

LOCAL

Public Transportation becomes higher priority for commuters

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Approximately 6,000 cars burn fuel out of Cleveland County into Gaston and Charlotte everyday. That is according to Executive Director Tom Crider of the Transportation Authority of Cleveland County (TACC).

The national average for rural states is four dollars. As pointed out in *The New York Times* article "Rural U.S. Takes Worst Hit as Gas tops \$4 Average" from June 9, the sights of trucks abandonedly parked on road sides, some of which require fewer than ten miles a gallon, are becoming signs of the time.

In Gaston County Bill Gary at the Chamber Business Development said, "We have heard some businesses are giving their workers stipends. Also, telecommuting from home has become more of an option for white collar workers."

"The state now pays 50 cents a mile, then it costs you 65 cents. It's \$30 to get to Charlotte," Crider said.

Whether lawyer or manufacturer, men and women are burning their wages to work.

CATS Vanpool

While most of us are spending hundreds a month in gasoline consumption, Benjamin Roberts, of Kings Mountain,

spends no more than \$52.50 a month. Five fellow Norfolk Southern Railroad welders from Spartanburg, SC pick him up in a pre-determined meeting place every work morning.

They are the fourth group to join the Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) "Vanpool" program. In one vehicle there can be nine to 15 passengers. The website says, "CATS covers the cost of gas, maintenance, insurance, and the Guaranteed Ride Home program."

There is also a smaller service called "Minivan Program" which consists of four to seven passengers. Both programs are meant to tailor to the schedule of each groups' needs as far as pick-up and drop-off times. As they do at work, all of Roberts' co-workers take turns driving the 165-mile round trip.

"Gas in the vanpool is decided by mileage between riders," Roberts said. "My position is to collect all the gas money from each guy and write bill statements to CATS."

If an emergency happens, CATS provides two free cab rides a month. They don't spill over into the next month if one of the travel-members doesn't use theirs.

"The system works well when you have people working at the same place. It saves money per month," Roberts stated.

The one negative for Roberts is that he has to arrive home a

little later because people have to be dropped off.

Interested commuters can log onto the CATS website and go to the vanpool calculator in which they can determine the cost per person. Right now there are six to seven vans and 42 people on a Vanpool waiting list.

Roberts says, "My wife drives 36 miles round-trip to Gastonia. Gas prices and everything are going up. It's gonna be really bad when people can't afford to go to work."

A KM link to light rail?

In November 2001 a Transit Study was presented by the Urban Land Institute and Business Community for Regional Studies. They suggested the study of five major corridors to Charlotte. ULI looked into Gaston, North Mecklenberg, Cabarrus, Cleveland, and York (SC) counties.

Plans for Cleveland were categorized under the West Corridor. It aimed to "link to the rail terminus in Kings Mountain."

The study continued in the hands of a Gaston Transit Study and Lake Norman Rural Planning Organization led by planner and transportation manager, Bjorn Hansen.

"The Gaston MPO did a major investment study looking at some sort of transit to Gastonia which did not go all

the way to Cleveland County," said Hansen.

However multiple studies, mainly the "Gastonia Transit Expansion Study," include Kings Mountain because it sits on the border of Gaston and Cleveland. The later above mentioned document stated, "Kings Mountain could be a destination for express service."

But such is talk.

"There's nothing right now I'm aware of with money behind it going West of Charlotte. We (Lake Norman RPO) want to show bus service before a fixed light rail," said Hansen.

Although TACC, non-profit transportation organization in Shelby, provides daily van rides to Charlotte and Gastonia. It's mostly for senior citizens who need to make appointments.

"We're getting a higher demand from younger people who want new means of transportation," Crider said.

While the West Corridor mentioned expansion to Kings Mountain, Crider states that the Cleveland Transportation Partnership hasn't been meeting until, according to Crider, a recent kick-off conference.

"There has been a problem with membership so there hasn't been representation enough to the Lake Norman RPO. And the West Corridor died because no one thought it was possible," Hansen said.

They are starting again, and

Crider is writing a grant request from the County to the state for more public traveling funds. He states that it will not be enough to produce a lot of transportation, but it is a beginning seed. He'd like to see something on the road, assuming the grant goes through, by next January or February.

He is thinking about a van which would act as a transfer to the Gastonia transit which goes into Charlotte. Riders would have to pay a fair, but they can buy a weekly or monthly voucher. If a van plan succeeds, Crider hopes that a reduction-transfer fee can be provided to riders who go from Kings Mountain to Gastonia.

"I don't think Charlotte and Gaston County plan to come here so we have to go to them," Crider said.

"A fundamental transformation in this country is going to take place," Gary said.

NC has a 2009-2015 plan to improve travel. By means of trains, bikes, and buses there are 510 projects statewide. The overall expenditure is more than \$13 billion dollars.

"Rural U.S Takes Worst Hit as Gas Tops \$4 average" from *The New York Times* also stated that families in the rural Southeast are spending almost as much on fuel as for groceries. Perhaps a bus voucher or vanpool could now be the new meaning of keeping food on the families plate.

KM YMCA working toward \$3.6 million renovations

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The Kings Mountain YMCA has a \$3.6 million plan set for renovations. Y Executive Director David Ozmore says that his team is in the process of working on a contract with the city, which provides a framework to continue their partnership for 20 years. The family and sports-oriented facility offer to maintain the annual stipend of \$300,000 from KM for their program.

The catch for the Y to continue the same pricing is that KM has to split renovation payment.

The mission, originally plotted in December 2007, was presented to Mayor Rick

Murphrey in March then to council in May, but the city ruled that there wasn't enough room in the '08 budget. To begin production, Ozmore hopes that council will have room next May.

"It's (the renovation plans) working through all of the right channels," Ozmore said.

Of the top featured changes is a water park. It will be in addition to the current pool.

"We will remove the current baby pool and build the 'zero depth' entry pool to include a large slide, dumping buckets, sprays, mushrooms, baby bungee, etc.," added Ozmore.

The hope is to still teach swim lessons and have recreational swim in the large pool.

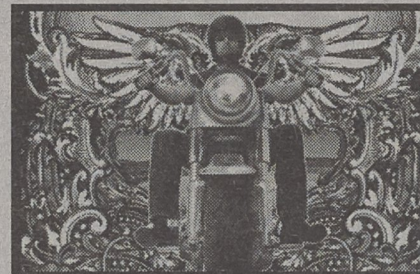
"We will also serve many

more small children and families in the addition," Ozmore stated.

In the next three weeks, Ozmore plans to meet and work with with the city manager and lawyer. He feels that both parties are comfortable with the spirit of the contract, and that the city likes what the Y has done in the past.

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