

Cuts in bus service strand many

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By Michele Mihalovich

A difficult financial decision has left many in the lower Snoqualmie Valley without a ride.

Snoqualmie Valley Transportation, a unique service that allows people to call in and schedule a ride, ceased lower Valley operations Sept. 21, said B.J. Libby, who oversees the nonprofit service as the executive director of Mount Si Senior Center in North Bend.

“This was a very difficult, emotional decision for me,” Libby said. “Three valued employees lost their jobs, and our valued customers lost their ride.”

The bus service, which began in 2003, initially catered to senior citizens and the disabled, and mostly served the upper Valley, said Libby.

But in recent years, it expanded to include service to all citizens and to people who live in Carnation, Duvall and Monroe.

Alec Lebed, 63, is one of the nearly 11,000 people in the lower Valley who last year depended on the service.

Lebed, who has been diagnosed with cancer, lives a mile and a half outside Carnation.

“I sold my vehicles years ago,” he said. “I need to get to town to go to the grocery store and the post office. Now, I can’t get there. Stopping those buses is just going to be devastating to so many people.”

Libby said the bus riders come from the lower Valley to North Bend and Snoqualmie to go to grocery stores, doctor’s appointments, banks, the senior center, pharmacies, restaurants, the outlet mall, job training, Mount Si Food Bank or just to visit friends. Last year, the seven buses picked up 40,000 people.

Libby said she understands how much the communities rely on the buses, but that the money just wasn’t there to continue the rural service to lower Valley towns.

The Snoqualmie Tribe had been receiving a federal grant for about \$250,000 to go toward the three buses that serve the lower Valley.

Matt Mattson, Snoqualmie tribal administrator, said that when the tribe didn't get the grant recently, the Tribal Council agreed that the program was important, and they cut funds from other programs so that they could contribute \$125,000 to SVT.

Libby said the Snoqualmie Tribe has always been SVT's biggest benefactor, and "they graciously agreed to continue funding SVT out of their own funds, although at the reduced rate."

She said that two buses requiring unforeseen high maintenance costs and the skyrocketing price of diesel fuel forced her to cut the service in order to stay within budget.

Libby said she has submitted a grant application to the Puget Sound Regional Council and Washington State Department of Transportation that would cover the full costs of running SVT for two years, which comes to \$1.352 million.

"It's a highly competitive grant, and I won't know anything until April of next year," she said.

North Bend Mayor Ken Hearing, Snoqualmie Mayor Matt Larson and mayors and city administrators from the affected lower Valley area met Oct. 3 to discuss the situation.

Most bothersome, Hearing said, was the lack of notice to the affected cities.

"The mayors in those towns were getting complaints about this from their citizens, but they had no idea what they were talking about. If we had been notified beforehand about the financial situation, maybe we could have helped," Hearing said.

He said he plans to talk to Libby to find out what funding "dried up. This service is particularly important. The lower Valley doesn't have much Metro services available, and this will leave them high and dry."

Hearing did say there are grants available out there that could help, and that the city of North Bend would definitely write a letter of support for the Puget Sound Regional Council Grant that SVT applied to.

Mattson said the tribe would be interested in contributing more to SVT if the other governments say the program is important to their communities, and are willing to help out with funding as well.