

# There's still hope for local transportation

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TRI-STATE REGION — Many questions have yet to be answered, and there are still too many unknowns for a concrete plan, but members of a local public transportation task force and representatives from the Dutchess County Transportation Council (DCTC) met at the beginning of the month to discuss the possibility of public transportation returning to the northeastern corner of Dutchess County.

Mark Debal, a senior planner at DCTC, and Cynthia Ruiz, a newly-hired transit administrator, fielded questions from the Eastern Dutchess Transportation Task Force, which was organized by members of the Foundation for Community Health, and included officials from municipalities, nonprofit and community organizations, church groups and others.

In January, county LOOP bus routes 7, 8 and 9 were eliminated due to rising costs of operation and low ridership. In January, Debal pointed out that all three

routes averaged six or fewer passengers per hour. The only remaining bus service in the immediate area is LOOP 10, which runs from Poughkeepsie to the Wassaic Metro-North station several times a day.

Since then, the Foundation for Community Health has held several meetings, organized a task force and worked to schedule a meeting with the county to discuss alternative options for public transportation in the area.

That meeting was held the afternoon of Aug. 5 at the Foundation for Community Health in Sharon; 11 members of the task force were present.

When asked about the discontinued service, Debal explained that the decision was based on ridership but elaborated that budget cuts and a transit planning merger among three counties, including Dutchess, left rural areas worse off.

While the change in LOOP service is permanent, a glimmer of hope for public transportation in the area resides in the county's FLEX Plan service.

The FLEX Plan, as it would be used in eastern Dutchess County, would be

split up into two zones, north and south. Debal and Ruiz estimated eight trips per day in each of those zones. The service is still in the planning phase, and there aren't a lot of concrete details, but both representatives stressed that input from the communities concerning the types of services needed in their areas would help get the most out of the service that would be provided.

After the meeting, Gertrude O'Sullivan, the foundation's director of communications and special programs, said she couldn't say if it was the area's best shot at getting public transportation. But she did say it was what the community had to work with.

"Something is better than nothing," she said.

Debal and Ruiz acknowledged that as the county's budget was cut by 30 percent, more urban areas have been prioritized. The FLEX Service plan could only be available up to two days a week, and could turn out to be some kind of a curb-to-curb service, but the best estimate of when the service might begin would

be January 2010.

One of the things O'Sullivan was most hopeful about was that the county seemed to be interested in working with the task force to maximize whatever program eventually comes out of these discussions.

"Providing input would be tremendous," she said. "The [transportation] schedule around here is important because the one that existed was antiquated. If they can get something in a busier area, that might change ridership."

O'Sullivan said there are plans to schedule more task force meetings to discuss alternate plans and to stay on top of updates concerning the county's FLEX service. She was also hopeful about the relationship between the task force and Ruiz.

"She was very knowledgeable, and she had good ideas. That was reassuring," O'Sullivan said. "If we get rolling and we do come up with an alternative solution, I think she'll have good ideas and suggestions on how to do it. She's a great asset."