

# **Transit Committee Looks For Money**

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**SPRINGDALE** — An advisory board for Ozark Regional Transit considered Wednesday how to finance the system that faces budget restrictions.

The group, which decided to call itself Advocates for Public Transit at its last meeting, learned of funding options used by transit systems across the country.

“What we plan today is what we will have 30 years from now,” said Jerre Van Hoose, honorary chairman of the advisory committee. “Once we plan, we have to figure out a way to make it happen.”

“The big issue is operations,” said Jeff Hawkins, executive director of Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning. “There are grants for capital expenses, like buying buses. There is no pot of money out there for operations.”

The changes are a result of the growing population in Northwest Arkansas. The population projection for the 2010 U.S. Census top 200,000 in Northwest Arkansas.

Once an urban area grows larger than 200,000, money from the Federal Transit Administration switches from operational costs to capital and preventive maintenance. In the Ozark Regional Transit budget, 60 percent of its operational budget, \$750,000, would be affected.

The system needs a boost in funding, not a replacement said Phil Pumphrey, executive director of Ozark Transit.

“We can do nothing and end up with a couple of buses and no fixed routes,” Pumphrey said. “We can replace funds at the current levels and keep an inadequate system that doesn’t reflect the growth in the area over the last years.”

The best method is to plan for the future by fixing the problem and find a dedicated money source, Pumphrey said.

The system came from nowhere to where it is today, said Jerry Hunton, committee member and former chairman of the transit system board of directors. To advance, the board has to convince people to make it a priority, he said.

“We need people to keep their little red truck in the driveway and ride the system,” Hunton said.

**A dedicated sales tax approved by voters is the method Hunton recommended.**

**Other committee members pointed to obstacles in the path approving a tax.**

**“We have to convince people what they will be getting is worthwhile,” said Nancy Hairston, of Youth Bridge.**

**“We need to get support from people who believe they will never use the system,” said Springdale Mayor Doug Sprouse.**

**The problem is big but not insurmountable, Pumphrey said.**

**“Over 90 percent of the people in the area don’t ride the system, but over 50 percent would support a tax for a transit system,” Pumphrey said.**

**The figures came from a poll by the University of Arkansas Survey Research Center. Questions concerning regional transit have been included in the last three annual polls, said Molly Longstreth, director of the center.**

**The 2009 poll shows 89 percent of the Washington County participants said a transit system was important or very important. In Benton County, 84 percent supported a transit system, Longstreth said.**

**Sixty percent of Washington County residents in the poll would support a dedicated sales tax with 54 percent in Benton County supporting a tax. Approval is higher when those participating are told the tax would replace federal money that has been lost.**

**The group, at its next meeting in February, needs to decide what funding method it would support, Pumphrey said.**

**“Our budget has improved slightly over the last 20 years, but not as much as similarly sized communities,” Pumphrey said. “We need to know if people want a great system, a good system or none at all.”**