

END OF THE ROAD FOR WOMEN'S TRANSIT AUTHORITY: [ALL EDITION]

Pat Schneider The Capital Times . Pat Schneider The Capital Times.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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The first sign of difficulty came early last year when WTA was late with its 2004 program report, said Deedra Atkinson, United Way's senior vice president of community impact. When the report on 2004 operations had not materialized by November 2005, United Way decided to withhold a \$1,666 monthly payment - part of a \$20,000 grant for 2005 - as an incentive to get the report completed, Atkinson said. That's when the agency first learned there was a tax liability, she said.

Executive director Susan Jeannette left in 2003; interim director Lori O'Konek served until [Robin Kinney]'s hiring in late 2005. Kinney declined to release an audit of 2004 operations, received just weeks ago. But a consultant's assessment of WTA operations in 2004 cited serious funding issues and lack of accountability for board members, the director and staff.

FULL TEXT

Ernie Mavis, 97, has been counting on Women's Transit Authority to take him from his east side apartment to the supermarket every 10 days or so .

Mavis, a retired Oscar Mayer meat cutter who said he gave up driving less than a year ago, was riding with WTA driver Rebecca Strome to the store Friday when he was told that the free-ride agency would be closing in a week.

How will Mavis get to the store for groceries?

He shrugged. "Unless my kids help me ...," said Mavis, who uses a cane to help him get around.

An unpaid federal tax debt of more than \$60,000 forced the WTA board of directors to vote Monday to shut down and dissolve the agency.

The move left users of the free ride service operated by the 33- year-old nonprofit agency scrambling for transportation and funding agencies floundering to come up with a replacement plan.

But signs of trouble in the agency have been mounting for the past few years, and the high public profile and phalanx of volunteers who once fueled popular fundraisers have long been a thing of the past.

Doua Vang, a program director for Kajsib House, which serves elderly Hmong, said the demise of WTA will leave dozens of people without transportation to his north side center and another Mental Health Center of Dane County

program conducted in Oregon.

"It will be very difficult for people to get there," he said.

Vang said that WTA had been reliable, and he was surprised it was closing. "It was very sudden and gave us little time to look for other transportation," he said.

WTA was formed to provide safe nighttime rides for women, but had since expanded its services to include everyone. Its nighttime rides were suspended this week, and other transportation services will end next Friday.

The city of Madison paid WTA \$83,919 for its night ride service last year through the Office of Community Services and awarded it an additional \$5,000 through Mayor Dave Cieslewicz's initiative for the Allied Drive neighborhood.

The agency's abrupt closing "was a surprise to a lot of people," mayoral aide George Twigg said Friday.

He said the mayor's office was "looking at what the options are - it's a challenge to fill the void left by WTA."

Dane County contributed \$5,300 last year to the night ride service, said county Department of Human Services spokesman Dave Carlson.

WTA also billed Dane County \$74,000 last year for rides to medical appointments for people eligible for medical assistance - charges paid with federal money funneled through the county.

WTA Executive Director Robin Kinney said that the agency provided 20,000 rides last year, 40 percent under contracts and the rest to people who called on their own.

Kinney had been on the job less than three months, overseeing a dozen drivers on staff.

She said she did not know the full extent of WTA's money problems until early December, when the IRS demanded payment of \$108,000 in payroll taxes.

The IRS dropped penalties and interest to reduce the debt, and \$6,000 was raised in a last-ditch effort to save the agency, she said.

Kinney said the taxes were deducted from employees' paychecks, but since 2003 were used for general expenses instead of being paid to the IRS.

"It was an oversight," Kinney said this week in the cramped WTA office on South Park Street, cluttered with half-packed furniture.

"It slipped through our cracks," said board President Angela Donahue.

Kinney faults United Way of Dane County for pulling funding when it learned the extent of WTA's debt, instead of trying to help the agency.

United Way officials said they provided the only help requested - the donated time of an attorney consultant - in mid-2005.

The first sign of difficulty came early last year when WTA was late with its 2004 program report, said Deedra Atkinson, United Way's senior vice president of community impact. When the report on 2004 operations had not materialized by November 2005, United Way decided to withhold a \$1,666 monthly payment - part of a \$20,000 grant for 2005 - as an incentive to get the report completed, Atkinson said. That's when the agency first learned there was a tax liability, she said.

United Way director of marketing Erika Monroe-Kane said WTA services fit with United Way's agenda. "We recognize the services they were providing are important. That's part of the reason we wanted to work with them."

Kinney said the debt scared off funders. "Having tax issues is taboo," she said.

WTA by its own accounting has been operating in the red for two years. A 2003 IRS filing shows a \$43,729 deficiency, while the 2004 report shows \$25,810 more in expenses than revenue.

And that's with employee tax money apparently going for expenses.

Executive director Susan Jeannette left in 2003; interim director Lori O'Konek served until Kinney's hiring in late 2005. Kinney declined to release an audit of 2004 operations, received just weeks ago. But a consultant's assessment of WTA operations in 2004 cited serious funding issues and lack of accountability for board members, the director and staff.

There had been no volunteers working at WTA recently; the agency seemed too disorganized to recruit or effectively employ them, one staffer said.

WTA didn't use a needs assessment to determine if someone should get a free ride, dispatcher Anne Eudaly said.

The agency served the working poor, and "if somebody asked, we assumed they needed a ride."

All kinds of people did, she said: elderly and disabled, night shift workers, single mothers with kids.

While she's driving Madison's streets, Strome's been thinking about what the closing of WTA will mean for her riders.

She was struck by the realization of its impact on people, like Mavis, who used the service to get to the grocery store.

Fresh potatoes are likely to give way to boxed, along with other foods too bulky or heavy to lug home on a bus.

"It means lower quality food," she said.

What's more, she said, there are some WTA riders who have been able to work second and third shifts at locations not served at night by Metro.

She wondered whether they are going to lose their jobs.

"People who own cars assume buses can take care of everyone else," Strome mused.

"But there are so many reasons people can't ride buses. It's not uncommon for someone to have three kids under 5,"

she said. "You don't have that many hands."

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Illustration

Caption: DAVID SANDELL/THE CAPITAL TIMES Ernie Mavis, 97, gets into a Women's Transit Authority vehicle Friday for a ride to the grocery store. He gave up driving within the past year and learned during his Friday ride that the agency he has depended on is closing in a week.

DETAILS

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