

SNOQUALMIE VALLEY RECORD

Keep it rolling: Valley's bus system finds ways to run smart, stay for the long haul



Carol Ladwig/Staff Photo

Snoqualmie Valley Transportation driver Colleen DeVine is, like all of the drivers of this grant-funded, Mount Si Senior Center-based service that's now in transformation, ready to help riders get on board and get where they're going.

FEBRUARY 6, 2013 · UPDATED 4:27 PM

Bus driver Colleen DeVine has an almost-new ride today. She's filling in for another Snoqualmie Valley Transportation driver, and slowly getting used to the different shuttle when she notices the mileage.

"It's got only 86,000 miles on it!" she said, surprised. In contrast, the shuttle DeVine usually drives had about 190,000 miles, last she checked.

The miles have really added up for Snoqualmie Valley Transportation, now in its 10th year of operation, and with some luck and possibly some new funding partners, the odometers will keep turning for years to come.

Snoqualmie Valley Transportation is the local bus service that, until last fall, carried riders up and down the valley, covering some 650 square miles, for 50 cents a ride. In September, though, SVT lost funding for about a fourth of the year's \$900,000 a budget, a federal grant the Snoqualmie Tribe usually received and then passed on to the service. SVT was less than halfway through its fiscal year, which ends in June.

"That's when I knew I'd have to make cuts. I didn't have a choice," said BJ Libby, executive director of the Mount Si Senior Center, and with it, SVT.

Fares went up to \$1, the service area was reduced to the Upper Valley, and ridership was restricted in a separate, but related, change that affected local students the most.

Not a school bus

"We were running out of money," Libby said, so she appealed to the Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT), both for additional funding and for technical assistance, to find ways to make the service more efficient. WSDOT has granted SVT a total of \$175,000, a two-year grant of \$125,000 plus an additional \$50,000 to make up for the lost federal funding—the Tribal Council also committed to \$125,000 for the service. The agency also told Libby she couldn't give students rides to school any more, if she wanted to continue receiving federal funds.

According to the terms of the grants, "If there are yellow buses in a driveway, our buses cannot go in that driveway," Libby explained.

A majority of students didn't notice the change, but several attending the Two Rivers alternative school suddenly found themselves without a way to get to school. Another group of students affected were those attending the district's Transitional Learning Center, many of whom used SVT to get to their jobs at the senior center after class.

For both of these groups, Libby said, she wanted to suggest new options to replace the SVT buses. She said she gave administrators at Two Rivers School the specific Metro bus numbers and routes that students could use, and suggested a Metro Vanpool. Metro auditors, she said, suggested another possibility. "If they could give me three documents that showed that they tried to get transportation funding at their school... then we could revisit the policy," Libby said.

The auditors also told her "closing down the Two Rivers school was the right choice, because clearly we were not in compliance with our grant money."

For TLC students, Libby arranged for an alternate pickup spot, so students could still come to work. Both students and staff use the bus, although Libby noted that school staffers could get a ride to and from school buildings on SVT, just not students.

Many riders, many reasons

SVT doesn't track rider demographics, so there is no "typical" rider, but many of the passengers on DeVine's bus the morning she subbed were seniors, going to or from the center to volunteer, run errands, eat and socialize. Most of them relied on the bus service.

Among them were Karen and Lloyd Peterson, Fall City residents for more than 30 years. They visit the senior center almost every day, Karen said, and always by bus.

“I never learned to drive,” she said, and Lloyd can’t drive any more for medical reasons, “so we’re left with public transportation.”

They use the county Metro service, too, and stay current on what’s happening with that service, she said.

“That’s our only transportation. That’s why, when they have a meeting, we’re there.”

Cleo Krenzler stopped driving about a year ago, when she was diagnosed with macular degeneration in both eyes.

“I parked my car over at my daughter’s in Snoqualmie,” she said, and now takes the bus to and from her volunteer work at the senior center every day.

Without the shuttle, she says, she wouldn’t be able to get around. “There’s no way,” she said. “If we didn’t have the shuttle, people would not be able to get to their appointments, they would not be able to come to the senior center. Most of them don’t have cars.”

Funding challenges do make the future of SVT a little murky, but Libby is excited about the changes that have already been made, and about the new leadership within the service. Amy Biggs, now a volunteer and dedicated transportation advocate, will take over the management of SVT in its next fiscal year starting July 1.

“My goal is to figure out creative ways to use the transportation money that we have, and get the community more involved in long-term transportation planning and goals,” says Biggs.

To that end, she has introduced a new scheduling system to the service. In the past, anyone in the service area could call for an appointment, three days ahead of time, ideally, and ask for a pickup or delivery at a specific time. Within 15 to 30 minute windows, they got picked up at their doors, and delivered to the door of their destinations.

It was very convenient for riders, but chaotic for drivers, who often met other buses at a location, and rarely had more than one or two passengers at a time. Some riders, like Karen Peterson, disliked the unpredictability of the service, too.

“You have to book a ride and it’s not on a route, and I like it being on a route, . . . because you know where the bus is going to be,” she said.

Routing, not scheduling

Under the new scheduling system, riders are consolidated into routes, but the routes change every day.

“We’re not scheduling any more, we’re routing says Biggs.”

Instead of picking up each person at the requested time, Biggs said, the schedulers will find out who else is going to the same place, and negotiate a window of time that works for all of them.

“It actually means routing every single day, creating a new system every day,” Biggs said, but it has already paid off in reduced run time for the service’s four remaining buses, down from seven. Fuel costs changed dramatically, too, in the first month of implementation, dropping from a monthly average of \$8,000 to about \$2,600.

Another change is the creation of a “circulator bus,” part of what Biggs calls a hub and spoke system. One bus stays in downtown Snoqualmie, picking up passengers at a central location and delivering them to their in-city destinations, leaving the other buses to pick up passengers from more remote parts of the service area.

Together, the changes have resulted in longer waits for passengers at times, and ridership has declined, Biggs said. She’s confident, though, that it will rebound as they continue to improve on the SVT service.

One of her other goals is to create mobility centers, “...physical locations where SVT can work with Metro,” she explained. “There’s a lot of options that Metro provides that are just wonderful, and people don’t even know about them.”

Although Metro has stated that it’s considering outsourcing some Valley bus services to SVT through a contracting agreement, Biggs was unable to talk about the conversation.

Biggs will find out in April how much WSDOT will contribute to the next two-year cycle of SVT—she asked for \$1.3 million—but is not waiting around to find other funding sources.

“We’re looking for business partners right now to assist in funding,” she said. “We haven’t crystallized this plan yet,” but she thinks it will involve some type of on-bus or in-bus advertising.

Learn about Metro’s future plans, 7 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 7 at Cherry Valley Elementary School in Duvall, or Monday, Feb. 11 at Chief Kanim Middle School. Or, visit metro.kingcounty.gov.

Learn more about SVT at www.mtsi-seniorcenter.org/svt.html.



Seth Truscott/Staff Photo

The view from the SVT shuttle, making its rounds between North Bend and Snoqualmie.