County hears testimony on increased fare, system merger

LEXINGTON—Dawson County residents are adamant. They want to keep their public transit service.

It was standing room only during a public hearing at the Dawson County board meeting on Friday as residents asked questions and shared their concerns about the fate of the county's handibus.

Dawson County commissioners have considered changes to the public transit system for about a year, including the possible merger with RYDE (Reach Your Destination Easily) Transit of Kearney.

Friday's hearing allowed commissioners to receive input from passengers, employees and others affected by bus service before decisions are made.

The first portion of the hearing addressed bus fares.

The round-trip cost for most trips has been $2 for at least eight years, according to transit director Barb Hollenbeck.

"Fares haven't changed," said Ed Butler, "but look at what's happened to the price of fuel and insurance and wages."

Butler is business manager for Mid-Nebraska Community Partnership which administers RYDE. He said transit systems across the country are revising fee schedules because of proposed government mandates.

The Dawson County Transit System receives half of its operational budget from federal funds.

Another quarter comes from state funds and the final quarter is county money.

The new mandate requires transit systems to acquire at least 10% of their operating budget from boarding fares. In Dawson County, that means a fee increase will be necessary.

Bernadine Sullivan of Eddyville told commissioners she and two other elderly riders from her town would be willing to pay more to keep the bus service they use regularly.

“It would just be too difficult for us to get to town without it,” Sullivan said.

Diane Adams of the Lexington Housing Authority and Ann Luther from the city of Lexington each cautioned commissioners that raising fares would be too much of a burden for elderly residents but Butler said charging a disparity among riders is not allowed.

Commissioners voted to increase the fare in Dawson County to $1 for each boarding. That means passengers would pay $1 each time they get on the bus after stops.

Longer trips, to Kearney for instance, would cost $3 initially with an additional $1 for each boarding.

In the second portion of the public hearing, participants discussed the benefits of consolidating with RYDE.

“The old adage stands true,” Butler said. “Together we’re stronger.”

RYDE operates buses in Buffalo, Adams, Franklin, Hamiltion, Kearney and Gosper counties as well as the city of Ravenna and provides public transportation to medical appointments, shopping and social activities. The service is open to the public and all buses are equipped to transport disabled passengers.

Butler said should Dawson County merge with RYDE, not only could some services be enhanced but centralized administration may help control costs.

As an example, he said instead of sending a bus from Lexington to Eddyville to pick up passengers, a bus that already makes stops in nearby Miller could swing over to the next town.

He emphasized that current Dawson County employees would all be invited to transfer to RYDE employment and most buses would continue to be dispatched out of Lexington.

Reaching the required 10% fare income would be easier in the RYDE system than in the county, he said, because it would be spread throughout the system.

“Eventually, we’re all going to be using public transportation so it is to our benefit to make it the most efficient service possible,” Butler said.

RYDE, he said, would approach Dawson County cities as possible partners as well, broadening the cost share.

Commissioner Dennis Rickertsen of Overton, who serves on the public transit board, said improved efficiencies are the main reason the county must consider a merger.

“It would be a dirty shame if we lost half of our funding because we couldn’t meet the fare box requirement,” Rickertsen said. “Being a part of a larger entity allows us better coverage and

more of an opportunity for funding."

The county board will vote on the consolidation of services once RYDE has made an official merger proposal.

In other business, commissioners:

authorized the Dawson Area Development leadership class to make an application to the state to place large welcome signs at the east and west entrance to the county on Highway 30.

accepted a low bid of $112,000 with a trade of $53,000 from Fairbanks International for a Case IH 130 industrial tractor with mowing attachment. The other bid of $112,700 was submitted by Landmark Implement.

received a petition to vacate Road 768 one-half mile east of road 448 which is northeast of Sumner and directed road superintendent Jon Mooberry to investigate the request.

discussed a long-standing Internal Revenue Service rule that requires entities that pay for meals during one-day travel to include the expense as employee income. This has previously not been the practice in the county but clerk Karla Zlatkovsky said she would work with individual offices to make it work.

approved a contract with GIS Workshop for a public Internet site that includes land maps that show parcel, soil and use layers using information from the county surveyor and assessor. Cost of the initial setup is $36,000 with $8,000 annual maintenance of information and $4,800 website maintenance.

watched a presentation by John Woodward, Dawson County Museum director, on the proposed design of parking lot, sidewalk and accessibility improvements. A portion of the cost of the project is covered by a grant with the remainder matched by the museum.