

## 12. RURAL TRANSPORTATION INITIATIVE

By all accounts, the I-Ride Transit System operated by Senior Services of Southeastern Virginia (SSEVA) has been highly successful since launching service in Franklin and Southampton County in March 2008. Residents are able to board and ride the buses for just \$1. The vehicles are wheelchair accessible and travel 3 fixed routes with multiple stops along the way in Courtland, Franklin, and Smithfield. In fiscal year 2008, total ridership was 5,687 riders and that number increased by 60%, to 9,100 riders, in FY 2009. They expect to easily break the 10,000 rider mark in FY 2010.

In addition to minimal funding from the localities (we contributed \$6,650 in FY 2010), I-Ride is supported with state and federal funding, and funding from Franklin-Southampton Charities, Franklin-Southampton Area United Way, the Western Tidewater Task Force on Aging, the Obici Foundation, and fares collected from the riders.

Given the early success of I-Ride, there is clear evidence that it has growing opportunities. SSEVA has expressed strong interest in partnering with us to explore the potential for expansion of service throughout the region.

Earlier this month, I met with John Skirven, Executive Director, and Cindy Creede, Director of Operations for Transit and Wellness, of SSEVA, to discuss how we might move forward. They have identified a potential technical assistance grant, administered through the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (VDRPT), for a feasibility study to determine the feasibility of a rural public transportation system. Applications are due February 1, 2010. The grant can cover 90-100% of the cost of the study, which would be outsourced to a qualified consultant, following a competitive procurement process. The study may identify possible routes, hours of service, potential operators, the expected cost of operational funding and the expected capital requirements.

If it is determined that a rural transportation system is feasible, we are eligible to apply for a second grant to cover the cost of developing a detailed operational plan. Once an operational plan is approved by VDRPT, we would be eligible to apply for federal funding that could cover 95-100% of the technical, operating and capital costs of the system including purchase of vehicles, construction of a maintenance facility, shelters at bus stops, signage, printing of schedules, etc.

While it's still several years away, this could be an important first step in developing a reliable transportation system that will improve access to health care, job training, human services, the community college, and personal shopping for many Southampton residents that lack reliable transportation.

I've invited Mr. Skirven, Ms. Creede, and Mr. Darrel Feasel, the Manager of Transit Programs for the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (VDRPT), to your meeting to discuss this exciting opportunity.

### **MOTION REQUIRED:**

**If the Board is so inclined, a motion is required authoring staff to apply for FTA Section 5311 grant funding to conduct a Rural Public Transportation Feasibility Study.**