

Transit system's growing pains bringing more riders

■ Trips to Bend and back increasing to twice a day on July 1

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Since Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council took over the operation of Dial-A-Ride Jan. 1, customers have experienced both increased service and changes in operation.

William McKinney, 67, hasn't been happy with the changes.

The southwest Redmond resident says he rode Dial-A-Ride three or four times before COIC took over with the new year.

"When the senior center ran the bus it was real quick to get the bus to go where you wanted to go," McKinney said. But the last time he called for a ride, he was told he needed to book 24 hours in advance.

"That's not very good service," he said. "Twenty-four hours ahead is a little bit ridiculous. It's supposed to be a service for people."

Central Oregon Council on Aging used to run the bus service, but contracted with COIC in order to go after Oregon

Department of Transportation funding to increase the number of times buses run between Bend and other communities and to operate longer hours, said Carol Bro of COCOA.

The bottom line is to provide more services for seniors, Bro said.

She admitted the change hasn't been without some complaints.

For example, for some reason Prineville riders objected to riding to Bend with Madras passengers. And there have been other complaints like

McKinney's.

But, Bro said, it's always been Dial-A-Ride policy that riders book their trips 24 hours in advance, although Dial-A-Ride has always tried to accommodate trips booked with less advance notice and still does, she said. Some days it's

See **TRANSIT**, page 9



Anthony Dimaano/ for the Spokesman
Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council driver, Gladysann Marshall, left, helps Linda Thornton, center, and Joyce Bryan, right, on to the shuttle last week in Redmond.

TRANSIT

Continued from page 1

easy to accommodate last minute requests; some days it isn't.

"We always try to accommodate emergencies," Bro said, "but we need to make sure we're being cost-effective for the majority of folks."

Scott Aycock of COIC concurred.

The 24-hour advance call for rides was "always the policy, but they didn't necessarily stick to it," said Aycock, the inter-governmental organization that runs what is now called Cascades East Transportation. "They could often accommodate them."

While the system does occasionally continue to make exceptions for late callers, with the increased ridership it's increasingly difficult to do so. "We're at capacity now," Aycock said.

Ridership has gone up about 50 percent since COIC took over, he said. Aycock doesn't have current statistics for specific cities, but for all of Deschutes County from July 1-Dec. 31, 2007, COCOA provided transportation to

9,684 senior riders. Since COIC took over Jan. 1, 2008, to the present, 14,354 senior riders have used the service - 6,462 in the third quarter and 7,354 in the current quarter.

COIC officials are predicting 32,127 senior riders for the 2008-09 fiscal year that begins July 1, he said.

The main reasons for the increase in ridership are the longer hours of service and more service between Redmond and other Central Oregon communities, Aycock said. Service between Redmond and Bend has gone from once a week to once a day, and beginning July 1 it will increase to twice a day.

The bus service runs two Central Oregon loops, with Redmond part of both - Madras-Prineville-Redmond-Bend, and Sisters-Redmond-Bend. The intercity service then connects with local Dial-A-Ride to get seniors and the disabled from their homes to their destinations, whether it's doctor appointments or the grocery store.

Aycock said the goal is

to use the system to build a mass transit system in the region that will benefit everyone, from seniors and disabled to people who need or want to live life without a car.

The COIC-run system can offer services to anybody - seniors, disabled and the general public, he said, but people have to get used to the new system.

According to Aycock, COIC knew it would encounter some grumbling when it took over and began making changes; people were used to calling late for rides or were used to a particular driver.

But, he said, while riders are giving up some things, they are gaining others - principally more hours of operation and more intercity trips.