

# **Pullman Transit's Presentation to the Washington State Transportation Commission**

## **Over View of Pullman Transit's Services**

Pullman Transit began service on March 19, 1979 with four 1962 35-foot coaches rented from Spokane Transit and two leased Mercedes mini-buses. Service was offered with two routes and a "General Public" Dial-A-Ride service. The Dial-A-Ride service was converted to "Senior and Special Needs" riders only in 1982. Ridership on the Fixed Routes service our first year was 331,019 rides and grew to a one year total of 1,529,380 rides in 2011, of which WSU students are 85% of the total ridership. Ridership has declined slightly since 2011, but we are still exceeding 1.4 million rides per year. The paratransit service, Dial-A-Ride, since switching to Elderly and Special Needs riders only has grown from 4,950 riders in 1983 to 17,778 riders in 2013.

The systems staffing has gone from thirteen (13) in 1979 to today's current total of forty-eight (48), with thirty two (32) of them being drivers. As the system grew we purchased our first new buses in 1985, until we reached our current fleet level of nineteen (19) 35-foot and 40-foot buses. In 2013 we purchased our first hybrid buses, with a fourth on the way this month. We have six paratransit vans, of which our main five are raised roof full-sized vans, and the other is an 18 passenger mini-bus.

We currently have one 14,300 square foot office and bus parking building, one transfer station, one driver break room/restroom, and twenty five (25) shelters. All the remaining facilities for vehicle maintenance and finance are provided by the City of Pullman, since we are owned by the City.

Pullman Transit has had a great relationship with Washington State University and its students. In 1991 the students passed a measure to allow student fees to be used to help expand Pullman Transit's service and allow students to ride the buses without paying the fare, since the fare was now prepaid. WSU Parking Services also added funds to allow staff and faculty to also ride the buses using the prepaid fare program. Since 1991, both the students and WSU Parking have increased their funding to where today they provide \$1,721,000 annually in financial assistance to aid in Pullman Transit's operations.

## **Funding for the System**

Pullman Transit is funded locally with a 2% utility tax, the only public transit system in the state to fund their operation with this type of tax. With the assistance of WSU and its students, the Pullman School District, and local funds, we still depend on State and Federal operating funds. Even with our strong local support, funding is still unpredictable and not always adequate to

support our system. Due to some funding shortfalls we are facing this year, some minor cutbacks this summer and during the next WSU school year are being planned.

With WSU moving toward a more “Pedestrian Oriented” campus the need for expanded transit service is growing. Without additional funding either from the university, the students, or the community we will soon be in a position where minor cutbacks will become major cutbacks to stay within the existing revenue stream. Neither the community, nor the University and its students can fully support our current operation, and it is only accomplished with the great partnership that exists. If additional local funding cannot be increased it will be likely prove very challenging to WSU’s future plans and the expected community growth.

For the last fourteen years, Pullman Transit has relied on Federal and State grants for operating assistance. While we have been successful in obtaining the needed Federal funding, that funding source seems to have plateaued and is not keeping up with increasing costs. The State funding in the past fourteen years has been very inconsistent. While we are appreciative of any and all State funding it is a very minimal part of our overall revenue, averaging less than 5% of our operating costs.

Prior to 2000 the State provided generous funding for all of the transit systems and even encouraged transit system startups with a pledge of matching funds through the Motor Vehicle Excise Tax. After that went away in 1999, the State has never found a way to replace those lost funds. While the issue is always talked about by the Legislature, and they have offered some funding, it has never been seriously looked at as to how to replace the lost funding we had before 2000. It is imperative that any “Transportation Funding Plan” as was debated by the Legislature in the last two sessions, has to include a sizeable increase in funding for the public transit systems. What was proposed by both parties in the past two discussions on providing transit funding was wholly inadequate and simply not a solution to public transportation providers’ current funding needs.

## **Capital Issues**

Pullman Transit has been very fortunate in getting federal grants for replacing our older buses. However, with the passage of the latest Federal Surface Transportation Act, MAP-21, most of the funding that was once available to the small systems has gone away. We find ourselves in a very difficult position because of this change; we no longer have a reliable source of funding either at the Federal or State level to replace our aging fleet of vehicles and facilities. Pullman Transit has replaced 14 of our 22 buses in the past seven years, but without a reliable funding source we will not be able to replace or update our equipment or facilities.

Right now our need is to replace five more buses, which range in age from 17 years old to 22 years old. Currently, there is no Federal funding available to small systems like Pullman Transit and the State only offers a limited pot of funding, which must be spread across all the small systems in the State. Only the State’s Regional Mobility Grant program has the funding to

possibly allow a system like Pullman Transit to replace its buses, but it comes with conditions. This grant program does allow for bus replacement funding, but only if you replace a smaller bus with a larger bus, like replacing a 35' bus with a 40' bus. For us a one-time request is workable, to purchase 40' buses, but we would be at capacity with 40' buses if we add two more. We do not have a need to replace all of our 35' buses with 40' buses, since much of our service is in residential areas and using larger vehicles in these areas is not feasible. With the costs of a new hybrid bus being over \$650,000 and a standard diesel bus being over \$400,000 there is no way we can buy buses without grant assistance.

For facilities, there is no funding currently available for upgrades or for expansion. The State's Public Transportation Division does not have funding to participate in any new, expansion, or upgrade of any facilities. With the loss of all Federal funding for facilities to small systems there is no outside funding available to upgrade or expand our existing facilities unless it is done with our local funds. While this is doable, it could require service cutbacks or at least no future growth to save our local funds for future facilities growth.

### **Alternative Fuel Issues**

As you know, the State of Washington now has legislation that mandates all public transit systems, "where practicable", to convert to alternative fuels by July 1, 2018. While we agree this is a good start in solving our energy and climate issues, it will be a very difficult change for a small agency like Pullman Transit to accomplish. As noted before we have enough issues in finding funding to replace buses with current technology that will be even harder with these rules in place.

Switching to bio-fuel is feasible during the warmer months of the year, but for us the warmer times of the year are not our busy times. Our service varies dramatically with the WSU school year and during our "Full Service" times when both WSU and the Pullman School District are in session we operate sixteen buses every day. When the schools are on break or during the summer we only operate three or four buses per day. Due to the fact that bio-fuel gels in the winter cold, we will only be able to use this form of fuel when we operate the fewest buses. The use of electric buses, while an excellent alternative, is very expensive and far out of our financial capabilities. CNG is an option, but there is no supplier in our area, so possibly we would be required to build our own filling station.

Since the State has made this mandate, we have not heard if there is going to be any funding made available for making the switch. As far as we can see, this is going to be almost impossible for Pullman Transit to be in compliance after 2018 if we don't have financial help. We understand that the law calls out "Where Practicable" but if it takes ten years to be in compliance will we be challenged or fined because we cannot meet its goal? We are very concerned about this issue and don't know if we can meet the expectations of the law within a reasonable time frame.