



A NET TRANS bus makes a stop at Milligan College.
(Ron Campbell / Johnson City Press)

Make the connection: First fixed-route weekday service between Elizabethton, Johnson City launches

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Public transportation in the Tri-Cities has taken an experimental leap forward with the first "fixed-route" weekday service between Elizabethton and Johnson City.

"We think this is the type of community where we're so close that a lot of people travel back and forth between the two that public transportation could work, whether for economic reasons or just convenience," said Dale Fair, executive director of First Tennessee Human Resource Agency, which debuted "The Connection" earlier this month.

FTHRA's NET Trans program celebrated the new service Monday with a ribbon cutting at the route's eastern end, the Workforce Development Center on State Route 91 near the Elizabethton Airport. It includes stops at the Elizabethton Food City (corner of U.S. Highway 19-E and Broad Street); Wal-Mart and Sycamore Shoals Hospital on West Elk Avenue; Milligan College; and the Johnson City Transit headquarters at Boone and Main streets.

Riders will pay \$2, but students ride free. The 12-passenger vans, which also include two wheelchair spaces, leave the Workforce Development Center at 6:40, 8:40 and 10:40 a.m., and 1:40 and 4:40 p.m. Departure times from Johnson City Transit are one hour later, and time between stops is 10 minutes with the exception of the Workforce Development to Food City leg, which is 20 minutes.

Tim Jaynes, deputy director for Net Trans, said the service has three primary target users: commuters, students and users of the health care system.

"If somebody wants to commute, there's a \$250 a year tax break, I'm not sure whether it's a credit or a deduction, for using public transit."

Jaynes said the agency began discussing fixed route options — as opposed to its traditional demand services — when gas prices spiked in 2008. The Tennessee Department of Transportation, which administers the federal Federal Transit Administration funds that support Net Trans' operations, said it was open to the idea, and it recently awarded Net Trans \$200,000 to try the service for three years.

"TDOT said we need to really help people in the rural areas connect to the urban areas, and this is one way you can get up to an urban system and go about anywhere in Johnson City after that."

The funds will cover driver salaries and added maintenance on the existing fleet of 12-passenger buses Net Trans uses for demand services across its eight-county service area. That fleet will handle the five daily round-trip runs from the east end to the Johnson City Transit Center and back.

"We wanted to keep the cost conservative," Jaynes said. "If it's successful, we may look at seeking funding for capital projects."

He said Johnson City Transit Authority staff and Metropolitan Planning Organization Director Glenn Berry both helped greatly as FTHRA put its grant application together.

"They have expertise in this kind of service, we don't, and we leaned on them a lot," Jaynes said.

The agency should learn by October whether it will receive any of three similar grants it's applied for to connect other outlying parts of its eight-county service area with the Tri-Cities. Those include a service from Greeneville through Jonesborough to Johnson City, and another from Rogersville to Kingsport.

Fair said he is confident the time has come for connecting what he calls the "spokes" to the hubs of Johnson City, Kingsport and Bristol and their urban bus systems.

"We've already been picking up ridership without a whole lot of fanfare," he said. "I didn't think we'd have any riders yet because we hadn't advertised, we just wanted to see if our schedule would work."

For more information on The Connection or other NET Trans programs, call 461-8233 or 1-800-528-7776.