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City and Federal Backing for HIRTA Benefits Boone Residents

A \$441,096 federal grant awarded to the Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency will significantly enhance transportation services across seven counties and will benefit Boone residents who rely on HIRTA to help them get around.

U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley announced the grant, adding, “Strong transportation options boost communities and local economies. These federal resources will help improve Iowa’s transit system and ensure Iowans have access to reliable transportation.”

HIRTA executive director Julia Castillo said in a news release that the federal grant, which will be administered by the Iowa Department of Transportation, gives the agency the “opportunity to expand our services and improve the quality of life for the residents in our region.”

“This grant will enable us to invest in innovative technology, environmentally sustainable vehicles, and dedicated personnel to better serve our communities, especially older adults and riders with disabilities,” Castillo said.

HIRTA will leverage the Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility (ICAM) Pilot Program grant to upgrade its on-demand scheduling software, purchase new plug-in hybrid electric vehicles, and funding for a mobility manager position. Those initiatives will improve service reliability, expand capacity, and increase accessibility, particularly for older adults and riders with disabilities, Castillo noted.

The agency will also purchase 12 plug-in hybrid electric vehicles to support growing ridership and reduce the organization’s carbon footprint. These vehicles will be used for ambulatory riders, freeing up wheelchair-accessible vehicles for those in need. This move aligns with HIRTA’s commitment to environmental sustainability and the Iowa DOT’s goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

HIRTA officials anticipate an increase in the number of people served through reduced vehicle wait times, improved on-time performance, and enhanced vehicle utilization. By expanding spontaneous transit access and reducing reliance on single-occupancy vehicles, HIRTA aims to improve the region’s economic strength, community health, and safety while increasing the number of riders served.

The Boone City Council unanimously approved a \$14,500 grant to HIRTA at its May 20 regular meeting. Mayor Elijah Stines said that vote is the latest acknowledgement of the importance of the mobility that the agency provides for local residents. “Public transportation is a major challenge in rural areas such as ours. The City of Boone places a very high value on the service that HIRTA provides and our long partnership,” Stines added.

Such grants by communities and counties within the agency’s service area play an important role, said outreach coordinator Danny Schnathorst. “We need community funds to match federal dollars,” Schnathorst explained.

People who need transportation services are encouraged to contact HIRTA. Schnathorst emphasized that HIRTA serves people of all ages and abilities. “Our slogan is ‘For anyone, for any reason.’ That could be for kids that need to go to grandma and grandpa or for someone whose

car breaks down and is in the shop or maybe some doesn't feel like driving in the snow in the winter," he said.

To get that message out to the public, HIRTA's staff collaborates with communities and organizations to hold organize informational meetings, including a recent event at the Erickson Public Library's summer reading carnival. "We parked a vehicle there and opened it up for kids to check it out. We had coloring books as a handout for them. And the HIRTA bus was there so people could hop onboard and check it out, practice with the lift if they liked and so we could showcase to the community just how safe, easy and reliable it is," Schnathorst added.

Schnathorst said people who want to schedule a HIRTA ride can do by calling 1 (877) 686-0029, emailing erides@ridehirta.com or using the HIRTA On Demand app, which he encouraged riders to download their cellphones from links found on the FAQ page of the website, www.ridehirta.com. "The more people who use the app or use the website to schedule rides, the more it frees up our communications staff and reduces hold times," he said. "That also means more people will be able to get rides."

He also encouraged people to sign up for HIRTA's email updates.

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