

Meeting puts emphasis on bus system 'crisis'

By BERTRAM RANTIN

News Columnist

Carol Randolph hopes that 2006 won't be the last stop for public transportation as she knows it in the Midlands.

But the Columbia woman knows it will take a lot less complaining and lot more convincing if she and others who depend on buses each day want to keep them running at full speed.

"Unless we convince the lawmakers, it doesn't matter how much we sing to each other."

Randolph was speaking before about 100 residents who turned out at the Cayce/West Columbia Public Library on Tuesday evening for the first of three public hearings on the struggling bus system.

Officials with the Midlands Regional Transit Authority have put the area on notice that the bus system is running out of funds and will have to significantly reduce its routes and hours of services at the end of the year unless alternative funding sources can be secured.

The system serves more than 40,000 passengers each week.

But while many at Tuesday's hearing lauded the virtues of the bus system, Randolph reminded them that most of those who need convincing weren't there.

"We're basically preaching to the choir. We've got to get the message out."

The hearings have been announced as avenues for getting comments on proposed reductions to the system. But CMRTA officials concede the meetings are as much a rallying point to spur riders to persuade their neighbors, church members, customers — and most importantly lawmakers — to help keep the system alive.

"We're trying to get the message out there that there is a crisis," CMRTA executive director **Mitzi Javers** said. "The people who need the service the most have to carry that message."

SCANA, which turned over operation of the system to the CMRTA in 1992, still provides about 58 percent of its \$11 million annual operating budget. But the company's funding will end in 2009, which has left agency officials scrambling to find alternative funding sources.

The system receives a much smaller percentage of its revenues from passenger fares, the city of Columbia and state and federal grants. But the CMRTA said the area, like many others, might need to go to the public for a sales tax or property tax increase to make up the difference.

Javers said officials have known for some time that public funding would be needed. But she said the timeline has accelerated significantly over the years because of required federal upgrades to the system, increased fuel costs, the addition of bus signs and increased hours of service.

And while no local government has been formerly asked to bring a referendum before their voters, Javers noted that many local lawmakers sit on the CMRTA board.

“It’s not like the message hasn’t been getting to the leadership.”

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