

Star-Telegram

Public bus service keeps rural and urban Johnson County connected

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Colleen Brady was eager to return to her home in Burleson after a long ride from Michigan on Amtrak.

So, instead of asking someone to meet her at the Intermodal Transportation Center in downtown Fort Worth in the middle of the day or enduring a long layover, Brady took advantage of a two-county bus service that would drop her off at the Walmart near her home.

"Instead of waiting two hours for Amtrak to go to Cleburne, I decided to take City/County. It's much cheaper," said Brady, who routinely takes the bus to Fort Worth, a ride that lasts about an hour, to save money on parking downtown.

Brady and a growing number of other Johnson County residents are using the Cletran City/County public bus service to travel to jobs, school, shopping and doctor's appointments in Fort Worth.

In two months, Cletran has gained around 100 new riders a month, and that trend is expected to continue, manager Julie Floyd said.

From October 2010 to October 2011, Cletran logged 36,560 trips. But from Oct. 1 through Dec. 20, the bus service provided 8,609 trips, 620 more than in the same period a year ago. Each time someone boards the bus counts as a trip.

Two years ago, Floyd never thought she would turn down requests for rides. But she said she sometimes can't accommodate all the requests because of the surge of aging baby boomers and others affected by the weak economy seeking a ride on public transit.

"I was surprised by the increase," she said. "I kept track of new clients. In October and November, so many people called in who had not called before." Many of the new riders are from unincorporated areas of the county.

According to the 2010 Census, the population in Johnson County increased 19 percent to 150,934. Since 2000, people 65 and over increased from 10.3 percent to 11.5 percent of the population.

Daily bus service

Cletran, which has 1,903 riders, 492 of whom live in rural Johnson County, offers several options including daily service from Cleburne to Fort Worth.

It also picks up people at their homes in unincorporated Johnson County, in Cleburne and in Burleson south of Farm Road 1187 and takes them to wherever they need to go in Johnson County and to Huguley Hospital in Fort Worth.

The bus service to Fort Worth, which leaves three times a day, stops in Joshua and Burleson before traveling to the Veterans Affairs Clinic at 2201 SE Loop 820 and ending in downtown Fort Worth.

Dan Alsup, who drives a Cletran bus, said he has noticed a steady increase in riders in the past four months.

"I transport a lot of people who are elderly or in wheelchairs. They would be homebound if not for us," he said.

Cletran receives funding from Johnson County and the participating cities as well as from state and federal grants. Floyd said rural transportation grants play a large part in helping Cletran and other providers bring transportation to outlying areas.

There are grants for rural and urban areas, but it's difficult for cities to come up with matching funds because starting up a transit service is very expensive, she said.

"I think it's very fortunate that most rural areas provide transportation. It's the urban areas that are lacking," Floyd said.

Johnson County commissioners recently voted to increase funding to \$52,530 annually for more rural service. County Judge Roger Harmon said the county has been participating since 2002.

"I think it comes down to having the right heart to help people. If they didn't have this transportation, a lot of people wouldn't have a way of getting to and from the grocery store," Harmon said.

Val Lopez, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Transportation office in Fort Worth, said the nine counties in the Fort Worth district provide some type of transportation to Fort Worth, but it is rare to find commuter bus service. Besides Cleburne, Palo Pinto County provides commuter service, he said.

"Cletran has been a tremendous partner in working with us," he said.

Getting to the doctor

Michael Seregamo, a self-employed landscaper who moved from Arlington to Johnson County because of the bad economy, used the bus service to Fort Worth to receive cancer treatments last summer because "the doctors didn't want me driving."

Catching a bus to see his doctors would have been tough if he had stayed in Arlington. Voters in Arlington, commonly referred to as the largest U.S. city without mass transit, rejected public transportation initiatives in 1980, 1985 and 2002. The city also ended its three-year limited commuter bus service with the Fort Worth Transportation Authority last year.

Handitran and the Ride2Work program provide the city's only public transportation.

Seregamo said he got rides with friends to Fort Worth where he could use the city bus system, then rode Cletran back to his home north of Cleburne State Park.

"Cletran definitely fills a need here," he said. "I can see the need in Arlington."

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