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Sunday bus service in the works for Wyandotte County

By BRAD COOPER
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Life can be hard when you rely on the bus to get around.

It can be even harder when the bus you need doesn't run when you need it.

Such is the case in Wyandotte County, where many transit-dependent residents want — and need — bus service on Sundays.

"Just because it's Sunday doesn't mean people stop getting out and about," said Quincy Phillips, who rides the bus daily from Wyandotte County to his customer service job in Mission.

"They want to ride the bus more than just going to work. People still want to go out to the Legends or Village West. You can't do anything on Sunday without the bus," Phillips said.

But there soon could be a bus on the way.

Transit planners are targeting October for the start of Sunday bus service, thanks to a federal grant aimed at reducing air pollution.

There are still some administrative hurdles that need to be cleared before the service can start.

The Sunday service is what's described as a "demonstration project," meaning it's essentially only a short-term test with no longstanding financial commitment after the grant runs out in a couple of years.

It would be left to the Unified Government to find a way to sustain the service — if it wanted to — after the grant money ran out.

Marcia Bernard, the Unified Government's transit manager, said the experimental service would be offered on a route connecting downtown to the Village West entertainment district and shopping complex.

"What an opportunity," she said of the experiment.

Overall, Wyandotte County tentatively has been approved for \$1.7 million that would help pay for the new Sunday service as well as enhanced bus service between downtown and the Village West entertainment and shopping district.

The money is for bus service in fiscal years 2009-2010. But full funding is still uncertain, since it's not known whether Congress will fund the grant program at the same level in 2010 as it's expected to do in 2009.

A bulk of that money — about \$1.3 million — would go toward enhanced bus service on weekdays and weekends along State Avenue.

The enhanced service could be the precursor of a new express route — known as bus rapid transit — proposed for the 13-mile corridor between downtown and Village West.

Among other things, transit planners are looking to make the existing route more direct and continuous so that riders won't have to transfer at the old Indian Springs mall. They also would like to improve bus frequency along the route.

By making the existing trip less circuitous, planners hope to cut 15 minutes off the hour it takes to ride from the corner of 10th and Main streets downtown to Village West.

Eventually they hope a bus rapid transit line will slice 30 minutes off the trip.

Just how various stops will be affected, like those at Providence Medical Center or Kansas City Kansas Community College, is unknown.

While any transit improvements are important in Wyandotte County, it's the Sunday service that stands to make a big splash with riders.

A 2007 survey showed that Sunday was the hardest day to get to work for low-income and disabled people. Sunday bus service was one of the most common suggestions.

"I work on Sundays, and there's no bus," said David Douglas, a Kansas City, Kan., resident who often turns to friends or family for a lift to work at Union Station.

Douglas said he pays a friend \$10 to take him to work to cover the cost of gas. A bus ride would be more affordable, not to mention he wouldn't have to impose on family and friends.

"It hurts my pocketbook, but what can I do?" Douglas said.

The Sunday service can't come soon enough for Clarke Byron, executive director of the Coalition for Independence, a nonprofit group that serves the disabled.

"It's coming a lot sooner than I thought it was," Byron said. "It just seemed like it was never ever going to happen. Now I can see some tangible strides in the right direction for transit-dependent people."

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