

It's in our power to change.

THE INITIATOR

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Benzie Bus: Celebrating Our First Year of Countywide Transportation

Getting around Benzie County isn't what it used to be for thousands of area people. It's much easier, thanks to the new Benzie Bus system in 2007.

Jim Moore, Executive Director of Disability Network/Northern Michigan, says, "It's been a year since Benzie County passed a millage to create a county-wide bus system. Prior to that, all we had was a specialized system for seniors, but the routes and schedules were limited."

While the surrounding counties had bus systems, "There was a big gap in Benzie County," explains Moore. Recognizing the crucial role transportation plays in keeping seniors and people with disabilities connected to their community, Disability Network teamed with local advocates to raise awareness and support for the bus system.

Ingemar Johansson, Director of Operations at Benzie CMH, helped lead the Benzie Bus campaign. "Most of the people I serve in community mental health don't drive," he explains. "That's how my interest in it began. The bus system is not just for people with mental illness or disabilities. As my children were growing up, I realized that it could be cumbersome for parents to take their children to after-school activities. All of that prompted me to work for a change."

Johansson's group spent approximately 10 years raising awareness of the need for public transportation. "We gathered grassroots support and kept elective officials informed of what we were doing," he says. "Eventually, we were

ready to present the idea to the voters. We went out as a group and assertively spread the word about the cost and benefits of public transportation."

After the community voted to pass a .5 millage, the system began operating in January 2007. Designed as a dial-a-ride service, the bus will take anyone from a home or business within Benzie County to any other location within the county. Buses also run to Traverse City, with specific stops including Munson Medical Center and BATA transfer stations. "That's a unique feature," says Moore. "Crossing counties with bus systems is not an easy task, but that was a point people really supported in our research."

Service is provided weekdays from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., and Saturdays from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The full fare is \$2 per ride, while seniors and people with disabilities pay \$1 per ride.

Barely into its first year, the system continues to grow. "We initially proposed five buses, and we have about 16 now," says Johansson. In fact, ridership increased from 1150 rides in January 2007 to 4730 in December.

Johansson attributes the bus system's popularity to the independence it provides. "Before this, people who didn't drive had less than nothing - not even a taxi service in our area. They had to beg for rides from friends and family. The bus offers a



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**"The bus offers a tremendous improvement in quality life."
-Ingemar Johansson**

tremendous improvement in quality life, and it's very inexpensive to use."

Moore adds, "This has proven itself to be a service the community is happy to have. They do like their Benzie Bus."

It's My Ride

Benzie Bus rider Sara Piersma says, "I'm actually waiting for the bus right now! I live on my own, and the bus was the final piece of my independence. I use it all the time, to go to work, to visit my mom, and to go grocery shopping. I do everything on my own. Before, it was a lot harder. It's been a good thing for me!"