

# CC RIDER: Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Story and photos by  
RANDY SANDERS

## Services and Customers:

CC Rider is Columbia County's public transportation organization. It serves a diverse swath of the

County's transportation needs. According to a report compiled by David Evans and Associates for the NW Oregon Transit Alliance and dated September 2012, 51% of Columbia County's residents work in the Portland-Metro area. The breakdown of destinations where they work include: Multnomah County 29%, Washington County 17%, Clackamas County 2.7 % and in Washington, Cowlitz County claims 5.5%.



### SCHEDULES, ROUTES & FARES

To find out more about CC Rider schedules & Routes:

<http://www.columbiacountyrider.com/schedules-2/>

To find out more about CC Rider Fares:

<http://ada.columbiacountyrider.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/2014-05-01-Zone-Pass.pdf>

Many of the County's work force who commutes outside the County are employed at jobs paying less than what's considered a family wage. Because of the huge financial burden of owning and maintaining a vehicle, many folks have discovered the Rider to be a valued and even vital alternative.

Factoring the price of car payments, vehicle maintenance, fuel costs and insurance, vehicle ownership becomes one of the highest line items on most family budgets. This doesn't even account for unfortunate -- and untimely -- maintenance surprise issues. Things like brakes or engine problems can put families on the hook for thousands of dollars. For those who live from pay

## TRI MET MAX CONNECTIONS

*The Rider connects with several Portland MAX trains*

**RED LINE:** Zoo, Portland Airport, Downtown PDX

**BLUE LINE:** Hillsboro, Gateway, Gresham

**GREEN LINE:** Clackamas Town Center, Portland State University, Gateway

**YELLOW:** Portland Expo Center, Portland State University, Downtown PDX

**For a complete MAX STATION GUIDE GO HERE:**

<http://www.trimet.org/max/stations/index.htm>

check to paycheck, this dilemma could catapult them into financial abyss.

Other segments of the Rider's demographic who rely on its service are senior citizens. Many who can no longer drive -- or elect not to do so -- look to the Rider's easy accessibility to fulfill some of the many things that other people take for granted: a trip to the grocery store, bank or to the pharmacy. This sounds trivial for most, but for many seniors it spells the difference between their independence and their confinement. Not all seniors have the luxury of relying on a loving family, a caring neighbor or fellow church members for help.

We are now entering a time where the Baby-Boomer class is aging; we'll see more seniors than at any other time in America's history. It's important that communities such as ours have transportation options in place to keep these older folks mobile so they too, may enjoy a decent quality of life standard.

Others who participate in the Rider's diverse swath of ridership are disabled folks who are often confined to wheel chairs or have sight-restrictions. Most of them -- just like seniors -- are also living on limited, fixed incomes. The Rider is ADA compliant and extends their popular *Dial-a-ride* service.

*Dial-A-Ride* is for people who have limited mobility. By simply contacting the Rider's dispatch office, customers may schedule a pick-up time, date and location for the vehicle to transport them. Interested in this service? Please dial **503.366.0159** or go to the Rider's website: <http://www.columbiacountyrider.com/dial-a-ride-4/> and click on the **Dial-A-Ride (DAR)** Application link for a PDF. For more information click the **Dial-A-Ride** Rider Guide link as well.

Other people who find the Rider useful are stay at home moms and teenagers who aren't driving yet, but need to get to their after school or summer jobs.

Interestingly enough, there's a fast growing trend of young people who have no desire to own a vehicle. This has started in cities like Portland and Seattle, and is rapidly expanding to smaller communities. The twenty-something or "Millennial's" -- as their often called -- have shunned the huge fiscal obligations of owning a vehicle and opted instead for public transportation. For those who are students or just recently out on their own, owning a vehicle can suck up more of their meager income than their rent.

But perhaps the most telling Rider demographic are those who actually don't need the Rider at all. These are folks who have sufficient incomes and own a family vehicle -- maybe even two -- yet enjoy commuting on the Rider for a few different reasons.

For instance, stress. Jumping in a car first thing in the morning for the 30-plus miles trek to Portland means dealing with the stress of traffic survival. When the amount of traffic is compounded ten-fold by anxious people rushing to get to work on time, there's a level of adrenaline that doesn't exactly bring out the best in people. Some folks simply choose to sit back with a fresh cup of coffee, read the paper or just close their eyes while the Rider takes them to their destination.

---

## ***FLEX ROUTES***

These are routes with fixed stops running on circulatory schedules. This design allows extra time built into the schedule enabling the bus to deviate a short distance to accommodate elderly or disabled passengers.

For more information about Flex Routes go here:

[http://ada.columbiacountyrider.com/?page\\_id=161](http://ada.columbiacountyrider.com/?page_id=161)

Then there's the factor of the added miles on their vehicles. People who have nice cars, usually don't care to pile on extra miles when they don't have to. For a

person living in St. Helens and driving to NE Portland, for instance, that's 60-miles round trip per day. Working five days a week means 300-miles a week or almost 15,000 miles year. These kinds of miles create enough wear and tear on a vehicle to depreciate its Blue Book value, accelerate the warranty and even increase insurance rates. Some of the people I've spoken with who once used to drive to work and have now decided to take the Rider, tell me the best part of their workday is when they get to relax in the morning by closing their eyes and when they get to unwind each night on their way home by listening to their favorite music on their ipods. For real testimonials from happy customers who enjoy using the Rider, watch the County's Facebook site: <http://www.FaceBook.com/ColumbiaCountyOregon>

## **Current Funding Issues:**

CC Rider Transit Director Janet Wright successfully cobbled enough state and federal grants together to purchase the land and the building from Friesen Lumber on Highway 30. The building was previously operating as a lumber broker's office and so renovations and additions were required to transform the old lumber building into an operational transit facility. The funds were also were also grant-funded with federal appropriations and a Connect Oregon grant.

"I used both sources of funding to buy the site and do the first phase of what we did here," Wright motions to the office. "Then I got a Flex Fund grant that was 1.12 million dollars to complete everything. We put in new windows and good energy efficiency type of things. We put in new lights, electrical, we had to do all that. We had to actually make it look like a transit center."

To be rewarded most federal and state grants, local funds must be matched. This means without local taxpayers stepping up, the grants won't be available. Rider fares aren't enough to sustain public transportation. This is the case in big cities like Chicago, right down to small communities like Columbia County. Even Portland funds MAX – their light rail system – with public tax dollars matched from state and federal grants.

But as most residents from Columbia County know, getting a levy passed is easier said than done. The latest effort to pass a jail levy – which could have left the county in extremely dire circumstances – passed with less than 400 votes, after three attempts. At the same time, voters rejected a fire and rescue levy on the same ballot. Other counties nearby have been much more generous, providing matching funds and earned grants to propel public transportation in their communities to high levels.

This becomes the source of Janet Wright's frustration as the director. If she were able to



persuade the local Columbia County voters to partially fund the County's local transportation, CC Rider would then be qualified to obtain a matched funding source from outside the local government.

“The difference between them and us,” Wright points out, “is that they are in special districts. They have a stable source of funding that they've been able to get past the communities. They've been able to get Clatsop County to provide the

matched dollars to be able to go out and get more federal and state dollars. As far as those grants go, we're all competing for the same funds. The problem is finding local cash to apply for the federal and state funding that's out there. Clatsop passed some kind of a levy. Of course River City, what they did was an addition to the sales tax. It was like a 2 or 3-cent addition to the sales tax in Longview; that provided them millions of dollars. They became a Special Transportation District. Their levy raises, I believe, the last I heard, was close to a million dollars a year.”

What Wright is referring to is River City, Longview's transportation system; Sunset Empire is Clatsop County's.

“What I'd like to do first is to establish a stable source of funding for public transportation in Columbia County so that there's a possibility I could reduce fares. If I could get a stable source of funding, I could possibly, I want to say 'possibly,' reduce fares to make it work where it's not as expensive for people to use it. Because you go to Sunset, River City, their fares are much lower than ours and they have ridership coming out their ears.”

Some of the ways Wright has been able to cut corners, are by bringing vehicle maintenance in-house. This way fuel costs are saved by not having to drive empty buses to and from Portland to

be worked on. Now, a maintenance contractor actually works onsite to keep from burning unnecessary fuel.

## **Future Service Needs:**

As the economy steadily rebounds and families from the Portland-Metro region resume their interest in Columbia County, we could expect people to realize that this is a great place to live. We currently have very promising business ventures at Port Westward which will require a skilled work force. Many of the folks who could potentially work there and currently reside in Scappoose or St. Helens, may also choose to take public transportation instead of driving. Portland Community College has expressed interest in expanding out to Columbia County and their two public presentations were well attended. Transportation for students from all ends of the County to the proposed campus will be essential. All this as Baby Boomers to do what they did back in their youth, multiply. Only this time as seniors and that means even more public transportation will be needed.

Besides these services, what are other options for transportation that could be instrumental in the near future? One issue that Wright understands and is trying to address is the claim from some folks that busses can't get people *exactly* where they need to go, at the *exact* time they need to be there. For that, she does have a solution brewing.

“People can't always get on the bus and have it work for them,” Wright confesses. “Wherever it is they're going or whatever it is they are doing. For example, if we had a person who needed to go to the doctor but they really didn't have a car or a way to get there, and our system wasn't providing a convenient way to get there. If they had a Zip car it would be cheaper, easier. They could go to their doctor's appointment and bring the car back, or leave it there, whatever it is they want. What I want to do is actually have Zip Car or Smart Car run that right from here. So it gives them an option, a transportation option.”

Wright's idea is an interesting one. If a person needs to drive to a particular destination and return at a specific time, a bus would not be feasible. Renting a car for the day means standing at a counter, filling out paperwork and leaving deposits. With an average price of renting a vehicle at about \$45 a day plus gas, this becomes expensive.

The Zip car model has proven to be extremely successful in markets such as Seattle, the Bay area, Portland and Boston. The customer pays a yearly membership fee of about \$50. This enables them to rent a vehicle simply by going online, no lines or windows. Once they enter the time they want the vehicle, then all they need to do is swipe their membership card to enter the car, take the keys and off they go. They'll be charged \$7 per hour and that includes fuel. Once they have completed their trip, they leave the vehicle where they found it. The system is less cumbersome than renting from a commercial rental, more convenient than a bus and pays for itself after two rentals.

“You can’t please everybody with public transportation. It’s not going to be convenient for everybody, so there’s multiple of ways that public transit has to work in order to make it useable for a majority of people.” Wright contends, “That Zip car would be one transportation option.”

Thinking about the needs of the future, is what makes today’s companies and organizations successful; the same can be said for counties. Transportation is growing and changing almost as rapidly as technology. As they both grow, eventually they will merge. Already we’ve seen driverless cars and phone apps that hail cars and buses in minutes.

As Columbia County rises up from the blows of the recession, we need to be smarter and more inclusive. Being able to offer transportation solutions to those who need it, alternatives to those who want it and at the same time, bringing those into the conversation who feel any publicly funded system must have their approval, is the challenge. It’s not only the big cities who must negotiate these challenges, now rural communities like Columbia County can and must, to save them from being thrown under the bus and unable to compete economically and socially in a fast and changing global world.