

(Silver Threads article Jan 2014)

The Road Ahead – Transportation for the Elderly

Run out of milk at home? No problem—we drive to the store. Have medical appointments? A book due at the library? A friend waiting at the movie? We drive wherever we need and want to go. We take our mobility and our cars for granted.

And yet for a greatly increasing percentage of our senior citizens, the confidence to drive on their own comes to an end. The domino effect of the physical and mental changes that cause seniors to give up driving can lead to less mobility and more isolation. Quality of life issues such as independence and self-sufficiency are affected. Warren Smith of the Senior Mobility Initiative of Cape Cod states that better mobility is key to better mental health, quality of life, and successful aging. Our elderly need transportation systems that are accessible, affordable, coordinated, and senior-friendly.

Why is this issue so important? There are many reasons, but two stand out. One is the sheer number of people affected. With the baby boomer population now joining this group, seniors currently make up one-third of Falmouth's population. This number jumps to nearly one-half of all Falmouth residents over 60 by the year 2030, according to a UMass regional planning projection. The numbers are growing very quickly, with the fastest growth in ages 75 to 85 and older. The second reason is that this issue affects all of us. We have no choice in the inevitability of our aging but we do have a choice in whether we establish support systems that encourage independence and opportunities for growth at all ages. Planning now will benefit all of us.

This is the first of two articles on transportation for the elderly. This one deals with what is currently available in Falmouth: what the options are, where the available fixed routes run, and how to navigate these various options. The second article will deal with future needs: what is being planned, what creative approaches other communities are taking, and what our local leaders, like Cape Cod Regional Transport Authority Administrator Tom Cahir, Falmouth Senior Center Director Jill Irving Bishop, and Falmouth Service Center Director Brenda Swain, hope to see.

Just as our seniors have a wide range of mobility needs, our transportation systems must also have a range of options to meet those needs. With food for the homebound being delivered by Elder Service's daily Meals on Wheels and the Service Center's twice monthly food orders, most transportation for elderly non-drivers is provided by three main sources.

The first is the Cape Cod Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), based in Hyannis. The "fixed-route" bus with the friendly seasonal "Go Sox," "Go Pats" slogans is called the Sealine. It has year-round hourly runs between Hyannis and Woods Hole, has scheduled stops or can be flagged down, and costs \$1.00 per ride for seniors (exact change, please, with all fixed route rides). It's perfect for a trip to the mall, lunch in Woods Hole, or shopping in Mashpee Commons. A second RTA fixed-route service helps to

meet the needs of those who are disabled and who meet ADA eligibility requirements; accessible minivans offer a door-to-door shared ride within three-quarters of a mile of the Sealine route. A wide range of disabilities is accepted; the application is on the www.CapeCodRTA.org website. The minivans have the same route, days, and hours as the Sealine, with a cost of \$2.00 per ride. Falmouth's final RTA fixed route offering is the WHOOSH trolley, which runs every half hour from late June through Labor Day from the Falmouth Mall to Woods Hole. These trollies have scheduled stops or can be flagged down, and they cost \$1.00 per trip.

Perhaps the RTA's most popular and flexible offering is the Dial-A-Ride Transport (DART), formerly called the b-bus. By calling 800-352-7155 the day before, a door-to-door "shared ride" trip for any purpose can be scheduled with a fare of \$1.50 per trip for seniors. With discounted passes, trained helpful drivers, and daily service, it is easy to see why there are nearly 1,000 DART trips a day throughout Cape Cod. There have been many recent improvements in convenience and ease of scheduling.

The second main source of transportation options comes from our Falmouth Senior Center. The popular "VanGo" minibuses offer transport for seniors within Falmouth; appointments can be made by calling the Senior Center at 508-540-0196 in the morning two days before needed. There are schedules for weekly grocery shopping trips and morning medical visits. Hours of operation are 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Although there is no set fee, donations are gratefully accepted. The buses are used for personal senior transport, group trips, rides to programs at the Center, and other needs. By using a combination of the VanGo buses and volunteer drivers who are available for medical transport of seniors unable to use the bus, Senior Center Director Jill Irving Bishop and her staff work to provide as many options as possible. They see transportation as crucial for our elderly and are working on a brochure that will consolidate transportation information.

The third source of transportation includes a nonprofit and businesses that assist with transportation needs. Neighborhood Falmouth is a local nonprofit membership organization that strives to keep seniors living comfortably and safely in their homes as long as possible. Volunteers provide a wide variety of services to the seniors, ranging from social and cultural opportunities to light home and yard maintenance. It is no surprise that 75% of the requests for services involve door-to-door transportation needs. With a membership fee that amounts to \$50 per month, Neighborhood Falmouth partners with other service organizations and is one option to help meet transportation needs. The private company "Access Express" offers accessible vehicles that provide door-to-door service for trips on and off Cape Cod. This fairly new service operates in partnership with the RTA, running vehicles from 5 a.m. to 2 a.m. with a fee of \$2.70 per mile for local trips and a discounted rate for longer ones (information and reservations at 508-746-5715). In addition, for trips to medical facilities in Boston, a daily Boston Hospital Transport with a fee of \$30 round trip can be taken by calling the RTA the day before, and there is also a Medivan "Life Van" that leaves from Woods Hole at 7:30 AM on Tuesdays (information at 508-693-9440).

Although this is not a definitive listing of all public and private options, these are all good options. However, their realistic use for the elderly brings up issues such as the distance from a person's home to

the fixed routes; the ability to walk that distance and to climb up into a bus and ride independently; the ability to pay the higher fees for the door-to-door types of transport; and the availability, planning needed, and wait time associated with the appointment buses and vans. Falmouth is the second largest municipality on Cape Cod, covers 44 square miles, and has a projected population of half its residents over 60 by 2030. The demographics speak loudly. What we need are voices of people who will speak back and plan now to provide transportation for the elderly in the future.

Boby Anderson