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Rural Transit bill sees major setback

By Dave Williams
Capitol Beat News Service

When the legislative session resumes, Georgia lawmakers will take up a measure originally aimed at bringing better public transit options to people in rural parts of Georgia, especially for seniors who already struggle to shop and attend medical appointments.

But senior advocates point out the measure, House Bill 511, was gutted a few weeks before the General Assembly was indefinitely suspended amid the coronavirus outbreak.

They view the move as a disappointing end to legislation that promised more money and tighter management for rural transit options geared toward helping older Georgians.

Lawmakers behind the changes, meanwhile, say counties and cities can already tap into state and federal funds to expand their local transit systems – an option they say makes unnecessary a key proposal in the bill to create a new oversight agency for rural transit.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Kevin Tanner, initially would have consolidated transit functions carried out by three different state agencies into a new department tasked with overseeing transit projects via regional managers, who would be spread out across Georgia into multi-county “mobility zones.”

Crucially, Tanner’s original bill also included ways to raise new state funds for buses and transit workers, either by letting counties levy new sales taxes dedicated to transit services or by charging a flat fee on ride-hailing trips

run by Uber and Lyft.

Tanner, R-Dawsonville, previously said the measure would give Georgia transit officials more tools to boost transit options for seniors and others in isolated rural areas.

Georgia has around 200,000 residents age 70 and older who no longer drive and have a tough time reaching grocery stores, doctor’s offices and other important places on their own, according to a Georgia Health Policy Center report from 2018. Officials expect the population of Georgians 60 years and older to double by 2040.

While most of the 80 transit systems operating in rural areas allow riders to cross county lines on an as-needed basis, some do not. That gap creates a problem for seniors who need to reach hospitals or other essential services, said Vicki Johnson, chairwoman of the Georgia Council on Aging.

Senior advocates like Johnson were counting on Tanner’s bill to help increase more cross-county transit options and broader regional public transit in underserved areas.

Tanner’s bill had backing from several top lawmakers including House Speaker David Ralston, R-Blue Ridge, and House Appropriations Committee Chairman Terry England, R-Auburn, who was a co-sponsor. The bill cleared the state House last year but hit a roadblock in the Georgia Senate, where lawmakers earlier this month stripped it down to the studs.

Now, the bill deals only with administrative rules for the Atlanta-region Transit Link Authority (the ATL) and an extension on tying the state’s motor fuels tax rate to the consumer price index.

Instead of creating a new department, the three state agencies tasked with public transit – GDOT, the Department of Human Services, and the Department of Community Health – are considering a pilot program for a regional commission to administer all rural, senior and non-emergency medical transportation services.

“The pilot will offer fully coordinated rural transit and human services transportation at the regional level and provide improved accessibility and ease of use for riders,” said Carol Comer, director of GDOT’s Intermodal Division.

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