

TRANSPORTATION

Vanpool, ride-share programs advance with DOT funding

Hope is to have service running in October

By B.A. Morelli, The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS — The first two pieces of a plan to expand transportation options and combat congested roadways clogged with one-occupant vehicles are primed to launch.

Furthest along are a regional vanpool and an online ride-sharing platform. Money is in place, officials said Tuesday, but it still will be several months before the offerings are available to the public.

"It's exciting to know we have the money available, but it's likely a little frustrating to people that it will be a few months before (the services) will be available," said Mary Rump, East Central Iowa Council of Governments transportation and regional development director.

Rump is part of an implementation committee assembled following the 2014 Iowa Commuter Transportation Study. It recommended a regional vanpool, ride-sharing application, express bus service and consideration of other options such as light rail. The committee met Tuesday in Cedar Rapids.

Officials have targeted transportation alternatives to help provide access to employment for those without vehicles and to ease congestion on Interstate 380. It's expected to worsen during a five-year project to replace the interchange of I-380 and I-80 in Johnson County.

The council of governments has secured \$178,000 to test a regional vanpool being called RideConnect, in which people coming from and going to similar locations, typically for employment, can share a van and the costs of travel. The service would cover a seven-county area in Eastern Iowa.

The hope is to have the service running in October, possibly earlier, Rump said.

The final piece of funding came last week when the Iowa Department of Transportation awarded \$142,240 to RideConnect through the Clean Air Attain-

ment Program. The vanpool had received \$28,448 through the state transit assistance special projects program, and a commitment of \$7,112 from the council of governments.

The council will solicit an operator to run the program and provide the vans beginning in February with hopes of making a selection in May or June, Rump said. The clean-air grant typically isn't disbursed until October, but if the program is ready sooner the council might request an early disbursement, she said.

The vendor will provide up to 26 vans and manage ride schedules. The cost of each vanpool will depend on the number of riders and distance they travel. The grants will help subsidize the costs so each rider pays less, Rump said.

The money covers one year of service, but the bulk of it is eligible to roll over for a second and third year, Rump said.

Beyond that, the hope is the service will have proved its value and can become self-sustaining, she said.

Meanwhile, the Iowa DOT last week awarded a six-year contract, up to \$350,000, to Canadian company RideShark. It's for an online statewide ride-sharing platform in which commuters can connect and arrange rides through a not-yet-live website at IowaRideShare.org, said Brent Paulsen, an Iowa DOT technology and research manager.

The company is supposed to begin 16-week implementation of the software, which must be integrated with transit databases around the state, beginning in February, he said.

On another front, options for routes and stops for an express bus service between Cedar Rapids and Iowa City will be available within two months, Paulsen said. He said public meetings are being arranged to present the information and take feedback.