

By DENNIS QUICK
Senior Staff Writer

For workers living in the tri-county areas rural outskirts and relying on buses to get them to work in the Charleston-North Charleston metropolitan area, the workday often is a long one.

They rise early in the morning for buses taking them to work. Buses bringing them home do not arrive until late afternoon. There is no metro-bound bus service between the early morning and late afternoon hours.

Steady, convenient bus service for rural residents who need to travel within their counties is also lacking.

As the region's population grows, with more people settling in the rural areas, rural residents need more transportation services, said William Hutto, executive director of the Moncks Corner-based Rural Transportation Management Association for Berkeley, Charleston and Dorchester counties.

Those services are forthcoming. By the end of June the RTMA will have six additional buses, bringing the association's bus fleet to 41.

The RTMA, which annually serves about 120,000 residents, is also trying to partner with other transportation agencies, human services agencies and faith-based groups to set up an informal transportation network consisting of volunteers shuttling rural residents to Mount Pleasant and Charleston. Volunteers would drive their own cars, Hutto said.

"We are trying to address additional transportation needs for growth as well as unserved areas of existing populations," Hutto said.

Those needs were identified during public meetings held last summer in Berkeley, Charleston and Dorchester

counties. Residents requested transportation services ranging from service for senior citizens to transportation for the disabled, he said.

People retiring to the Lowcountry's rural areas expect adequate transit service, Hutto added.

Increased rural transit service is important to the tri-county's economic development, said John Scarborough, Berkeley County's economic director.

"Getting workers to the workplace is a work force issue," Scarborough said, adding that workers do not always live where the jobs are.

When company executives consider regions to relocate or expand the business, they ask where the potential workers are located and how they would get to work, Scarborough said.

The new buses the RTMA ordered are 30 feet long and seat 20 passengers. The seating can be rearranged to accommodate seven wheel chairs. The association's bus fleet also includes three 40-foot buses seating 45 passengers.

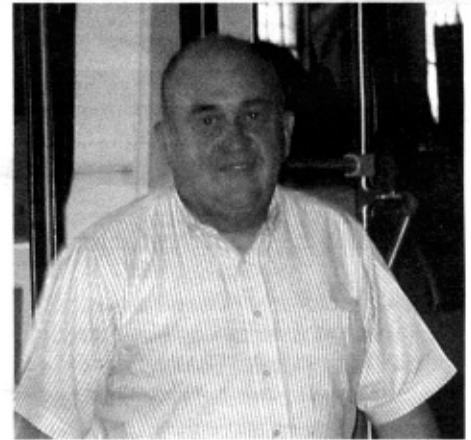
Getting enough buses isn't so much the problem as getting the money to pay for more drivers and cover fuel costs, Hutto said.

In 1996, the year the RTMA was created, the association's annual operating budget ranged between \$700,000 and \$800,000. Today, that budget is \$3 million, Hutto said.

The association receives Federal Transit Administration funds administered through the S.C. Department of Transportation, plus \$350,000 from Charleston County's half-cent sales tax. The RTMA's bus fares, which range from \$1.50 to \$3.00, provide the smallest percentage of the association's funding, Hutto said.

Advertisements on the sides of RTMA

PHOTO/DENNIS QUICK



William Hutto is executive director of the Rural Transportation Management Association based in Moncks Corner.

buses help the association get additional revenue. The association hopes to generate more income through a stepped up marketing campaign and a forthcoming Web site.

Population for the tri-county area is projected to reach 598,970 by 2010 and 650,760, according to the S.C. Office of Research and Statistics.

This means that county governments and agencies will have to work together to create an interconnected transit system involving the RTMA, the Charleston Area Regional Transportation Authority and new transportation modes including the possibility of light rail, Hutto said.

Scarborough agrees. "All public transportation systems are going to have to be studied. We have to look at regional transportation more and more," he said. ■

Dennis Quick is senior staff writer for the *Business Journal*. E-mail him at dquick@charlestonbusiness.com.