

When will transit projects hit the road?
written by Newspark Team | March 30, 2014



Third in a series exploring local government budgets

The conversation about regional transit projects is gaining momentum among transportation decision-makers in Charlottesville and Albemarle County.

The Charlottesville-Albemarle Metropolitan Planning Organization has identified three projects as priorities for the community. The projects will be included in the region's Long Range Transportation Plan to be adopted in May.

Sarah Rhodes, lead transportation planner for the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission and program manager of the MPO, said including the projects in the 2040 long-range plan is a "big deal."

The projects are:

- » implementing a downtown-to-Crozet bus route;
- » improving transit infrastructure to existing bus Route 10;
- » and creating express bus or bus rapid transit service along the U.S. 29 corridor.

"Specifically noting that these are improvements the community would like to see is a real first step to moving forward," Rhodes said. "It says this is the overarching transit vision for our community."

City Councilor Kristin Szakos, who is chairwoman of the MPO, said the U.S. 29 bus rapid transit project is one "where there is a lot of public support, but it is very expensive."

Rhodes said that funding transit projects is different from funding other projects. For roads, intersections and bicycle/pedestrian plans, once the MPO allows for federal and state dollars to go toward a project, the money flows in. With transit projects, the community must be more proactive and apply for funding.

"We don't have an overall estimate for how much funding we can expect for transit," Rhodes said. "If this community were to pursue bus rapid transit in the U.S. 29 corridor, this community would have to go forth and apply for a grant. We cannot anticipate what this community will decide to do."

A possible course for funding of express bus service or bus rapid transit on U.S. 29 could come out of the recent effort to find alternatives to the Western Bypass, Albemarle Supervisor Brad Sheffield said.

"There could be a shift to focusing on enhanced transit on 29 with the bypass discussion going on," Sheffield said. "They could take that money and put it towards buying buses."

That project is estimated for completion in the long term, between 2035 and 2040, and officials last week said it could cost as much as \$70 million.

However, John Jones, transit manager of Charlottesville Area Transit, said express bus service could be half as expensive to start and would be a scalable first step toward bus rapid transit.

The downtown-to-Crozet bus route has the earliest timeline of the three priorities, with estimated implementation between 2020 and 2027.

The MPO Technical Committee estimated that the initial investment and six-year operating cost of a Crozet commuter route would total \$11,673,000.

Lena Seville, speaking on behalf of Transit Riders of Charlottesville, called for the Albemarle Board of Supervisors to be the body that moves forward on a bus route to Crozet.

"We suggest you consider a feasibility study to look at commuter routes to Crozet and Scottsville so we can see where we are at," Seville said. "Transportation is one area where there is significant public perception that more could be done."

Management of the projects could come not only from local government, but from established agencies such as Charlottesville Area Transit or JAUNT.

Sheffield said discussion of future transit projects must consider how all these bodies could best work together, potentially under the formation of a regional transit authority.

"Who would put all this together? That is the problem we are at right now," Sheffield said. "A [regional transit authority] could focus these efforts a lot better."

"It would help us move these transit projects forward faster if there was a governing body to manage

it,” he added.

The last effort from local officials to form such an authority was tabled in 2010 because Albemarle’s budget didn’t have the capacity to support it. Legislation to allow formation of an authority still exists, but so does the funding challenge.

Jones said that CAT, as the largest transit provider in the area, would be the starting point for implementing a regional transit authority if that became necessary.

“[An RTA] will be organized under us because we already have the assets, we already have the expertise,” Jones said.

“It would depend on how well the partnership develops between the city and the county, and how funding develops to determine whether governance change on that level is necessary,” he said.

There is evidence that a transit partnership is already developing.

Charlottesville Area Transit will begin providing the same quarterly report to the Board of Supervisors as the City Council gets. The Board of Supervisors’ budget also tentatively allows for additional money for night service of CAT Route 10 and additional service to Piedmont Virginia Community College.

Kathy Welch, the county’s representative on CAT’s advisory board, said she is pleased to see more engagement from the county in CAT’s route planning process.

“We need to get away from this notion that there are ‘county routes’ and reorient ourselves,” Welch said. “We are dealing with a system where there are a lot of interdependent routes.”

Jones said CAT is in the right position to look for federal funding to undertake future transit projects.

“Those projects are still a little out there, but such is the time to plan and implement strategies,” he said.

Of the projects to be listed in the long-range plan, “they are reflective of what the public is looking for and what is feasible for getting federal assistance,” Sheffield said.

“All three of these projects, when presented publically, everyone has said, ‘yes, yes, yes,’” Rhodes said.