

West Valley VIEW

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Wheels of change

Avondale to replace bus route with van service

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Avondale is moving forward with a change in its transit system that could increase ridership and thereby the city's chances of landing light rail.

Last week, the City Council gave the go-ahead to eliminate a Phoenix bus route, opting instead for a van service as its replacement.

The addition of a circulator transit system in lieu of Start Route 131 would "really improve the level of transit service to the community, and actually, on a per-mile basis, at a much lower cost," City Manager Charlie McClendon told the council.

Currently, Avondale contracts with Phoenix to operate Start Route 131, a 12-mile route that runs hourly 14 times a day and provides connections to downtown Phoenix and Estrella Mountain Community College.

"Start Route 131 has always operated as a type of circulator that serves the transit-dependent populations of south Avondale," Assistant City Manager Rogene Hill said.

Should Avondale continue its contract with Phoenix, the city could expect to pay \$6.37 per mile, or \$651,302 for service in 2012, Hill said.

A contract with Valley Metro through operator Total Transit would take advantage of four 11-passenger vans, 2009 Eldorado Nationals with approximately 21,000 miles each, donated from Sun City Area Transit.

Total Transit pins the price of a pilot circulator at \$3.60 per mile or \$770,121 in the forthcoming year.

Hill explained that the approximate \$120,000 increase is because of expanded service.



FOUR SMALL VANS, such as this one, will comprise a new circulator transit system in Avondale. Submitted photo

The replacement circulator would run every half hour - from 5:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. weekdays only - on a 14-mile route, hitting 15 different activity centers throughout the city. Avondale would charge 50 cents per ride.

In the face of transit cuts across the state, the new circulator service "will continue to provide connectivity to fixed routes and even greater access to EMCC and other activity centers," including City Center and the 99th Avenue and McDowell Road retail corridor, Hill said.

Commuter options

Aside from expanding service and saving the city money on a per-mile basis, Avondale officials see the modified transit system as a means to increase ridership - and thereby boost the city's chances for landing light rail sometime down the line.

"This transit option supports our future," Hill said. "Unless your community has connectivity and provides other means of people getting to those light rail stations, you're not a good candidate for the light rail project."

A public survey conducted in January of last year, which resulted in 527 responses, revealed the following:

- 69 percent of respondents typically drive alone when traveling to destinations.
- 54 percent of respondents said gas prices influence their decision to use public transit.
- 46 percent of respondents indicated they are more willing to use public transportation when the price of gasoline is between \$3 and \$4 per gallon.

Additionally, 51 percent of those surveyed said the new circulator service was a great idea and that they would use it often; 33 percent said it was a good idea and they would use it occasionally; 13 percent said it was a good idea but they would not use it; and 3 percent said it wasn't needed.

Moreover, a look at monthly ridership in December 2010 shows that Avondale had a total of 11,225 boardings; meanwhile, the East Valley town of Gilbert had 12,219 boardings.

"So, with our smaller city and smaller number of miles, our total boardings are pretty close," Hill said.

And when it comes to daily ridership, "We actually believe with the implementation of the circulator service that those numbers will increase even more, they could even double," Hill said, citing Chandler as an example. "We will have our small buses filled with riders."

Giving the green light

Response from the City Council was overwhelmingly positive.

"This is exciting, it's been a council goal for some time and I wasn't sure if this was to happen in my lifetime," Mayor Marie Lopez Rogers said.

"This is very exciting to have something that we can do and not be forced to take whatever we can get," Vice Mayor Jim McDonald said.

Councilwoman Stephanie Karlin stated her satisfaction with the economic and environmental benefits of the circulator system.

"This also encourages sustainability and reduces our carbon footprint; and the fact that this will cost

less money ... and there's more connectivity and there's less wait, I do kind of see this as a win-win situation," she said.

Councilman Jim Buster touted the circulator as a "creative solution" that "could lead to even greater service if we partner with neighboring cities in the Southwest Valley."

Signaling further approval of the new transit system, which Hill said could potentially be called "SWAT," short for Southwest Area Transit, the Avondale City Council also voted to move ahead with a \$350,000 grant proposal that would help fund it.

"We believe it is timely now to actually implement [this] service," Hill said.

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