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Wednesday, October 18, 2006

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Maine accelerates commuter van offering

By JOEL ELLIOTT
Staff Writer

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By JOEL ELLIOTT

Staff Writer

The Maine Department of Transportation more than doubled the number of vans used to ferry people about the state after receiving \$400,000 from the federal government.

This brings the number of vans in the Go Maine program to 20 from its original nine, increasing total passenger capacity to 240, program leaders announced Tuesday.

When the program expands in early 2007, it will reach York County, Lewiston-Auburn and other areas.

Eventually, van routes will reach Greater Portland, Topsham and Brunswick, as well.

Demand is outpacing supply, as the nine vans currently running have a total capacity of 108. With 184 people registered with the program, newcomers have to sign a waiting list.

Expanding the program will help bring the state closer to meeting demand for the service, program manager Susan Moreau said.

"With the increasing gas prices, it's become a critical issue for a lot of people," she said. "Certainly, Mainers know a good deal when they see it, and this is a good deal."

Moreau said taking a daily van ride between Portland and Augusta costs \$115 per month. Sharing a van to commute to work or other places is cheaper than riding alone, according to Beth Nagusky, director of the Governor's Office of Energy Independence.

"Maine commuters want to reduce how much they spend for gasoline, and they are taking steps to reduce their gasoline consumption," she said.

Nagusky pointed to state surveys that indicate that a majority of Maine drivers are looking for ways to conserve gasoline.

"Expanding public transportation not only saves money, it will reduce our dependence on foreign oil and emissions of greenhouse gases," she said.

Routes are selected and expanded in response to customer demand, as survey responses indicate desired destinations.

The van-pooling program began in response to the 1973 oil embargo, and initially only served state employees. The program has gradually expanded over the past 30 years, however, and is now open to public use.

Additionally, Go Maine facilitates car-pooling with its Web site, <http://www.gomaine.org>. More than 3,400 people subscribe to that service.

"Van-pooling works particularly well in a rural state, because we don't have mass transit everywhere, because we don't have enough people to warrant that," she said. "So vans are filling that critical need."

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