

Englewood: Close the transportation gap

GAP

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ENGLEWOOD — Residents, seasonal renters and business owners made it clear to public officials there's a huge need for expanded bus transportation that will cross county lines in Englewood.

A standing-room-only crowd gathered Wednesday for a Sarasota County Area Transit-sponsored public workshop at the Englewood Chamber of Commerce. Also at the meeting was Richard Kolar, senior manager of the Transit and Fleet for Charlotte County.

SCAT is asking for public input for recommendations for a Comprehensive Operations Analysis. The feedback will help with proposed changes for Sarasota County Commissioners to consider.

Currently, SCAT has Englewood routes Monday through Saturday.

Charlotte County has a curb-to-curb service in Englewood, Punta Gorda and Port Charlotte. However, riders must call 24 to 48 hours in advance to schedule a ride.

Many don't feel that is adequate.

A property manager at Grove City Manor, an independent living community for primarily low-income seniors, said the Charlotte County

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curb service sometimes runs an hour late.

She said some of the residents there miss doctor's appointments because the bus is so late.

Kolar said he would work with her to fix that issue.

Elaine Miller, chair of the Transportation Task Team in Englewood, asked the group — which was evenly split with residents from Sarasota

and Charlotte counties — what routes they would like to see expanded in Englewood.

The majority said they wanted Charlotte and Sarasota county officials to work together. The main routes they wanted would take people from the mainland to the public beaches on Manasota Key.

Most liked the idea of having people park at the empty public parking spaces near the Dearborn Street business district and Pioneer Park. Then they could take a SCAT bus from Dearborn to Manasota and Middle beaches.

Another bus from Charlotte County could take riders from Dearborn Street to Englewood Beach and Stump Pass Beach State Park, on the southern end of Manasota Key.

The group said this would allow for businesses in Old Englewood to prosper while helping to reduce the number of motorists searching for parking at all local beaches.

The group also agreed the bus should run later in the evening, perhaps to 11 p.m., so workers could have transportation from the restaurants near the public beach.

Participants also said the Englewood YMCA, Tringali Recreation Center and Englewood Community Hospital (from the Charlotte County side) would be good places for bus service, as well as Walmart and other shopping centers.

One woman said a proposed bus service would only create “more traffic” because people would see others using the bus so they would drive to the beach.

A Manasota Beach resident said there needs to be a bus from Englewood to Punta Gorda, so residents could enjoy attractions on the other side of Charlotte County.

Kolar said there’s a major obstacle for the Charlotte County transportation system.

He has more buses than bus drivers.

“Of 10 bus driver candidates we had, only one lasted longer than two or three months,” he said.

“We are facing a real shortage of drivers.

If you know anyone who wants to drive a bus and is willing to stay a while, please call us. We would be willing to house buses at San Casa (on county property in Englewood) if we could find local drivers. This way they wouldn’t have to drive to the hub in Punta Gorda every day. I could even propose new routes if we had drivers.”

Another challenge is not enough people know about the curbside program, Kolar said, adding that he admits the department hasn’t gotten the word out about Charlotte County’s transportation opportunities. He said he’s open to talking about a beach route but would likely use a

smaller bus at first.

Sarasota County officials say changes could be considered based on funding availability and reassignment of other routes.

All information will be compiled by the Englewood chamber before May 1 and submitted to SCAT.

Sarasota County Commissioners will review any proposed routes.

David Wertman, program administrator for the North Port Health Department, said there are 3,500 patients using the facility with about 1,000 from Englewood.

He said there needs to be a better relationship between transportation coordinators where buses can cross over county lines to get patients to the North Port facility.

“We don’t want this window of opportunity to escape,” Miller said.

“We will be compiling all information and getting to Sarasota County before the deadline.”

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— **Elaine Miller, Transportation Task Team in Englewood chairperson**



Could Sarasota County’s bus system help alleviate parking problems at Englewood Beach, even though the beach is in Charlotte County? That was one topic that was explored at a transportation and parking meeting Wednesday in Englewood.

FILE PHOTO



A full house greeted county officials Wednesday as they arrived at the Englewood Florida Chamber of Commerce offices to discuss

transportation and parking at Englewood's public beaches.

SUN PHOTO BY ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH