

# Public can help steer bus plan

By **JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer** | **Posted: Sunday, April 30, 2017 6:00 am**

Berrien County transportation planners want to hear from residents on a proposal to consolidate four bus systems into a single operation, which they believe can serve more people for less money.

Connect Berrien will hold four meetings: 3-4:30 p.m. and 5-6:30 p.m. May 9 at the Niles Library, 620 E. Main St.; 5:30-7 pm. May 10, at the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, 376 W. Main St., Benton Harbor; and 5:30-7 p.m. May 11, at the New Buffalo Township Library, 33 N. Thompson St., New Buffalo.

The meetings are an opportunity for residents to hear the rationale for consolidating the four systems – Berrien Bus, Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority, and Niles and Buchanan Dial a Ride – and to offer their thoughts on the types of services they want, said Dan Fette, Berrien County community development director.

Berrien is the only county in Michigan with four separate public transportation systems, a 2014 report found.

The study concluded that the county had “a fragmented system that is difficult for residents to navigate” and that consolidation would result in cost savings with a more efficient system that would reach more of the county.

Berrien Bus is operated by Berrien County and does not serve Stevensville, Shoreham or Bridgman. Fette has reported that the system is losing money and could be broke in two or three years, leaving nothing to build on.

The Twin Cities system is maintained by the city of Benton Harbor and serves residents there and in Benton and Royalton townships. The Niles and Buchanan systems serve their residents and nearby townships.

The four systems have a total annual operating cost of around \$4 million, including \$1.1 million for Berrien Bus and \$2.2 million for Twin Cities Dial a Ride. They carried 305,000 riders at a cost of \$12.47 per trip.

In comparison, Jackson County, with a similar population and a single transportation system, carried 602,000 passengers in 2013, at a cost of \$7.09 per trip and an annual operating budget of \$4.2 million, according to the 2014 report.

Last year Fette told county commissioners that consolidation could save \$215,000 a year by eliminating duplicated administrative and dispatch operations. A transportation authority could request a funding millage from residents, and would be eligible for more state and federal funding, he said.

County commissioners have expressed their support for consolidation. Niles and Buchanan authorities say they are on board if it improves service for their residents. Benton Harbor initially rejected the proposal, but remains part of the planning process and is taking a wait-and-see attitude as a service plan is drafted, Fette said.

Fette said that once comment from residents and other stakeholders is collected, a service plan could be ready by year's end.

The Lakeland Foundation, the Berrien County Manufacturers Association and the Michigan Department of Transportation, along with Berrien County, funded the 2014 transportation study.

The full study and other information is at [www.connectberrien.org](http://www.connectberrien.org).

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