

Sisters Transit Stakeholder Meeting
March 25, 2013
2pm-4pm
Sisters City Hall

Attendees:

Erin Borla (Sisters Chamber of Commerce)
Catherine Childress (Sisters City Council)
John Gerke (Faith Community)
Eric Porter (City of Sisters)
Ann Richardson (Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show)
Eileen Stein – (City Manager, City of Sisters)

Staff:

Scott Aycock, Karen Friend, and Tamara Geiger (Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council)

Introductions

The attendees introduced themselves and the organizations they represent. Scott A. thanked them for coming and explained that he expected a lighter turn out (it is Spring break) but he will be sure to forward meeting notes on to other important stakeholders (representatives from the healthcare community, etc).

Meeting Purpose

Scott explained that CET is at a critical point in the planning process for the transit system as a whole and is approaching each community's stakeholders to get a better idea of their priorities and local funding options. He explained that there was "start-up" funding and other funding opportunities when CET opened before the recession; however, the start-up period is over (those funds were never supposed to last forever) and a lot of the social service agencies that used to support transit have had to cut back. The system needs dedicated local funding in order to maintain service.

He explained that in the past, many believed that there would be a region-wide Central Oregon solution for funding and service, but recently it has become clearer that there is no one size fits all for service or funding. Each community's funding option will likely be different. Eileen asked if the Bend Transit System (BAT) is completely gone. Karen explained that the Bend system has been folded into CET and there is an IGA with the City for funding and big picture decisions. The City of Bend provides their local match and then some for funding, and there is a different pot of federal money to fund the Bend system because it is urban vs. rural.

Current Transit Service Overview

Scott reviewed the current transit service. He explained that Sisters service is different than all of the other communities because they only have local service on Tuesdays (and it primarily serves the senior meal). When service began, community connections were more important than local service. However, the reservation system and one day of service is prohibitive because it is inconvenient and prevents Sisters residents from using it to connect to the Community Connector for a M-F schedule (even though the Community Connector is fixed-route, five days a week). Sisters still has a much larger service area than the UGB because service is only offered on Tuesdays and the majority of riders live outside the UGB.

Existing Conditions

The group reviewed the community demographic information which appears as though Sisters is in the direction of less transit dependency – lower poverty rate, average percent of seniors, etc. The percentage of Sisters residents who walked to work or worked at home is very high compared to the County, state and country. This data doesn't show that there's not a need for transit, it just shows that the need may be a bit different. Scott

continued that outside of the Madras-Warm Springs shuttle, the Sisters- Redmond shuttle has the lowest ridership. He thinks this is compounded by the lack of local service and that the shuttle is going to Redmond rather than Bend. Erin commented that she believes there is a very important demographic missing, visitors. She explained that visitors want to go somewhere (frequently to Bend) and there isn't a taxi service in Sisters. She thinks that more people would come in if the service were advertised to visitors.

Sisters Service Plan

Scott and Karen explained that consultants Nelson/Nygaard reviewed the CET service plans and were asked to determine whether the system should be changed in any way. They stated that they were open to broad structural changes, if the consultants determined that they weren't offering the correct service. However, the consultants only tweaked the existing service and maintained that the priority for the system is to serve people who don't have other options. The service plans they included are: short term (1-3 years), midterm (3-10 years) and longterm (10+) years.

Karen explained that the midterm service plan, for 3-10 years from now, is assuming a recovered economy and that stakeholders should think of it as the service they want to work toward funding. Scott explained slide 31 as depicting the future demand for inter-community travel – and apologized that in black and white it was hard to discern the colors. Karen asked Erin and Ann what types of jobs they see with employees living outside of Sisters and commuting in. Erin explained that it's a combination of service, retail, and professional jobs – there's not one industry that dominates the commute.

Action Item: Email stakeholders the Powerpoint so that they can see the diagrams.

Scott explained that the estimated future demand to add local service and service to Redmond remains low; however, there is a medium potential for Sisters-Bend commuting. He continued that there are a couple of people riding to Redmond that would not like a change, but there is the potential to capture a lot more rides for the Sisters-Bend market.

Scott continued with a breakdown of funding. He shared that all of the other transit systems the size of CET or larger have local funds supporting, frequently more than 50% of the cost. The question is: how does CET garner local support in a community like Sisters? He explained that CET has completely tapped all federal funds available to support the service, and that in reality Sisters will need to provide 21.5% of the cost in FY15 (\$25,839.49). Also, social service community partners have faced sequestration and funding cuts, which will translate into how much funding CET receives. John stated his understanding was the sequestration only cut "additional funds." Scott explained that one partner, the Council on Aging, just had their funding cut 10%. Karen explained that nothing ever seems to be as it appears, for example the BETC credit was supposed to be phased out over 5 years. CET figured that was plenty of time and it would be no problem, but the legislature put a mechanism in place that made difficult to sell because the interest rate is so low.

Eileen asked whether the Bend-Bachelor bus is a good model for something that pays for itself or makes a profit. Karen explained that it is funded entirely by Mt. Bachelor and is a requirement of their lease (from the Forest Service) that they provide transportation up to the mountain. She continued that the fare (\$12/RT) is a bit high to encourage ridership. Scott explained that in this case it was an opportunity to lower their cost of doing business, since they used to run their own shuttle service. Karen continued that they are continuing to identify mechanisms or potential routes and expansion that could help them and the community. They continued that Ride the River is a service that nearly pays for itself (it's short, focused, and has a high demand). Karen explained that when buses are full they start to pay for themselves.

Eileen asked about other rural transit services and how they are funded. Scott explained that it is most frequently through a property tax and that a transit district is established (like a parks district, etc.). Karen also gave the example of Corvallis that is funded through a utility fee (about \$3/household/month) and allowed the system to be free (no fare). Also Ashland, a tourism community, levied their own sales tax. However, CET/COIC recognizes that they need a critical mass of service to attract people to use it and see the value in the tax.

The group continued the discussion about changing the Community Connector destination from Redmond to Bend. Eileen asked about the students that are traveling to Redmond Proficiency Academy (they were vocal at

the public meeting) and whether there are other ideas to meet their needs? She continued that a transfer through Bend is most likely going to be prohibitive for them. Karen explained that they are a vocal group but there are only a couple of students riding the bus. Erin mentioned the school district bus that is traveling from Sisters every morning to Redmond to pick up kids and take them to the Sisters school district. Couldn't the RPA students ride it on the way to Redmond? Another suggestion from Catherine was for them to ride the airport shuttle. Ann stated that considering the per user cost of taking two students to school, it is hard to justify the cost of running the CC to Redmond. Erin continued that connecting people to Bend is a priority for the Chamber, especially for visitors.

Erin also added that the website is very difficult for her to navigate and understand what is demand-response or the Community Connector. John seconded that he didn't know how to reach the service, or who to call when he was trying to help some people get through town. Erin added that it's hard to know from the map that the services are "clickable" for the current schedule. She asked for one page of dedicated information about Sisters service for their office and Scott explained that a flyer should have gone to the City and the Chamber recently. Erin explained that she'd be happy to share the message if she knew the message.

Action Item: Karen to contact the Sisters drivers to find out where flyers are and get them to Sisters City Hall and the Chamber.

Erin and Ann asked when the Bend-Sisters shuttle would begin. Scott explained that there haven't been any concrete plans made, but that it would be after school is out (to lessen damage for RPA students). They also asked about the hours, and Karen explained that they previously based the schedule on common working hours but those shuttles were underutilized. At this point, they are not sure of the schedule.

John explained, with the understanding that there's nothing CET can do in the immediate future, that he has worked with the homeless council and frequently transients are stranded in Sisters after dark. They don't have anywhere to stay in Sisters and have no way to get to Bend or Redmond where services are available. He asked Karen and Scott to keep this in consideration as they moved forward.

The group continued with the Bend shuttle discussion and Ann asked whether CET would like input from the community for the schedule. Scott said absolutely, and Erin thought that she could help with the effort through contacting their member businesses. Karen explained that a bus that is marketed as the "Sisters Shopping Experience" would need to be convenient and have busses running frequently. John asked whether Erin and Ann thought the local businesses would financially support it. Erin thought that after demonstrating the demand, they may be willing. Eileen suggested a potential room tax.

The group moved on to the funding options page, where Ann explained she believed there would be very little if any public support for any tax until they see a benefit to the community. Scott explained that that's the predicament— CET can't provide the service they need without the dedicated funding but can't get the dedicated funding until they provide the service. Scott explained that the funding issue, \$26,000 that needs to be provided by Sisters, is for next year (FY15, July 2014). Erin continued that she believes it would be worth rebranding the Community Connector shuttles as "Experience Sisters" shuttle because it would change the mindset and could increase ridership. Also, could promote a day trip to Sisters through Visit Bend.

She continued that if the other communities have a working class group using the service, and that market is not using the service in Sisters, then we need to change the market. Changing the title will change the business perception. Catherine asked about using the shuttle for transport to special events on the weekends in the summer (Quilt Show, Folk Festival). Ann explained that she would happily publicize the shuttle for the quilt show, and they could even have a reservation process. Scott thought this sounded promising and said the next step is to make the Sisters-Bend CC work with new marketing and branding. Then, special event services may be added. Ann emphasized that using the shuttle for events would demonstrate the positive benefits of transit.

Scott explained that the draft service plans would be brought to Council, and the COIC board before being adopted as a part of the Regional Transit Master Plan. The group planned to stay in touch about planning the re-branding effort of the Bend-Sisters Community Connector.