

New shuttle service headed for Devens

By Anne O'Connor

POSTED: 03/10/2017 07:36:49 AM EST

DEVENS -- Nearly 5,000 people work in Devens and more workers are needed. Without a vehicle, getting to work can be a challenge.

Not everyone taking a \$12- to \$13-per-hour entry-level job has a car. Many Devens workers come from the Fitchburg/Leominster area and there is no public transportation for commuting.

Professionals from Cambridge and Boston can take the commuter rail. But, the reverse commuters need a bicycle to travel the last few miles from the stations in Ayer or Shirley to get to work. There is no shuttle.

Help is on the way. A public/private collaboration is in the works that will bring a scheduled bus or van route that includes those stations, Fitchburg, Leominster and Devens.

Thanks to the early morning and late day timing, that same vehicle can be used for a route during the day. Non-drivers will be able to travel within Devens and Ayer, including Nashoba Valley Medical Center, and to shopping at Whitney Field and the stores at Orchard Hill Park Drive in Leominster.

The need for public transportation came up in conversation, said Thatcher Kezer, vice president of Devens at MassDevelopment. The agency oversees the economic redevelopment of the former military base. Governmental functions are run by the Devens Enterprise Commission.

A red flag went up when companies in Devens started talking about expanding or consolidation, said Steve Sawin, president and CEO of Operon Resource Management.

The company provides temporary staffing for some of the advanced manufacturing in Devens. "We started the chant for transportation back in 2000," Sawin said. Since then, an entire generation of industries, manufacturing and distribution has come and gone.

Sawin met with Kezer to get the ball rolling again. "To his credit, he got it right away," Sawin said.

When workers are offered a job and learn the company location, they know there is no way for them to get there without a car, Kezer said.

Perhaps a dozen positions a month that could have been filled are not, Sawin said.

Adding to the transportation challenge, Kezer said, is the schedule. The advanced-manufacturing plants in Devens have a 12-hour per day schedule, seven days a week.

With millions of dollars invested in facilities and clean rooms, there is no downtime, Sawin said.

The Montachusett Regional Planning Commission was called in. They plan for MART, the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority.

The only existing public transportation for Devens is very, very limited, said Transit Director George Kahale. A van originates in Fitchburg and Leominster and takes patients to the Boston hospitals three times a day. Recently a stop was added for Devens.

"It does not help the workers," he said.

A new plan was developed.

The proposed route for a new bus or van will be partially funded by riders. The plan is to have the remaining costs split three ways.

Businesses on Devens will pick up a third of the remaining costs, MART will pick up a third and the rest will come from assessments Ayer and Shirley already pay to the state.

Instead of the town's annual state transportation assessment going to the MBTA, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, it can be channeled to regional transit authorities, Kahale said.

Improved transportation to and from the stations will increase commuter rail use, benefiting the MBTA, he said.

Ayer selectmen voted to use the town's assessment to support the local bus route. The vote was unanimous after the plan after was presented on Feb. 21 by Peter Lowitt, director of the Devens Enterprise Commission.

Westford has a similar program and it has been big for them, Selectman Chris Hillman said.

Shirley has not yet voted. Since Kezer presented to the board, new people have taken office.

The work is still in progress. MRPC has heard back from about 10 businesses, Kahale said.

Once the funding is lined up, it should only take a couple of weeks for the transportation to be up and running, Kezer said.

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