

Help on way for public transport in Dutchess

Those of us who have chosen the rural life know that country charm comes with a price. We must travel farther for amenities and sacrifice conveniences for the tranquility of our rural lifestyles. For some of our neighbors, however, the distance to reach medical care, grocery stores or employment can be a struggle, especially for our seniors and those without access to a vehicle of their own.

Up until January 2009, the needs of our rural communities were being met at least partially by the Dutchess County LOOP bus service. Then came hard-pressed budget restraints. The county downsized its bus routes, which obliterated all public transportation in the rural towns of the county's northeast quadrant, with only a few routes now in operation running to Millbrook, Wassaic and Dover.

To their credit, a few groups rose up to meet transportation needs on a volunteer basis, including Friends of Seniors and the North East Community Center, but more is needed.

Residents of Stanford, Amenia, Pine Plains, North East, Milan, Clinton and the outer areas of Washington and Pleasant Valley are justified to be perturbed for funding a system for which they have been carved out. In managing county tax revenues the county was right to scale back services that were not profitable, yet there is something essentially unjust about a system where the totality of county taxpayers fund a county public transportation system that only benefits residents of the populous towns.

THE COUNTY ACCOUNT MICHAEL KELSEY

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I sat through a county transportation presentation on the current bus routes last month, distraught by our region's neglect. I also met with the Foundation for Community Health, a Sharon, Conn.-based nonprofit that commissioned a Northeast Dutchess County Transit Feasibility Study that was released in April 2010.

The report analyzed the transportation needs of local residents and articulated a strategy for improving localized transportation.

The report recommended applying for federal New Freedom monies to hire a mobility manager to redevelop transportation systems in northeastern Dutchess County.

The mobility manager would identify and revive transportation efforts for those living in isolation in northeastern Dutchess County through a variety of means, including increased volunteer door-to-door service, a two-day-a-week "FLEX Service," restored ADA (Americans with Disability Act) paratransit and perhaps eventually expanded LOOP service. The New Freedom program came about in 2001 by President Bush's executive order that the federal government should assist localities to implement community-based services for individuals with disabilities in accord with the Supreme Court's *Olmstead v. L.C.*

In March, Legislator Gary Cooper and I were pleased to sponsor legislation that passed unanimously to accept New Freedom funding in the amount of \$200,000 to hire a mobility manager to address transportation needs of northeastern Dutchess County.

The plan calls for the North East Community Center to recruit a vibrant mover-and-shaker to serve as the mobility manager. Applications are now being accepted to hire this person to fill the transportation gaps experienced by our neglected rural towns. To those neighbors out there who have been struggling to get around, help is on the way.

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