

Fox Cities leaders push for flexibility on bus service

Dec. 20, 2013 |



Fox Valley political and business leaders are pushing for state approval of a bill that would allow the creation of regional transit authorities to help fund services like Valley Transit. / Dan Powers/The Post-Crescent
Written by

Nick Penzenstadler
Post-Crescent Media

MADISON — Bus riders in the Fox Cities could be saddled with higher fares and fewer ride options if the state doesn't allow communities to create regional transit authorities, local leaders told a state Senate committee Thursday.

"Without reliable transportation your ability to hold a job is compromised," said Peter Kelly, president and CEO of United Way Fox Cities.

Kelly and Fox Cities nonprofit leaders, technical college representatives, elected officials and business groups implored legislators to approve regional transit authorities,

which have the ability to levy up to a 0.5 percent sales tax in communities that vote to join the program.

“This bill is key to providing mobility to a group of people in our population struggling to become self-sufficient,” said Sen. Mike Ellis, a Neenah Republican who is pushing the bill with support from Appleton Democratic Rep. Penny Bernard Schaber.

A referendum requirement was added to the bill to allay concerns by Republicans that regional transit authorities have taxing authority without any check on their powers by voters.

“For those that say this gives taxing authority to an unelected board, nothing could be further from the truth,” Ellis said. “Each community that wants to participate would have to vote yes in a referendum.”

Hole in budget

The need for more funding came after the 2010 Census that put the Fox Cities over a 200,000-person cap for transit funding.

Deborah Wetter, the bus service’s general manager, said the organization is in danger of losing about \$1.5 million a year plus capital funding for new buses.

“Valley Transit has an aging fleet with many buses that have more than 1 million miles and were purchased in 1994,” Wetter said. “If we don’t have a new model, the only options are to cut service or increase fares. Our \$1.80 fare is already among the highest in the state.”

Senators on the panel pressed supporters of the bill for other options that may have been explored to raise funds. Technically, Appleton or other municipalities could raise property tax by a referendum for the transit needs.

Mayor Tim Hanna railed against that idea — citing a delicate balance among 21 funding partners that rely on the service in the Valley. He also said a new authority would allow a voice to be heard from each group.

“Our funding comes from all the cities in the Valley, all the villages and many of the towns,” Hanna said. “Appleton doesn’t have its own economy, neither does Neenah or Menasha, we’re together in a regional economy.”

GOP opposes new tax

Speakers at Thursday’s hearing were repeatedly questioned by the Republican members of the transportation commission: Sen. Joe Leibham, R-Sheboygan, and Sen. Robert Cowles, R-Allouez.

Cowles said he’s concerned about the tax needs and the discrepancy between the bill which allows up to 0.5 and the request from transit leaders say it would be closer to 0.2 percent.

“The 0.5 percent would generate close to \$16 million, as opposed to this \$2 million shortfall,” Cowles said. “That seems to be opening a pretty big door.”

Outagamie County has a sales tax of 5 percent, opting not to add extra taxing for revenue, as allowed by state law. The new authority could cover communities in Calumet and Winnebago counties.

Leibham pressed Hanna on guarding against “opening the box” to a bevy of authorities to fund special issues like libraries, tourism or other needs. He also expressed concern among small business owners for adding the tax.

“How do you keep control on this? I’m worried that every issue or thing could end up getting a tax,” Leibham said.

Ellis, who holds considerable sway in the Senate as its president, vowed to visit each committee members’ office to lobby for the bill — and get a vote early in January.

The bill also has support from the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce and Industry, despite some reservations about the added tax, said Thom Ciske, the group’s vice president of government affairs.

“We support the RTA... we’d like to see the vehicle put in place to help fund transit, and we can argue about the details when the time comes,” Ciske said.