

October 7, 2009

Memo to: Transportation Study Committee

From: Claudette Sortino

Subject: Interview with Mary Grant, NEK Rural Community Transportation

The Northeast Kingdom Rural Community Transportation (RCT) provides all modes of transportation including buses, vans, cars, volunteer drivers, rideshares, and van pools. The passengers come from several programs including Medicaid-eligible residents needing transportation for medical services, as well as the elderly and disabled who might need to go shopping or visit a physician's office. RCT also provides transportation for eligible veterans needing services at the VA hospital in White River Junction or at the Littleton NH satellite office. The mission of Rural Community Transportation is to encourage the use of public transportation through the provision of coordinated transportation services for those who are eligible. There are similar operations in other regions of Vermont.

RCT is a private, non-profit organization incorporated in 1991 and created through a grant from the Federal Urban Mass Transportation Administration to coordinate Medicaid transportation services. It eventually expanded into the Northeast Kingdom and began including other categories of passengers as listed above. RCT raises about 10% of its funds locally which opens the door to both state and federal funds. An "earmark" included in the federal budget by Senator Sanders a couple of years ago resulted in the acquisition of 5 vans and one bus, all of which were critically needed.

The demand for services from RCT increases during a bad economy. Some of the elderly cannot afford to keep their cars in good repair or pay for the gasoline. Given that they qualify for RCT services, they take more advantage. The same applies to Medicaid recipients.

NEK RCT relies on volunteer drivers to provide transportation for those in need. Ideally they would have more routes run by vans or buses but right now they only have two: one from Newport to Derby Line and one from St. Johnsbury to Lyndonville. The rural nature of the regions causes more dependence on the volunteers who use their own cars to transport clients. They receive 54 cents per mile. Many of the volunteer drivers need the mileage fee to help them keep their own cars going.

The most pressing issue for RCT is that volunteer drivers are often being told by their automobile insurance companies that they must pay more because of the driving they do for RCT. The insurance companies claim this driving classifies them as a business because they create additional liability for the insurance company if something untoward occurs.

In 1997 President Clinton signed into law the Volunteer Protection Act of 1997 that provides immunity from tort claims that might be filed against volunteers of nonprofit organizations. The federal legislation had to be adopted by each state in order to become effective in that state. Vermont has not done that while both Maine and New Hampshire have. RCT is working with Rep. Warren Kitzmiller, Chair of the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development, who is attempting to get legislation passed in Montpelier that would put the volunteer drivers under the protection of the federal law. Without this change, volunteer drivers will stop driving and given that they are the major source of transportation for those who qualify for rides, a severe reduction in the ability of RTC to fulfill its mandate will occur.

Rural transportation for the disabled, elderly, and indigent is necessary so that people can keep their medical appointments and do necessary shopping for food and medicine. It is a vital component of transportation in states like Vermont and should be maintained and enhanced if possible.