

Commuter program gets \$300K in federal funding

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Dulles and Leesburg business owners hungry to hire more workers soon will be able to recruit from outlying rural areas, thanks to new federal funding for transportation linking Virginia's high- and low-tech communities.

The Virginia Regional Transportation Association in Leesburg is receiving about \$300,000 in federal funds to create shuttle programs linking rural and low-income areas in Loudoun, Clarke and Frederick counties with employers in the Leesburg and Dulles areas.

"For every one of those high-tech jobs in the Dulles Corridor, we know there are three to four service and administrative jobs needed to support that high-tech worker," said Mark McGregor, chief executive officer of the Virginia Regional Transportation Association.

The federal funds, awarded by the U.S. Department of Transportation through the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, will be matched by a grant of roughly \$300,000 from the state Department of Social Services, McGregor said.

"The program provides two services," said Chip Badger, assistant director of the Rail and Public Transportation Department. "One, it gets people who need jobs to get to those jobs. And two, certain parts of the state have had trouble getting enough service personnel. This program gets both groups of people the help they need."

The association will use the money to buy and operate two vans, which will transport up to 50 workers per day, McGregor said. Clients will largely be heading to entry-level jobs in the retail, restaurant, manufacturing and hotel

industries.

Vans will move between gathering points in Loudoun, Clarke and Frederick counties and employment centers in the Dulles Corridor. One route will start in Winchester, stopping along Route 7 while en route to businesses on Route 28. The second route will stop in Purcellville, Leesburg and Sterling before heading into the Dulles Corridor.

"Any sort of program we can get that might staff the types of positions most difficult to staff will have a positive impact for us," said Sandy Denham, spokeswoman for the Loudoun Convention and Visitors Association.

McGregor said the rural counties chosen to participate in the shuttle program had appealed to the Transportation Association for solutions to their transit problems. The organization already provides services for other rural areas of the state, including Fauquier and Orange counties.

Services from the Transportation Association have worked wonders for some local residents, said David Phillippi, a self-sufficiency specialist for Orange County's Department of Social Services.

"It's been very successful," he said. "It helps people not only get to jobs, but to medical services and child-care services."

The federal grant also includes roughly \$72,000 to purchase a van to expand the Transportation Association's service to Culpeper, Fauquier, Orange and Madison counties.

McGregor hopes the Loudoun County program will be at least as successful as its predecessor. Success will improve the program's chances of receiving further federal funding.

"If we can get people employable and off the welfare rolls, think how much money it will save," he said.