

Mass transit needs remain pressing in region

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More than 60 people attending a public hearing on mass transit Wednesday differed on details but had one overriding message for policymakers: Northwest Indiana needs a regional bus system.

"We need a regional transit system that goes all throughout the county, so if I get up in the morning and can't get a dial-a-ride I know I can catch a bus and go where I want," said Joseph Cunningham, of Gary.

His comments were later seconded by Sherri Cox, of Valparaiso, who said she hasn't been able to drive a car since becoming disabled.

"What I'd like to see, I'd like to be able to get out of Valparaiso once in a while," Cox said. "I'd like to be able to go to Lake County."

The public meeting and hearing at Wicker Park Social Center in Highland was put on by the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission. In May, NIRPC pledged to host the hearing as part of a settlement agreement reached in federal court that ended years of litigation between the agency and Everybody Counts, an agency that advocates for people with disabilities.

"We want Lake transit providers to recognize that the people that need public transit might have some good ideas about what's needed in public transit," said Everybody Counts Executive Director Teresa Torres.

North Township Trustee Frank Mrvan said his township's dial-a-ride service illustrates how badly public transit is needed. Rides on the township's dial-a-ride buses will reach 48,000 this year, a four-fold increase from the 12,000 riders carried in 2012.

"Every thriving economy in America has public transportation," Mrvan said. "And it's long overdue that Lake County get on the road to creating a public transit system that provides rides for everyone."

Looming large over the hearing was the demise of the Regional Bus Authority in the summer of 2012, which left Lake County's largest city without fixed-route bus service.

Anne Collins, of Merrillville, said Lake County bus riders and residents should have done their best to support that service. Instead, divisions over the RBA turned the region into a laughingstock, she said.

"I'm really serious," Collins said. "What we need in Lake County is bus transportation or reasonable transportation that can connect to Valparaiso and some places beyond. But you won't do it unless Lake County commissioners and legislators can stop laughing at us."

Cunningham and a number of others said Gary Public Transportation Corp. should form the basis of a new regional bus system, because it already has by far the largest ridership, reach, and fleet of any area transit provider.