

# GWTA offers residents no-cost rides for vaccine

## Ridership, staff decline during pandemic

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The Goldsboro-Wayne Transportation Authority is providing no-cost transportation to residents needing access to the COVID-19 vaccine.

The free rides are covered through \$28,000 in funding the GWTA received from the N.C. Department of Transportation and the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, as part of \$2.5 million in coronavirus relief funding provided to transit agencies across the state.

The no-cost rides are available to any resident, as part of the state's effort to provide access to the vaccine to people needing transportation.

"Fighting the COVID-19 pandemic is everybody's business, and every organization has something they can do to help," said J. Eric Boyette, DOT secretary. "We are committed to doing everything we can to help get North Carolina vaccinated as quickly and easily as possible."

As part of the effort, GWTA is partnering with the Wayne County Health Department and the Goldsboro Housing Authority to provide free transportation to vaccinate minorities, low-income people and underserved groups in the Wayne County area, said Don Willis, GWTA director.

On Monday, GWTA buses went to area neighborhoods and transported people to and



News Argus/TYLER STOCKS

Adrieen Eley, left, of Goldsboro, takes a transfer ticket from driver Chester McClarin as she gets off the bus Thursday afternoon at the Goldsboro-Wayne Transportation Authority station on North Carolina Street.

from the county's COVID-19 vaccination site, at the former Bussmann building on Dixie

Trail, where they were able to receive the vaccine.

Willis said GWTA has pro-

vided round-trip transportation to 50 people who the health department and the housing authority identified as needing the service.

Willis said the state funding will continue to help pay for transportation for residents needing access to the vaccine.

"We're putting that money in a holding account, and that money will only be used to pay for those trips like the ones that we just did," he said. "As we do those trips, that money is 100% for what it cost to do those trips."

Since March, the pandemic has resulted in decreased ridership on GWTA buses and vans.

The number of people riding GWTA buses has declined by 25% and ridership on GWTA

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vans has dropped by 50% since the pandemic took hold a year ago, Willis said.

"Last year compared to where we are now, the urban bus service is about 75%, so we've lost about 25% of our ridership compared to the prior year," Willis said. "People are clearly choosing to ride less, and they're clearly choosing only to take the most essential trips."

GWTA, which employed 48 people

a year ago, now has 40 workers.

Despite the drop in ridership and staffing numbers, GWTA is still operating and serving Wayne County residents.

"I think overall we're doing very well," Willis said. "We never stopped operating, and the nature of these trips is critical, so we did not make any decisions to cut staffing, but we did lose some staff. We had individuals who retired or no longer felt they should be out in the public for personal reasons.

"We have lost some staffing, and it's been basically commiserating

with the loss in ridership."

The loss of staff, which was mostly drivers, has caused stress, but Willis said his employees are handling the situation well.

Having access to public transportation is critical for everyday activities, such as grocery store trips, doctor visits and even going to and from work, Willis said.

Adrieen Eley and Donald Peters, who were at the GWTA station at 103 N. Carolina St. on Thursday, said they appreciate having public transportation available in the city.

Eley just moved from

New Jersey and said she was worried that Wayne County wouldn't have public transportation.

"They've been making sure we're safe and everything like that," Eley said of GWTA staff. "Since I've been down here, they've been good and catered to our needs. I'm glad they have it down here. I'm so used to getting on a bus. If you ain't got a car, it comes in handy, and I love it."

Peters, who is wheelchair-bound, said he appreciates having a way to get around town.