



News Advisory

Blue Water Area Transportation Commission

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Program Offers Support for Full Participation in Community Life

Federal Grant Provides “New Freedom”

For Area Residents with Disabilities

PORT HURON, MI — Area residents with disabilities now have a better chance to fully participate in community life, thanks to paid transportation provided through a voucher system introduced July 1 by the Blue Water Area Transportation Commission (BWATC) and made possible by a \$296,654 grant awarded under the federal New Freedom Program.

The program is part of a comprehensive plan that represents an important step in working to ensure that all Americans have the opportunity to learn and develop skills, engage in productive work, make choices about their daily lives, and participate fully in community life.

BWATC was awarded this grant through a competitive process, receiving half of the total funds that were available to Michigan’s small urban communities with populations under 200,000.

“This is a wonderful opportunity that helps disabled individuals become more mobile, especially with today’s rising cost of gasoline,” says BWATC Board Chairman William Smiley. “It’s always good to see federal funds coming back to our community to benefit people living within the Port Huron area.”

The program is being funded with 50% Federal funds and 50% local funds. The State of Michigan is providing the local match for this initial 15-month period (July 2008-September 2009).

“The program will end next year, after September, unless our community can identify a source for local matching funds for future years,” says Jim Wilson, BWATC General Manager.

The voucher system will reimburse eligible individuals for approved travel at the IRS rate of \$0.585 per mile.

“We will be working with local agencies to determine eligible participants and authorize travel plans,” says BWATC General Manager Jim Wilson. “Area residents with disabilities should contact one of these local agencies to determine whether or not they are eligible to participate in the program.” These agencies include the ARC of St. Clair County, Goodwill Industries, Blue Water Center for Independent Living, St. Clair County Mental Health Authority, and others.

“This program will help individuals and have a positive impact on our local economy,” says Michael P. McCartan, Executive Director of the St. Clair County Mental Health Authority. “For years, we have identified transportation as the #1 barrier to both human services and employment for area residents.”

In 2001, the federal government introduced the New Freedom Initiative as part of a nationwide effort to remove barriers to community living for people of all ages living with disabilities. Today, there are more than 54 million Americans living with a disability, representing a full 20% of the U.S. population.

The New Freedom Initiative was developed in response to the Olmstead v. L.C. Supreme Court decision issued in July 1999 that requires states to administer services, programs and activities “in the most integrated setting appropriate to the needs of qualified individuals with disabilities.” The decision interpreted Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which gives civil rights and protections to individuals with disabilities and guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, State and local government services, and telecommunications.

BWATC History & Background

The Blue Water Area Transportation Commission continues a proud tradition of innovation in public transit that has served Port Huron for more than a century. Port Huron was one of the first communities in the country to operate an electrified transit system in the 1880s and one of the first to operate motor coaches when they became popular in the 1930s. Following an eight-year hiatus, the current bus service began in September 1976. Since then, it has carried more than 19 Million riders and continues the tradition of innovation with its fleet of alternative fueled buses.

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