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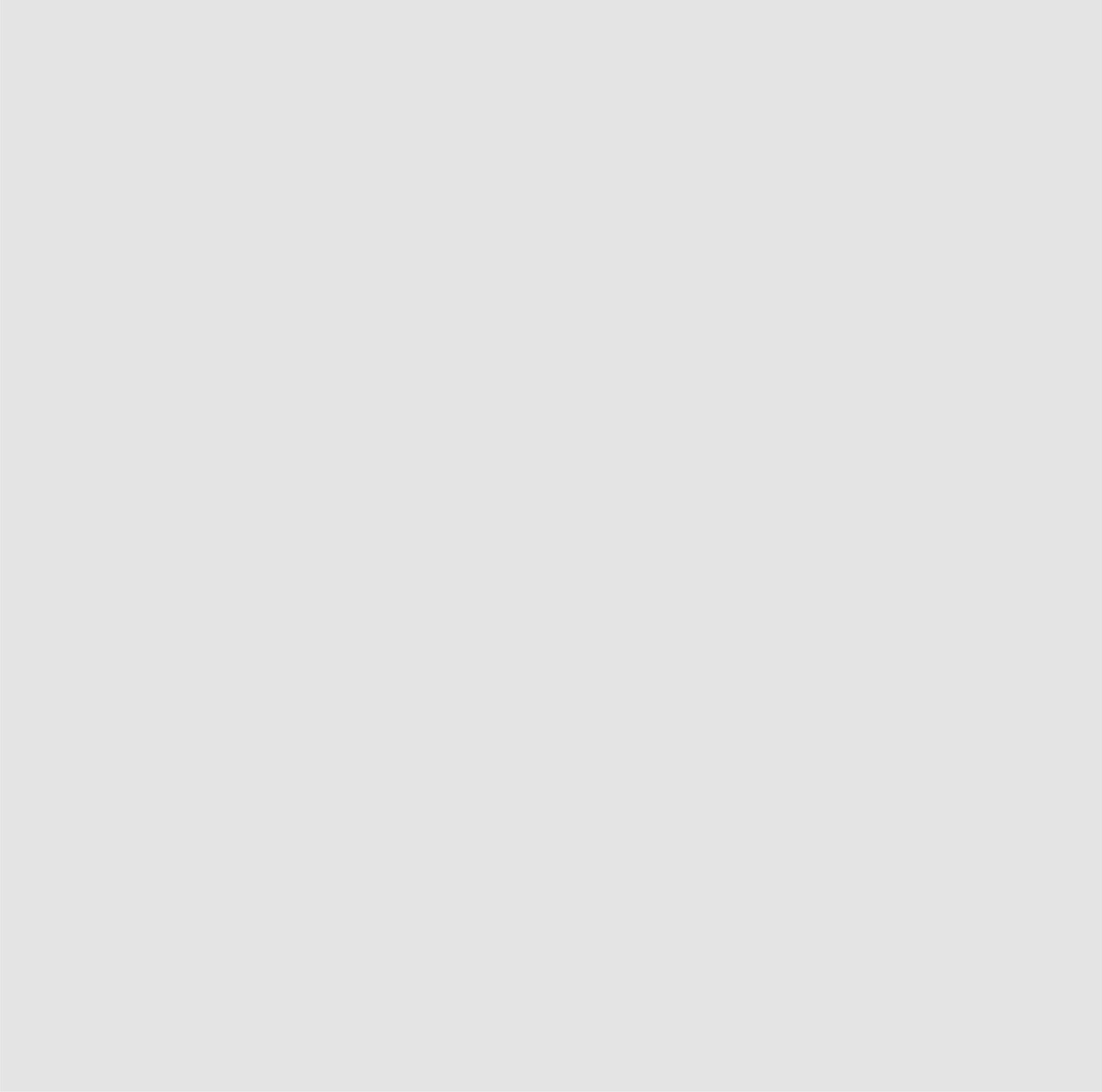
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New transit study to involve WKU, GO bg Transit

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com 1 hr ago



Director of Neighborhood and Community Services Brent Childers speaks during the Bowling Green Civic Assembly Town Hall on Thursday, February 22, 2018, at La Gala. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Austin Anthony

Less than three years after contracting with a consultant to study Bowling Green's GO bg Transit public transit system, the Bowling Green-Warren County Metropolitan Planning Organization is ready to solicit bids on a new study that will include an examination of Western Kentucky University's Topper Transit system.

Plans for releasing a request for proposals to get bids from consultants were discussed at Monday's meeting of the MPO policy committee. MPO Coordinator Karissa Lemon said the study will be paid for with \$100,000 in Federal Transit Administration funds, \$11,000 from WKU and \$14,000 from the city of Bowling Green.

The study will include short-term analysis of the transit systems and a long-term look at a possible change in how the two transit systems are structured.

"It will be a three-part study," said Brent Childers, director of neighborhood and community services for the city of Bowling Green. "The first part will look at WKU's system, and the second will look at GO bg Transit.

"The third part will be a long-term study looking at what it would look like if the two systems were to merge."

Combining the two bus systems might not be that far-fetched, according to Childers and others who pointed to the example of the Oxford-University Transit Commission in Oxford, Miss., home of the University of Mississippi.

Formed 10 years ago, the Oxford-University Transit Commission was a city-university partnership from the beginning. Its buses carried a total of 1.4 million passengers last year, according to Ron Biggs, the commission's general manager.

Biggs said Oxford's transit system, like GO bg Transit, is funded largely by FTA money. He said the transit system receives 80 percent of its administrative and capital costs from federal money that is funneled through the Mississippi Department of Transportation. The other 20 percent is covered by the city and the university.

"It has been very successful," Biggs said. "It takes cooperation from both parties to make it happen."

Biggs said Ole Miss students and staff aren't charged to ride Oxford's transit system but that the university is billed each month.

Oxford's transit system is slightly larger than a combined system in Bowling Green would be. Lemon said Topper Transit carries close to 800,000 passengers per year. GO bg Transit has averaged just over 100,000 passengers per year over the past three years, but that number dipped by about 20 percent last year after recommendations from a \$55,000 study of the system by consultant WSP Parsons Brinkerhoff were implemented.

"Ridership on GO bg Transit has declined," Bowling Green Mayor Bruce Wilkerson said. "We're trying to figure out now the best way to make sure transit is available. This (the new study) is an opportunity to look at other types of transit.

"You have to look at everything or you leave out potential options for improvement. We're going to look at as many options as possible and try to make the best decisions."

WKU Parking and Transportation Director Jennifer Tougas said she's open to all options that will improve public transit both for WKU students and the general public.





"This first phase of the study will look for efficiencies in our route design and staffing," Tougas said. "We went through some budget cuts last year and have scaled back some."

Tougas hopes for results of the study of Topper Transit by next spring so she can implement whatever efficiencies are recommended. Longer term, she is open to investigating a merger of Topper Transit and GO bg Transit.

"There are pros and cons for both systems to doing that (merging)," Tougas said. "The thing we would bring to the table is high ridership. If that's a resource that can help GO bg Transit, then it may be good. Does it make sense to combine? What would it look like and how would it be managed?"

Whatever consultant is hired will try to answer those questions and figure out how to merge two systems that are structured differently. GO bg Transit receives the majority of its funding from the FTA. Topper Transit, although it has purchased eight of its fleet of 13 buses with FTA grants, is university-funded.

GO bg Transit is operated by Community Action of Southern Kentucky, and that agency's interim executive director, Don Butler, said he is open to any changes that will improve the bus system.

Butler said the earlier study focused strictly on the routes for the six buses GO bg Transit operates. He's expecting this three-part study to be much broader and possibly lead to some big changes.

"Any way we can improve, we're open to it," Butler said. "For now, we're going to continue to transport people to work, to school or to doctor's appointments. We're going to continue focusing on getting our veterans to Veterans Administration appointments, and we're going to do it in the most cost-effective and customer-friendly way possible."

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