Recommendation From
Boynton Beach Financial Advisory Committee

Subject/Topic: SHOPPER HOPPER

Reviewed By: TERRY LONERGAN

Recommendation (Specific Action Recommended): DISCONTINUE SERVICE. RECOMMEND STAFF WORK WITH VOLEN CENTER TO QUALIFY SENIOR CITIZENS AND DISABLED FOR TRANSPORTATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE SHOPPER HOPPER. ACCORDING TO INFORMATION RECEIVED DURING INTERVIEWS, THE VOLEN CENTER PROVIDED NO-COST TRANSPORATION TO REGISTERED ELIGIBLE PERSONS. IT IS A SIX-PAGE APPLICATION THAT PERHAPS CITY STAFF AT THE SENIOR CENTER CAN ASSIST CITIZENS IN FILLING OUT. THE COMMITTEE ALSO REVIEWED A TAXI SUBSIDY PROGRAM TO HELP PROVIDE OTHER TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS. THE COMMITTEE NOTED THAT THE STAFF IS ALSO PRESENTING TRANSPORATION ALTERNATIVES AT THE CITY COMMISSION MEETING OF APRIL 5, 2011.

Pros of Recommendation: FAC SURVEY RESULTS OVERWHELMINGLY SUPPORT DISCONTINUANCE. THIS HAS NEVER BEEN FISCALLY SUSTANIBLE. RIDERSHIP DOES NOT WARRANT THE EXPENSE.

Cons of Recommendation: DISCONTINUANCE WILL PRESENT A HARDSHIP FOR THOSE NEEDING TRANSPORTATION TO THE BOYNTON BEACH SENIOR CENTER AND OTHER STOPS ALONG THE FIXED ROUTES. SENIOR CENTER MAY LOSE NATIONAL ACCREDIDATION IF THE SERVICE IS ELIMINATED.

References (Staff, Documents, and Public): FAC SURVEY; MEETING WITH WALLY MAJORS; ATTENDANCE AT SENIOR CENTER ADVISORY BOARD MEETING

Impact on 2011/12 Budget: WILL ADD $220,000 TO CITY BUDGET.

Impact on Out Year Budgets: VEHICLE MAINTENANCE WILL NO LONGER BE NECESSARY

Impact on Citizens: POTENTIALLY LEAVES SENIORS WHO ARE UNABLE TO DRIVE WITHOUT TRANSPORTATION TO THE SENIOR CENTER, WALMART, TARGET, WALGREENS, CVS AND OTHER STOPS ALONG THE FIXED ROUTES. WILL ALSO CREATE A HARDSHIP FOR CHILDREN GOING TO AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS, ACTIVITIES AND SUMMER CAMP WITHOUT TRANSPORTATION

Impact on City Staff: AT THE PRESENT TIME, 3 F/T AND 1 P/T EMPLOYEES WILL HAVE TO BE REASSIGNED OR LAID OFF.

Committee Vote Result: For: 6 **Against**: 0

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION ON THE PAGES ATTACHED. (From City Staff Report to City Commission for April 5, 2011 Meeting.)

History of local Boynton Beach Transit

On December 20th, 1994 per Resolution #R94-193, the City of Boynton Beach entered into an interlocal agreement with Palm Beach County to lease 4 transit coaches to provide public transportation to the general public in the City of Boynton Beach. Per the Agreement the City "leases" the coaches on an annual basis for $10.00 from the County. The County was the recipient of a capital, operating and planning assistance grant per the Federal Transit Act. Included in the Grant's Program of Projects was the acquisition of rolling stock to be used for alternative public transportation purposes. Beginning in January of 1995 the City began operating as the Boynton Beach Transit Authority and provided transportation based on a fixed route system coordinated with Palm Tran (Staff believes it was called Co-Tran at that time). The fixed route followed the same path and schedule each day and did not deviate from the route. Therefore, the transit system at that time best served those residents that lived in close proximity to the fixed route.

Sometime after 1997 Palm Tran added routes that coincided with the fixed routes the City was providing. Between the two systems offering the same routes ridership diminished for the Boynton Beach Transit Authority. As a result the name of the City's program changed to the Shopper Hopper and fixed routes were eliminated. The Shopper Hopper started providing door to door service from various locations (communities). Two buses were used at that time for this service. In addition the service changed again and started providing transportation from local elementary schools to the City's after school programs, summer camps and the Senior Center.

The program today continues to provide the Shopper Hopper service to various locations (limited to grocery, Wal-Mart, Kohls, Target, the Mall, for example) and transportation from local elementary schools to the Art Center and Hester Center for After School programs and provides transportation for the Senior Center for special group activities. Current Shopper Hopper Services are noted on an attached exhibit. Shopper Hopper fares are $1.00 each way with a reduction to $0.50 each way for seniors over age 61.

It is obvious that our local transit system has adapted and evolved to meet the needs of our local Boynton Beach residents. Our transit system was established, and prospered, at a time when few other public transportation options were available, particularly for seniors that were the intended users of this system. However, since the inception and evolution of our local transit system, there have been substantial regional transit changes that offer residents County-wide more transportation options. Notably, seniors and disabled individuals have a variety of options to them that expand far beyond our local transit system. A discussion of these options follows in this report.

Fiscal Constraints

As fiscal constraints have become more prevalent in all City operations, the Boynton Beach Shopper Hopper system has come under increased scrutiny, as have many other City programs. It is necessary to identify those programs that provide a service to the public that is worth the cost. However, defining a program worth can be subjective. Therefore, this staff analysis will concentrate primarily on measures of ridership and cost data. Any subjective sentimental worth and value to the community is best determined by the City Commission as part of its budget deliberations.

Staff provides the following cost and ridership data of the Shopper Hopper system (from the 2010 Budget submittal). Final data for the current fiscal year (2010-11) will not be known until after Oct 1, 2011.

	2005-06	**2006-07**	**2007-08**	**2008-09**	**2009-10**
Operating Revenues	$10,262	$9,062	$9,732	$8,517	$9,500
Operating Expenses	$239,554	$224,582	$275,912	$325,325	$269,131

Operating Loss	$229,292	$215,520	$266,180	$316,808	$259,631
Annual Rider Trip	15,248	13,221	12,958	12,170	12,609
Net City subsidy / Trip	$15.04	$16.30	$20.54	$26.03	$20.59

The above operation cost is funded by the City's transfer of Gas Tax revenues to the transportation program. The City annually receives slightly over $1.1M in gas tax revenue from the State. These funds can only be used for eligible items affecting transportation and highways. The current year budget (2010-11) of gas tax eligible expenditures is as follows;

Trans Services (inc. Shopper Hopper)	$224,554
Public Works Street Maintenance Division	$972,151
Transportation related Capital Projects	$930,000
Total Gas Tax Eligible Expenses	$2,126,705

The City has around $2.1M of Gas Tax eligible expense yet only $1.1M of Gas Tax revenues. The difference of $1.0M is comprised entirely of monies from the General Fund. Therefore, any reduction of the above referenced programs will provide financial relief to the General Fund.

Transportation Options

For the past several years, the City has recognized that the continued operation of the local transportation system is not sustainable. Simply stated, either passenger revenues must increase or operational costs must decrease. As the above financial chart shows, City staff has reduced the transportation costs from a high of $325,325 to a current budget amount of $224,554. This has been accomplished primarily by transitioning to more part time staff in lieu of paying full time wages and benefits where possible. There are other operating efficiencies as well. There is very little room for further operating cost reductions. Therefore, one must instead look to increasing revenue from riders in order to offset overall cost to the taxpayer. However, as illustrated earlier, the City subsidy per rider is around $20 per trip while the rider share is $0.50 per trip for seniors. The rider fare would have to be increased significantly and, if implemented, would very likely result in greatly reduced ridership. We must balance the demand for services with the rate the customer is willing to pay. The equalization point of supply to demand is difficult to determine.

Staff does not believe the funding gap can be reasonably accommodated with rider fare increases. This, therefore, would suggest that the Shopper Hopper / Transportation System should cease operations as we know it today.

But, the goal of our program has always been to move people, primarily seniors. We need not assume that this can only be accomplished by our current Shopper Hopper system. It can be difficult to determine transportation needs because each rider has a unique destination, a unique departure point, and a unique time of day they wish to travel, hence the dilemma that transportation planners across the country try to solve. So, what choices do we have locally?

Existing Transportation Alternatives for Shopper Hopper riders

Palm Tran

Palm Beach County began mass transit operations in 1971. The current name of Palm Tran was established in 1996. The initial seven transit routes have grown to 36 routes today. In 2009, Palm Tran served 10 million riders from 3,200 bus stops. Destinations are County wide as shown on an attached Exhibit.

Locally, Boynton Beach is served by five Palm Tran Routes as shown on the attached exhibits. These routes primarily serve riders on Boynton Beach Blvd, Congress Avenue, Seacrest Blvd, Gateway Blvd, Lawrence Road, the Boynton Beach Mall and the Tri Rail Station. Staff clearly recognizes that these routes are likely not convenient to seniors, particularly, who may reside well removed from the arterial bus route. The routes do, however, provide transit options to many other people that may reside, or have a destination, near a route.

Palm Tran Connection

Palm Tran Connection is a relatively new service that was adopted by Palm Beach County in 2004 to address the transit needs of the elderly, the disadvantaged and the disable person. Palm Tran Connection relies entirely upon a door to door para-transit system that, ironically, is nearly identical in the way that our existing Shopper Hopper operates. However, whereas our Shopper Hopper system provides door to door transportation to specified locations within the City, Palm Tran Connection can be utilized by the public for transit for any destination of any type within the County from their home in Boynton Beach. The fare for this service is $3.00 each way compared to our Shopper Hopper fare of $1.00 per trip ($0.50 for ages over 61).

Despite the fact that Palm Tran Connection is more costly than our existing Shopper Hopper service, one can certainly claim that the destination alternatives allowed by the Palm Tran Connection make it a very good alternative. Also, we should be mindful of the fact that our Boynton Beach residents help to fund Palm Tran Connection as they are also Palm Beach County residents.

Had the Palm Tran Connection been in operation years ago prior to when our own Shopper Hopper system was established, it is very likely that our senior residents would have used Palm Tran Connection and there would have never been a separate need to establish our own local transit system.

Staff believes that the Palm Tran Connection system is a viable alternative to our Shopper Hopper system

The Volen Center

The Volen Center in Boca may be one of the best kept secrets for transportation needs in South Palm Beach County. The Volen Center is funded by The City of Boca Raton, residents of Palm Beach County and other sources. The Volen Center provides transportation for seniors in that portion of Palm Beach County south of Hypoluxo Road. Therefore, all geographic areas of Boynton Beach would appear to fall within the area served by the Volen Center transit system as would Delray Beach and Boca Raton.

The Volen Center provides transportation for seniors at either minimal, or reduced cost, depending upon the origin and destination. Fares are $3.00 (to match Palm Tran Connection) for most trips. Bus trips to an individual's primary care physician, or for dialysis, are free or for donation. Riders must call the day before pickup and can expect a ride any time within a selected one hour window beginning at 10:00 am and ending at 2:00 pm. Riders must call for a return trip prior to 2:30 pm.

The Volen Center provides transportation to numerous County social services agencies and meal sites for example. Our own Senior Center is one such site that would be a great destination for users of the Volen transit system.

Staff believes that the Volen Center transportation system is an excellent alternative to those users of our own Shopper Hopper system. The fare is either free or reduced and the variety of destinations is far greater than our own Shopper Hoppers system.

Taxi Service

Fresno County
No transit report would be complete without referencing transportation alternatives provided by the private, for profit, sector. There are shuttle systems and limousine services too numerous to mention. These services are easy to locate through a yellow page search. These services are costly for individual riders.

Taxi service is a well defined and known private transportation service. Private taxi companies provide on-call transportation needs for those users who do not desire to use mass transit and prefer to travel alone. Taxis are very common in our area and are utilized by seniors because of the convenience when compared to other public options such as Palm Tran Connection and the Volen Center. Seniors may also choose taxi services because they are not aware of the wide variety of public alternatives mentioned herein.

That said, many communities across the country have found ways to leverage private taxi services for transportation needs of local residents, seniors in particular. The most common method is to utilize a voucher or coupon process. This process allows for a city to issue a voucher, or coupon, to an eligible participant that allows the rider to reduce the cost of a taxi fare. Attached is a program brochure for the Taxi Scrip Program in Fresno County California. This is one of the best descriptions of a taxi coupon program staff was able to find on the internet.

Fresno County's program is one where a taxi rider is able to purchase a $20 taxi coupon for $5. The rider then uses the full value coupon to pay for the taxi ride. Specific program details are defined in the brochure. Obviously Fresno County has agreements with tax providers for the use of the coupons and payment terms to the provider. Fresno County chose to make the service available to those age 70 years and older. Of course, any government entity choosing to provide taxi coupons in this manner could create any eligibility requirements it wishes based upon local community need and resources.

Wellington, Florida
The Village of Wellington recently implemented a taxi subsidy program to accommodate their need to transport seniors within their corporate boundaries. This subsidy is budget in the amount of $20,000 per year. Detail of Wellington's system is as follows:

Eligibility:

- Wellington Resident – 60+ years old, and "mobility impaired". However, the Town bases all this on the "honor" system, (i.e. they do not check birth certificates, tax records, etc…)

- Both persons in a marriage who are eligible can participate in the program. However, vouchers cannot be transferred amongst the couple.

- Each registered participant receives a card that is valid for ten (10) trips. The Village pays $13, the individual pays $2 – Total $15/trip. A "round" trip counts as two trips.

Area of Service: Within the Town's corporate limits

Reserving a Ride: Participants can make reservations by calling the contracted transportation companies directly, Monday through Friday 7am to 7pm, excluding holidays such as Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

Participating Transportation Companies are chosen by the Town based on a formal bid process.

Rides can be reserved as little as one hour, if scheduling permits, and up to 2 weeks in advance and can be for any purpose within the servicing area.

Rides are available Monday – Friday 8am to 5pm excluding holidays such as Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Years Day

Taxi Subsidy Summary

A taxi coupon program could be a viable alternative for local senior transportation needs. However, additional research regarding internal staff support needs would be warranted. We do not have a history with this type of system so it is difficult to estimate annual direct costs or man hours necessary to support the program. This could very well be a great program but one that is not worth the administrative oversight. Should we proceed with this system, staff recommends that a budget amount be established and the program should operate to that limit and no further.