

Western Piedmont Leads the Way

Officials in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell and Catawba counties along with the municipalities of Hickory, Newton and Conover recently passed resolutions to create a regional transit authority. Tentatively called “Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority,” the organization will become the first regional public transportation authority with consolidated urban-rural transit service in the state.

“This is a huge step forward in addressing current and future public transportation needs in our region,” said John Tippett, planning director for the Western Piedmont Council of Governments, which helped to lead the effort. “We are well on our way to having the first truly consolidated urban/rural multi-county transit system in North Carolina.”

The transit authority plans to assume the operations of the rural and urban transit systems in the four-county region, collectively known as the “Unifour,” on July 1, 2008. The following four service providers will be consolidated:

- Alexander County – community transportation provided by Alexander County Transportation, a county-operated system
- Burke County – community transportation provided by Burke County Transit Administration Inc., a nonprofit agency
- Caldwell County - community transportation provided by Caldwell County Area Transit System Inc., a nonprofit agency
- Catawba County – Piedmont Wagon Transit System, operated by the city of Hickory, which provides community transportation to county residents and fixed-route service for the cities of Hickory, Newton and Conover

The authority’s story began in 2001 when Caldwell County Area Transit System applied for a planning assistance grant on behalf of Unifour. The funding, awarded from the U.S. Department of Agriculture through the Community Transportation Association of America in 2002, made possible a feasibility study, completed by consultants RLS and Associates in 2004.

From feasibility to implementation, the project moved forward in 2005 when Hickory used federal Section 5307 planning funds, combined with state matching funds from the NCDOT Public Transportation Division, to finance the implementation study. The city contracted with the KFH Group to complete the study, and work was initiated in May 2006.

The Western Piedmont Council of Governments served as facilitator for the project. A study committee met regularly and guided the progress of the Regional Transportation Implementation Plan. Additionally, each county conducted meetings and public hearings.

“The project had support early on from the transit directors and their transportation advisory boards,” said Pat Perry, transportation planner with NCDOT Public Transportation Division, whose assigned area includes Unifour. “They had the willingness to pursue the idea and explore their options with the common goal of how to provide better transportation within the region.”

The Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority is well on its way to becoming the state’s next regional system, following the regionalization initiative promoted by the Public Transportation Division. An additional 29 counties and municipalities have expressed interest in exploring the concept.