

Cooperating to get across the county line

OUR VIEW

OUR POSITION: *One town, two bus services.*

A decade ago, a coalition of Englewood residents led by the late Dr. Bill Coy met regularly over the course of years to figure out a way to establish fixed-route public bus service across the county line in Englewood.

Coy wasn't successful during his lifetime, and the focused effort eventually petered out.

But a related initiative has emerged, this time under the umbrella of the Englewood Florida Chamber of Commerce, and this may have more promise.

At a public workshop last week, the chamber's Transportation Task Force addressed the possibility of running some sort of bus service — with regular buses, trolleys or small shuttles — from Sarasota County-Englewood to Charlotte County-Englewood and back.

The town is split between the two counties. Sarasota has an extensive (and relatively expensive) fixed-route bus system; Charlotte has, so far, avoided a fixed-route system, relying instead on a door-to-door, call-and-ride service.

The result is, Sarasota's regular buses travel close to the county line and loop back.

That means would-be passengers can't ride from North Englewood, Dearborn Street, the Englewood Family YMCA and Englewood Community Hospital across the county line to Englewood Beach, Manasota Key, Walmart, Charlotte County's government offices or the pool and recreation park on San Casa Drive.

It was the hope of Coy, et al., to extend routes primarily to serve people lacking transportation: the young, the old and the poor.

But another problem has grown in recent years: the parking crunch at Charlotte County's Englewood Beach and other parts of Manasota Key.

Many of those at the workshop favored a system that could take workers and others to the parking-starved beach and restaurants and back. One idea was to use public parking lots on Dearborn Street as pickup and drop-off spots.

Note that the two counties took a stab at a similar issue three years ago when they studied the possibility of cross-boundary bus service between North Port (in Sarasota County) and Port Charlotte (in Charlotte). There was general enthusiasm for the idea at that time — it seemed to gather more steam than the Coy-led effort of previous years in Englewood.

Eventually, though, it came to a halt when Charlotte County commissioners balked at the potential costs of fixed-route service.

Still, the concept has merit, and we hope it will gain momentum as the chamber and county governments continue to investigate the idea.

Parking at Englewood Beach will only become a larger problem in years to come. It only seems a matter of time before some type of shuttle/trolley system from the mainland to Manasota Key is necessary. And years after Coy's group first pressed the issue, there remains the social concern of better mobility for the transportation-impaired.

There may be creative ways to accomplish the goal, a solution that is economical and sustainable, even a pilot project with limited scope. It must seem silly to most people that fixed bus routes can't cross the magical county line within the same town and bring people to attractions on either side.