Valley Regional Transit, other organizations try to bridge gap

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Dollie Iiams spends most of her afternoons eating with friends at the Parma Senior Center. The center serves lunch to seniors from around the area five days a week, but getting to the location or even doctor’s appointments or other necessities can be a challenge.

Iiams used to drive the few miles from Apple Valley herself to join others at the popular weekday lunches. But starting three years ago, she began to take advantage of an alternative. She just has to call the center and set up a ride. She said the drivers will even take her by the grocery store if she needs to pick something up — all because they’re “very nice.”

Some of the seniors may no longer drive or don’t want to get out on the roads when the weather is bad.

Public transportation for people who live in rural areas of the Treasure Valley isn’t as easily accessible as in Nampa, Boise or Caldwell. But efforts from local senior centers, Valley Region Transit and other organizations, are trying to bridge that gap.

There are no bus routes to most of the rural areas in Canyon County, specifically in the western portion of the county, and most people who live outside the larger cities rely on local organizations to get to around.

“There’s a real need for transportation out there, and there aren’t many options,” GoRide mobility manager David Pederson said.

VEHICLE SHARING

Iiams’ go-to destination is usually the Parma Senior Center’s lunch, but the center’s transportation services actually provide options for people to get rides most places they need to be.
Parma Senior Center’s transportation services cover one of the largest rural areas for volunteer drivers. Covering much of Canyon County west of Caldwell, Parma Senior Center’s volunteer drivers transport hundreds of people each month, Parma Senior Center volunteer Lenny Elfering said.

“I really appreciated it because I don’t have to drive my car,” Iiams said. “... Heavens yes, it’s nice to know (the service) is there when I need it.”

Elfering, who’s been volunteering for the last six years, said the center’s ability to help transport people who need it really skyrocketed with the partnership with GoRide three years ago. He said GoRide’s Vehicle Sharing Program has been instrumental in the expansion of the center’s transportation abilities.

“That program is unbelievable. It has helped us so much,” Elfering said. “There’s just no transportation option in this neck of the woods. … (GoRide) helps us fill a big void here in the Valley”

The Vehicle Sharing Program allows area senior centers, churches and other local organizations to share from a pool of vehicles for use based on their needs. Annual donating members can give an existing vehicle to VRT, and VRT then insures and maintains the vehicle. The local group that donated the vehicle doesn’t give up its rights to using they, however. Organizations do not have to donate a vehicle to participate, but it would have to pay an annual fee or a fee per day of use.

“This is for the greater good. (The organizations) have access to a variety of vehicles,” VRT’s Mark Carnopis said.

Elfering said the program has allowed many people in the rural communities to be more mobile and active with the low-cost transportation option.

“We had people before who weren’t really leaving their homes because they just didn’t have the money,” Elfering said.

Pederson said there is a good core of senior centers in the Treasure Valley, and GoRide hopes to get them all working together under the Vehicle Sharing Program.

COMMUNITY LINK

Valley Region Transit’s 2013 to 2018 five-year strategic plan details the ambition to offer a rural route that would make frequent stops every 60 minutes at some point on the horizon.

One route would have buses stop at park and ride lots in Notus, Parma, Wilder and Greenleaf and another route to Melba. But in the meantime, people in rural areas who need a lift rely on senior centers, churches and similar local organizations. VRT’s GoRide operates a bit like Uber, but for seniors — and at $3 dollars for each 8-mile segment, it’s also cheaper than Uber’s $1.75 per mile.
GoRide’s pool of volunteer drivers already goes out into communities outside the normal ValleyRide routes to transport each month upwards of 300 people. For the most part, these passengers are disabled people, veterans and seniors who have no other means of transportation.

People who use GoRide on a daily basis call and set up an appointment for a driver to pick up passengers and drive them to and from destinations such as doctor appointments, social events or even a quick shopping trip. The volunteer drivers are reimbursed 56 cents per gallon if they use their own vehicles. The volunteer drivers may also use one of the GoRide vehicles.

“I’ve taken people to holiday dinners, doctors appointments, shopping and really anywhere they need to be,” volunteer driver Anna Brandt said. “… This is something that is really needed for a lot of people.”

Carnopis said each of the drivers must undergo a background check and take training courses to qualify as a driver. Brandt said she was looking for something to do and heard about the volunteer position through CraigsList. She said she loves to drive, and it was also a way to help out people.

“There’s a lot of people with good hearts that want to help but it’s a big challenge,” Carnopis said.

The individual rides are GoRide’s most basic functions on a day-to-day basis. But Pederson said GoRide is working to build a comprehensive transportation system to ensure that people across the Treasure Valley are mobile.

“The (transportation) need is getting more pressing,” Carnopis said.

JOB ACCESS VANPOOL

GoRide additionally began operating a job access vanpool over the summer to provide low-income workers with transpiration to jobs.

Carnopis said there is a demand in the Treasure Valley for transportation options for people who can’t afford the transportation to and from work.

“There is a need to get people to jobs. For people with lower income jobs it can be hard to get to work,” he said.

Over the summer, the vanpool transported recent refugee workers to and from the Symms Fruit Ranch in Sunny Slope. Up to 30 workers took advantage of the service.

A major ongoing project revolving around getting employees to jobs is the Mobile Village. The program aims to provide transportation job training to participants, such as CDL training and automotive and bicycle repair. Some of the participants would be trained to drive the vehicles, and once they own their own, they could help provide more transportation options to those in need.