



THE TAOS NEWS

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County opts to board regional transit bus

By **Andy Dennison**

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The “blue buses” remain — but the clock is ticking.

In their first major split vote as a board, the Taos County Commissioners officially joined the North Central Regional Transportation District that provides limited bus service in Taos County.

However, the commissioners left themselves an opening to withdraw membership within 75 days, and that decision may hinge upon Santa Fe County’s ongoing debate over withdrawing from the four-county district.

Critical to the success of the regional bus service will be a November tax-increase vote in Taos, Rio Arriba, Los Alamos and possibly Santa Fe counties that would add 1/8th of a cent to the gross receipts tax (GRT) charged on goods and services, except food and prescription medicine.

The tax hike would fund the expansion of bus routes, both in range and frequency — a proposal supported by a survey of its members.

Casting the two dissenting votes, Commissioners Dan Barrone and Nicklos Jaramillo opposed membership at this time. They cited a \$60,000 county contribution that must come from a squeaky-tight 2008-2009 budget and the possibility that Taos County will have to pay for bus service its voters don’t want to pay for.

“It’s an aggregate vote,” said Barrone. “If the voters Taos go against this tax increase but the others vote for it, we are stuck with the tax for 15 years.”

Commissioners Charlie Gonzales, Joe Mike Durán and Gabriel Romero voted for membership into the district.

“This will only happen if we make it happen,” said Gonzales.

Authorized by legislation in 2003, a regional transit district in the state can only use GRTs as a local funding source. Since October, the district has run morning and evening buses from Questa and Peasco to Taos, and from Taos to Española. The initial eight months of service has been funded by a windfall GRT collection in Los Alamos County,

a \$1.2 million federal grant and county contributions. Taos County cost the district \$280,000, according to Josette Lucero, district CEO.

Passengers have paid a fare based on zone, from \$1 to \$3. As of June 2, the district will waive all fares until the end of the year.

Ten governments have already joined the district, including three counties, five pueblos and the cities of Española and Santa Fe. Taos County failed to qualify for membership in 2007 because the commissioners failed to hold a public hearing.

The town of Taos has so far refused to join — although recent statements indicate a change of heart — and the “blue bus” times and routes have been loosely coordinated with the town-run Chile Line.

Santa Fe County commissioners are expected to vote Tuesday (May 27) on a motion to withdraw from the district. Situated in two regional transit districts, county officials are wary of paying twice for public transportation.

If Santa Fe County drops out — and does not hold a GRT hike election — the funding for the entire district will drop from about \$8 million to \$3.5 million.

“If that happens, services will be adjusted,” said Lucero.

Supporters speak up

A standing room-only crowd — replete with election-year candidates — wedged into the commission chambers Tuesday (May 20) to implore the panel to keep the buses running.

From opening comments by Joanne Foreman, the anointed matriarch of public transportation in Taos, to the final 3-2 vote, the audience applauded and cheered as two dozen speakers rose in favor of district membership.

“I have never owned a car and used public transportation all my life,” said Foreman, of Talpa. “As you can see, I haven’t died.”

Petitions from Peasco (434 signatures) and Questa (335 signatures) were presented to the commissioners favoring expanded service.

Speakers from Peasco and Questa told how the bus service brought them to work and to shop in Taos, and how an expansion of service would benefit the economy of the county.

Several students from Roots & Wings Community School in Lama told the commissioners that the bus service to and from their charter school was a money-saver from their parents.

Bob Arellano, an academy head at University of New Mexico-Taos, said that a number of people from the Dixon-Embudo area have been able to return to college because of the buses.

Two speakers cautioned the commissioners about a duplication in services, especially with vans from senior citizen and social service centers.

“We need to local government to coordinate transportation services,” said David Lòpez. “It’s ongoing duplication because we pay through Medicaid.”

The commission will reconvene June 10 and decide, at that time, whether to authorize an election on the sales tax increase in November. If passed, it would add 12.5 cents for every purchase of \$100.

The current rate in Taos County is 6.876 percent.