



Shopper Links program provides transportation

Shuttle service gives rides to seniors, adults with disabilities, and residents dependent on public transit

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SOUTH PORTLAND — The Greater Portland Council of Governments is piloting a city-wide shuttle service, Shopper Links, in South Portland.

The shuttle transports adults age 55 and older, adults with disabilities, and adults with low incomes to local grocery stores and to the South Portland Food Cupboard.

The shuttle, a lift-equipped van operated by the Regional Transportation Program, runs on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, from 9 a.m. to noon.

It serves a different side of the city each day. The shuttle is free, with a suggested donation of \$3 paid on the shuttle.

“Shopper Links is a wonderful addition to the transportation needs of South Portland,” South Portland Director of Social Services Kathleen Babeu said. “At our food cupboard, residents select fresh fruits and vegetables, cold cuts, cheese, bread, and other healthy choices. If a resident doesn’t have a car and relies on public transportation, it’s difficult to get there.”

Currently, there’s no regular bus service directly to the food cupboard.

The nearest bus stop requires shoppers to walk approximately six to 10 minutes.

South Portland Director of Transportation Art Handman said that the roads to the cupboard aren’t big enough to handle regular buses.

“You have to have a certain amount of mobility to get to the bus stop,” Councilor Sue Henderson, who serves the South Portland Committee on Aging, said. “In the winter, they can’t get there.”

A December 2018 report conducted by the South Portland Senior Citizen Advisory Committee examined barriers to transportation for seniors in South Portland as a component of the town's livability.

"If people haven't got mobility, they can't access food, healthcare, or social opportunities," Henderson said. "It's essential to a good quality of life."

The report found that the use of one's own vehicle declined with age, and that slightly more than a third of the respondents age 85 and older cited affordable ride service as a barrier to transportation.

The report revealed that focus group participants cited costly access, walking to bus stops, timing trips, and drop off location as barriers.

Shopper Links meets the identified need for a low cost, low barrier, doorto door ride service.

Alongside the shuttle, Shopper Links is also testing GoGoGrandparent, an on-demand ride service which allows those eligible in South Portland to call and be set up with a discounted Uber or Lyft driver, without a smartphone.

Shopper Links covers the first \$5 of the trip, and the rider pays the remaining cost, which would be between \$3 and \$10, according to the program's website.

A rider could take an \$8 Uber from their home to Rosemont Bakery, for example, and pay \$3.

The on-demand ride program services a variety of destinations, including Shaw's, The Farm Stand and Walmart.

"The eventual goal would be to expand into the Greater Portland metropolitan area," Henderson said.

Babeu said the city is enthusiastic about the addition of this transportation program and hopes it will continue after the pilot.

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