

Nicollet County volunteer transportation system benefits St. Peter's seniors

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Posted by Jessica Bies jbies@stpeterherald.com

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Bob Maharry loves to give people rides. From St. Peter to Mankato to Rochester, he is part of a Nicollet County volunteer transportation program that has helped area seniors get out of the house and around southern Minnesota since 1976.

“These are the kinds of services that make St. Peter a nice, healthy place to live,” Maharry said.

Senior Services Coordinator Sylvia Perron said not only does the service provide rides to seniors who may not have a car or can no longer drive, but it helps them maintain their independence by making it possible to attend important appointments and conduct other personal business.

“This service, I feel, really lets seniors remain independent and remain in their own homes,” Perron said.

Open to Nicollet County residents older than 60, those who use the program must be able to walk and cannot be wheelchair bound. Volunteer drivers, registered with the county, drive participants to doctor and dentist appointments, social services agencies, nutritional meal sites, senior centers and sites where they may be volunteering.

The program is completely free, though the riders are encouraged to give donations. The transportation program is funded by Nicollet County with donations from the St. Peter United Way, Lafayette United Fund and Nicollet Fund Drive.

“We don’t want to take away from neighbors or family doing it,” Perron said. “It’s for people that have no other form of transportation.”

The program currently serves about 150 people, some who call for rides several times a month. About 100 are from St. Peter.

Perron said the program offers rides to Mankato, the Twin Cities and Rochester. Depending on the length of the drive, the trips could take the entire day.

There are currently 30 volunteer drivers, some who give rides more often than others. Perron said typically the drivers are also senior citizens or retirees, some are even older than their passengers.

The volunteer drivers are reimbursed 56.5 cents per mile, Perron said, adding that a typical drive across the county costs the driver \$14. They are also reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses. Annually, the program spends \$20,000 on mileage.

In 2012, the volunteer drivers spent more than 3,000 hours on the road, driving about 36,000 miles. The volunteers use their own cars to transport the seniors and often wait for their passengers while they attend their appointments.

“My volunteer drivers are wonderful,” Perron said. “They will wait in Mankato two to three hours sometimes... a lot of them think they benefit from it just as much as the riders.”

One volunteer, Bob Maharry, has been involved with the program for almost six years. A retired Presbyterian clergyman, he said he enjoys the more social aspects of the job.

“It’s an opportunity to be out and meet people I might not meet ordinarily “ Maharry said.

Maharry said services like the volunteer transportation system make St. Peter a more attractive place for seniors to live. He estimated that he drives 200-250 miles each month giving rides to area seniors, many of whom would not be able to make it to appointments without the assistance.

“A clinical appointment in Mankato may as well be 100 miles away,” Maharry said of his passengers.

Maharry said he often runs errands while waiting for his passenger’s appointments to conclude and usually carries a Nook with him so he can read while in the waiting room. Even though the job involves a fair amount of downtime, he said he enjoys getting out of the house and helping some of his fellow residents.

“We visit in the car and that’s one of the things I enjoy,” Maharry said. “I enjoy people.”

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