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The Gadsden Times

Etowah's public transportation gets a boost

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Public transportation in Gadsden and Etowah County will see new equipment and other improvements from federal stimulus money, local transportation officials said.

The Etowah County Commission on May 19 approved accepting \$440,000 in federal stimulus funds for the county's Rural Area Transportation program. The city of Gadsden will be receiving \$856,964 in stimulus funds, Meinrad Tabengwa, transportation director, said.

Lana Payne, director of Etowah County Rural Transportation, said its stimulus funds will be used to purchase new vans and to have fencing and a shelter built for van storage at the Etowah County Courthouse.

Tabengwa said the city funds will be used to purchase four new, smaller buses that will be painted to look like trolleys.

He said the funds also will be used for permanent structures for terminals — one downtown and one in East Gadsden near the Etowah County Health Department. The new structures will have restrooms.

The stimulus funds can be used only for capital outlay.

Payne said the county funds will be used to purchase six new 14-passenger handicap-accessible vans. The program also is ordering GPS equipment and mapping equipment for each van, which will help in locating addresses.

Payne said the vans now have a designated parking area at the courthouse, but sometimes that parking is taken up by other vehicles.

She said the program has seven vans and three will be replaced, so the program will have a total of 10 vans.

Tabengwa said the city's four new buses will be handicap-accessible and will replace older and larger buses in the fleet.

The older buses are more expensive to operate, city officials said when three smaller buses were purchased late last year at a cost of \$126,000.

Tabengwa said the city will sell the remaining larger trolleys and its entire fleet will

be the smaller buses, which hold about 18 passengers.

"I'm positive it will enhance it," Tabengwa said.

City stimulus funds also will be spent for bus stops, signals and communication equipment, Tabengwa said.

He said ridership for the Gadsden Trolley Co. has remained strong and should increase as gas prices continue to increase. The city might even look at expanding the bus service depending on the results of a transit assessment study.

That study should be completed next month, Tabengwa said.

The city will not use stimulus funds to purchase additional buses for Dial A Ride Transportation, Tabengwa said.

Payne said the Rural Area Transportation program recently expanded to provide transportation for the Smeltzer Center and has a contract with CED Mental Health. It also has a contract with "Access to Care" that provides transportation to doctors' offices for those on Medicare or Medicaid who can't afford transportation. Payne said Rural Area Transportation began working with that program about six weeks ago and is providing about 70 trips a month.

Payne noted that in rural areas it can take 45 minutes to get to a residence and another 45 minutes back to town, not including the time a driver has to wait on a rider to finish what he or she is doing for the return trip. She said additional vans are needed to meet the program's needs.

Those using the program call in advance to schedule a time to be picked up for a trip. The round-trip cost is \$6, and the funds generated go back into supporting the program.

While Dial A Ride covers Gadsden, Payne said, the Rural Area Transportation program covers other parts of Etowah County and can take people from Gadsden to a rural location and back.

The RATS number is 547-1014.

Payne said ridership is increasing as gasoline prices are increasing.

She said the stimulus money also will pay for road signs promoting the Rural Area Transportation System, noting that many people don't know about the program and the services it offers.

