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High demand has Arlington job-transit service running on fumes

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About 100 lower-income Arlington residents who depend on a lift from the city's Ride 2 Work program may have to find other transportation beginning March 1.

The program's success in attracting people who need rides to their work, job interviews or job training is draining its federal grant ahead of schedule, leaving the city staff to scramble for more money.

"Nothing like this has been undertaken in Arlington," said Lyndsay Mitchell, a project manager in the Community Development and Planning Department who launched the program almost a year ago and hoped that the initial matching grant funding of about \$200,000 would last two years.

"But the program has been so popular and so well-used that we have been using our share faster than we anticipated," she said.

The city used federal Community Development Block Grants to match part of a \$374,000 job-access grant from the Federal Transit Administration. Assuming that the grant was fully matched, it was first projected to fund the service through the end of 2014. Mitchell has now shortened that estimate by several months.

Meanwhile, she is working to get an additional \$60,000 to extend the program through July 1 while longer-term arrangements are explored.

Exceeding the forecast

The city, which contracts with the American Red Cross to provide the transportation, projected 3,500 one-way trips this year. But by the end of November, the program had logged 5,000 rides.

Mitchell said 60 people are on the waiting list.

The city needed to use part of the startup money to buy two 12-passenger vans, which Red Cross drivers use to ferry an average of 25 riders per day. The riders pay \$2 per one-way trip.

The need for Ride 2 Work and other transportation efforts is obvious to Tillie Burgin, executive director of Mission Arlington, one of several organizations that refer people in need of job-related rides to the city-managed program. The mission also provides car rides and gives bicycles to people who can pedal their way to work.

"I know people who walk from the north side of the city to the southwest side to get to their jobs," Burgin said. "This is a good program."

Vital for employment

Moderate-income people are eligible for the Ride 2 Work program, but Mitchell said about 85 of her 100 regular and occasional customers have incomes below the poverty level of \$22,350 a year for a family of four.

The Red Cross runs a similar work-ride program for Hurst-Euless-Bedford, along with a half-dozen other shuttle programs in Tarrant County, said Leah Schumann, transportation manager for the Red Cross.

It's not enough, she said.

"It's very important being able to find employment," Schumann said. "But it's also important having transportation to get to that job."

Ride 2 Work's grant still has about \$270,000 available for matching. Mitchell has applied to 12 other private foundations and organizations for grants and has received rejections from four so far.

Individuals or groups wanting to contribute can contact her at 817-459-6653.

Ideally, she said, the program would develop a support network that could sustain it after the matching grant runs out.

"It's a long shot," she said. "But that would be the hope."

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