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Group wants free rides for medical appointments

By HATTIE BERNSTEIN, Telegraph Staff

MILFORD – Rarely is there consensus among elected officials about how to spend taxpayers' money.

But selectmen found little, if anything, to argue about earlier this week after a regional advocacy group asked the board to support a one-year pilot project that would provide free transportation to Milford and Amherst residents for non-emergency medical appointments.

The Granite State Organizing Project has asked the board of selectmen to approve a warrant article for the March town meeting that would allow the town to contribute half of the roughly \$43,000 needed to run the two-town pilot.

GSOP plans to make the same request to Amherst selectmen Dec. 10.

"We're asking for a question on the warrant that asks for an additional \$1.50 for each motor vehicle registration in Milford to provide the town's matching funds," said town resident Ruth Heden, a GSOP member who has spearheaded the transportation project.

Heden said GSOP, in collaboration with Nashua's transit system, has targeted July 1 as a start-up date for the project.

She said anyone in either of the participating towns who is unable to get to a medical appointment would qualify for the free service, regardless of income.

Nashua transit vehicles are equipped with lifts for wheelchairs and are accessible for riders with special needs. Presently, the service provides rides to medical appointments for Nashua and Hudson residents.

In recent years, older residents of the Souhegan Valley have grown increasingly vocal about the need for non-emergency transportation to medical appointments, chiefly in Nashua, Heden said.

She said faith communities, including St. Patrick Church, which runs the SHARE program, and the town's Methodist Church, run limited transportation programs, as does the volunteer Friends in Service Helping.

To take advantage of federal funds available to the Nashua transit system, the towns must commit a portion of the cost, Heden said, observing that the cost to the transit service of one trip to and from a medical appointment is about \$45.

She said Nashua transit vehicles have the capacity to transport up to 24 passengers at a time.

During a presentation to the selectmen, GSOP said that 21 percent of SHARE's budget is dedicated to transportation, while the two Nashua hospitals reported that a third of their patients are residents of the Souhegan Valley.

"It's not just the elderly," Heden said. "There are working people who were laid off, people with medical conditions who can't drive. People can be very desperate in their homes."

Heden said some local residents told the GSOP during community listening sessions that they drive to their medical appointments, even though they know that with their medical conditions, driving is dangerous.

During the selectmen's meeting Monday, town officials agreed that transportation for medical appointments is a priority. "We do need to do something," selectmen Chairman Noreen O'Connell said.

O'Connell said board members want to do some research of their own before committing to a specific initiative, such as the surcharge on motor vehicle registrations.

"We really need to look outside the box," O'Connell continued. "See where we can pull other money, and maybe it won't cost us anything."

O'Connell said the board is exercising caution, with good reason.

"In order to make it work, we still have things we need to do," she said. "We need to sit own and look at this from all angles, because it's important that it succeed."

Mark Sousa, director of the Nashua Transit System, said that if the pilot is approved, transit system officials will make quarterly reports to the two town boards, identifying the number of trips, the destinations, time of day and other data that can be used to fine-tune the project.

Based on these reports, Sousa said, the transit system could increase or decrease schedules, eliminating services that aren't being used.

If the support and use of the service are strong, Sousa said, the project could be expanded.

Eventually, project organizers said, they envision a system that provides free, non-emergency medical transportation to residents in a nine-town area that includes not only Milford and Amherst, but also Brookline, Hollis, Lyndeborough, Mason, Merrimack, Mont Vernon and Wilton.

"We'll start with a few towns and see how it goes," Sousa said.

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