

Casino revenues affecting vital senior bus service - NECN

Written by Administrator
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HACKENSACK, N.J. (AP) — Officials in Passaic, Bergen and Morris counties are struggling to keep free bus services for the elderly and disabled at current levels while Atlantic City casino revenue used to run the programs declines sharply.

A state revenue tax on all 11 Atlantic City casinos helps support county transportation programs that provide free busing for senior citizens and people

with disabilities to senior centers, grocery stores and medical appointments.

But the recession has taken a toll and the casino revenue for those programs has dwindled from \$36.9 million in 2008 to \$29 million this year, said Jim Thebery, director of the Bergen County Division of Disability Services and chairman of the New Jersey Casino Revenue Fund Advisory Commission.

Casino funding for Passaic County's Para-Transit program has dropped 21.3 percent since 2008, to \$1,313,383 this year. Casino revenues for Bergen County Community Transportation plunged 21.2 percent in three years, to \$2,211,233. And funding for the Morris Area Paratransit System dropped 21.4 percent since 2008, to \$1,256,495 this year.

The program provides an important lifeline to senior citizens such as Wayne residents Annette Ford, 90, and Anita Mizraji, 84, who agreed the bus service is vital. They think it can be maintained with more community donations. Ford, a retired caretaker, and Mizraji, a retired sewing worker, use the bus for visits to the senior center and occasional shopping trips.

"Their service is very good and it should be kept," Ford said. "It helps the old people, and a lot of us don't have a lot of money."

Passaic County officials last month sent out a letter about the funding cuts to riders to encourage donations, said Mary Kuzinski, executive director of the county's senior services department. The same letter will soon be sent to all Passaic County residents. The program collected \$24,502 in donations in the past two years.

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"We've been as efficient as we can to make sure the seniors get where they need to be," Kuzinski said.

Three driver vacancies were not filled, and a GPS system installed on buses in 2009 helped to reduce idling, Passaic program officials said. John McGill, the program director, said he would like to see more funding for para-transit programs, and suggested New Jersey consider allowing sports betting to increase the casino revenue.

Bergen County Community Transportation "hasn't depreciated the service," but some routes have been combined and staff overtime has been cut to keep expenses down, said Rudy Pasterczyk, the director. Meals on Wheels deliveries on Saturdays were cut last year, but Pasterczyk said senior citizens got an extra meal delivery on Fridays.

Thebery said the commission recommended that the state Legislature increase the transportation program fund by \$4 million. He added that he hopes tourism and convention bookings in Atlantic City will increase this year.

Morris County has maintained steady service and most bus rides are still provided on a donation basis, said Hope Hezel, the director of special transportation. But the county instituted a pilot program that charges \$2 to \$5 per ride for people who use the bus to get to work. Hezel said the fee is on a sliding scale based on income, and funds from the program have been used to provide more bus rides. Hezel said the program has raised about \$10,000 and the fee can be waived for riders with extenuating circumstances.

In some communities, municipal budget cuts have affected senior citizens' services, too. Clifton, Passaic and Paterson had to stop their transport program and close senior nutrition centers on local government furlough days because of state aid cuts. Kuzinski said Clifton and Passaic officials have been assisting one another with driving dialysis patients when regular staff are on furlough.

To help out, the Passaic County Para-Transit program started a bus route Friday that takes Paterson seniors to the Charles J. Smith Senior Center in Hawthorne. The Riverside Vets senior nutrition center in Paterson will be closed on furlough days and the para-transit program will help the 22 city residents who had signed up for the service, Kuzinski said. Donna Ivy,

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director of the Paterson Department of Health, said the city sent notices advising senior citizens about the furlough days and reminding them not to make medical appointments for those dates.

Some senior citizens who ride the Passaic County Para-Transit bus said they haven't noticed any difference in the program, despite the funding cuts.

During a morning ride last week, driver David Johnson helped passengers with walkers board the heated mini-bus before he set out over snow-covered Wayne roads to take riders to the Totowa Senior Center. The radio serenaded the ladies with such golden oldies as "Sleep Walk," "Right Back Where We Started From" and "When a Man Loves a Woman."

"See what David does?" Josephine White, a retired bookkeeper, said with a grin. "He gives us music when we get up."

White spends every weekday at the senior center, where she socializes, plays cards and eats lunch. "If it wasn't for this, I wouldn't be able to get out," said White, 82.

White said she wasn't aware of the budget concerns facing the program and said she'd consider donating more to keep the "punctual and good" bus service going. "It's mostly a gratitude for all that they do," she said about her prior donations.

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