize the need to keep them running.

Columbia’s **Ben Cook** was among them. He said he and his wife have other means of getting around but often take the bus as a way to save gas money.

“We have to get the message out that transit service is for everybody,” Cook said.

Many who do use buses every day say that message has to start with them.

“We’re going to have to convince the voters that those who use the service need the service,” Columbia’s **Carol Randolph** said. “We’re going to have to reach into our pockets.”

Lexington County resident **Joe Kyle** said that if the transit system is to be truly regional, it must have the support of more local governments than just Columbia’s.

The city is the only area municipality that helps fund the transit system.

“This is not a Columbia issue. This is a regional issue,” Kyle said.

The RTA operates with an \$11 million annual budget.

Officials say \$25 million is needed to sustain and expand the system.

Javers said a strong regional system is the hope but added the unwelcome alternative would be to eliminate service where there is not support for it.

“You don’t go there.” Javers said. “You can’t go if they won’t financially support you.”

Kathy Riley, director of the Women’s Shelter in Columbia, hopes it doesn’t come to that.

She said that practically every day she comes in contact with many who would be at a loss without bus service.

“We need to do a push. It needs to get on the ballot.”

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