

Session on public transportation brings call for regional cooperation

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Ty Warner, executive director of the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission, addresses the crowd during a public meeting hosted by the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC) in cooperation with Everybody Counts to present current information on existing public transportation and to gather public opinions on the subject. The meeting was held in Highland, IN., at the Wicker Park Social Center on Wednesday, Oct. 29, 2014. | John Smierciak/For Sun-Times Media

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HIGHLAND — Frustration often bubbled to the surface during a public transportation hearing held by the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission on Wednesday afternoon, but the message was clear: the patchwork bus service currently available does not adequately meet the needs of residents, particularly for the disabled.

NIRPC held the hearing — on the performance of current services and how future service could take shape — as part of a settlement agreement with disability advocacy group Everybody Counts. The settlement ended years of litigation in federal court.

More than 50 people gathered at Wicker Park Social Center to discuss the issue.

Currently, 10 transit agencies offer a mix of fixed route, complementary paratransit, and demand response services. NIRPC serves as a pass-through for seven transit agencies in Northwest Indiana, while three others receive federal money directly. Ridership is up in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties, from 1,340,481 in 2012 to 1,442,632 in 2013.

There have been several attempts to develop a regional transportation system, but the most prominent effort — the Regional Bus Authority — ran out of \$12.3 million in seed money from the RDA on June 30, 2012, after failing to find a permanent funding source. It ceased bus service, including operation of the Hammond Transit system.

Everybody Counts Executive Director Teresa Torres said the hearing should have offered services for the visually impaired to better participate.

“Collaboration is possible in Northwest Indiana,” Torres said. “I prefer to work collaboratively, but if that doesn’t work we’ll do what it takes.”

North Township Trustee Frank Mrvan urged those involved in the process to look at this as “a new beginning.”

“People want equal access to go to the store or to the doctor’s office,” Mrvan said. “The time is now for a regional bus system and for us to have leadership to put this together.”

Valparaiso resident Sherri Cox enjoys the city’s V-Line service, but she wished it ventured farther into the county and region.

“I’d like to get out of Valpo once in a while,” Cox said. “I’d love to connect to Lake County to shop and connect with other towns in Porter County like Portage. Being disabled and relying on public transportation, I don’t like that. I like to be independent, but I can’t drive because of my disability.”

Gary resident Joseph Cunningham said Northwest Indiana leaders need to think beyond individual communities to create a regional transit system.

“We need an alternative to just dial-a-ride,” Cunningham said. “Gary should be the hub. We need to be able to go anywhere we want to go anytime we want to.”

Despite a lot of discussion from communities and government officials, Hammond resident George Janiec said, solutions are difficult to find.

“The things we need are funding, planning and execution more than anything else, but wrapped up in everything is frustration,” Janiec said.

Finding a stable source of local funding is the key to developing a truly regional service, NIRPC Executive Director Ty Warner said.

“We’re not in the way of making that happen, but we have not been able find a way to sustain local funding,” Warner said.

Mrvan said the township’s dial-a-ride service is so popular that federal grant money that funds it could run out by next summer. This year, the township expects to provide nearly 48,000 rides compared to just 12,000 in 2012.

Hobart Mayor Brian Snedecor, president of the NIRPC board, said the leadership on this issue must come from individual communities.

“We look at NIRPC as the key to resolve this, but it really stems from communities coming to NIRPC, with a unified voice, saying we’re willing to put up local funds. Even on the South Shore rail extension, Congressman (Pete) Visclosky didn’t get 100 percent agreement.”