OPINION

THE KEENE SENTINEL TUESDAY, AUGUST 31, 2010

Sentinel Editorial

Getting there

Last year, in one of this newspaper's periodic reports on the availability of public transportation in the region, we noted that some people who want to visit a recreational area, or go shopping or keep a medical appointment often find themselves dependent upon the kindness of others. Or plumb out of luck. Two years earlier a study by the Monadnock United Way, community leaders and human services agencies cited transportation as one of the area's most significant public needs.

A new public transportation initiative gets under way.

Since then, some progress has been made, but significant challenges remain, as chronicled by Sentinel reporter Dave Eisenstadter in an extensive review published Aug. 21. A chart accompanying that story noted that while public transportation can be found from Langdon to New Ipswich and points in between, the patchwork nature of those services greatly limits their usefulness.

Despite decades of good will and community concern — and despite the many charts, graphs and editorials in this newspaper — there is no central source of information that people can consult to find what transportation opportunities *are* available. So the region's two coordinating councils have now put together a directory of options that will be used on a trial basis by the Keene and Peterborough hospitals to help patients get to their appointments. Later the directory may be available to everyone to bring clarity to the regional jumble, while helping highlight the remaining needs.

From time to time, especially when gas prices spike, far-sighted people dream about how nice it would be to build a robust transportation system in southwestern New Hampshire, in which buses patrolled the streets hour by hour, taking people to and from work and stores during the day, and to and from restaurants, cinemas and theaters in the evening. Such a system could lessen air pollution, reduce petroleum consumption, breathe new social life into the region, break the confinement of people who have no personal transportation, and diminish traffic congestion and the need for expensive road repairs and construction.

Of course, there is a place where such dreams have been realized. It's called Europe. There, governments keep gasoline prices high and run the buses and trains. But cultures differ. Around here, all indications are that the family car will continue to rule for some time to come.

In this rural part of our small-government state, most public transportation is provided by nonprofits. The government role is limited to tax exemptions and an occasional grant. Private enterprise makes voluntary contributions. But the nonprofit sector takes the lead, as it often must as government resources are strained.

This coming November, advocacy groups from around the state — including the two regional commissions from this area — will be meeting with legislators and others in Concord as part of a longstanding effort to bring an acceptable level of public transportation to New Hampshire. And, while local and regional nonprofits will provide spirit and wherewithal, a state role will also be critical, for the state must help tie New Hampshire communities together. After all, transportation is not just about travel; it's also about neighborhoods, workers, employers and human services.

The goal this fall, as always, will be to help people reduce their reliance on friends, neighbors and a confusing patchwork of daytime services, and help car-centric New Hampshire cease being a place where you can't get there from here.