



MEDIA ADVISORY – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: February 29, 2012

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Benzie Bus Reaches Record Ridership in 2011, Plans More Service to Traverse City *By Popular Request, the Bus System Also Now Offers a Discounted “Student Pass”*

HONOR, Mich. – The Benzie Bus system provided a record 71,590 one-way passenger trips in 2011, reflecting a 3-percent increase from the prior year and the first time that annual ridership eclipsed the 70,000 mark. The jump in demand for bus service came as more local people sought an affordable alternative to high gasoline prices and car costs during tough economic times.

Benzie Bus also stayed busy in 2011 with several other developments, as the public bus system completed its first five years of service in December, opened its new headquarters east of Honor in November, and won voter approval by a 3-1 margin in May to renew its funding for another five years.

The flurry of activity occurred as Benzie Bus – like its passengers – continued to find ways to ride out the shaky economy, with the bus system last year extending an employee wage freeze while coping with high fuel prices and reduced tax revenue due to depressed local property values.

“In these challenging times, it’s a privilege to help local people preserve their independence, get to work and school and other local destinations, and save money on transportation expenses,” said Susan Miller, Benzie Bus Executive Director. “I’m very proud of our dedicated staff of drivers, dispatchers, mechanics, and managers who have stepped up to meet the challenge every day with a positive attitude and a commitment to help their neighbors.”

About half of Benzie Bus’s ridership comes from the general population, including many commuters and customers of local businesses, about 30 percent from senior citizens ages 60 and older, and about 20 percent from people with disabilities.

While most bus trips begin and end within Benzie County, Benzie Bus in 2011 also provided 8,793 one-way rides either to or from Traverse City, and another 561 one-way trips to or from the Manistee County line, where passengers can transfer between the Benzie and Manistee County bus systems.

Ridership to Traverse City among commuters and others is expected to climb even higher starting this fall, when Benzie Bus intends to significantly increase the frequency and convenience of its regional route in cooperation with the BATA bus system, which serves Grand Traverse and Leelanau counties. While both bus systems are finalizing their plans, the concept is for Benzie Bus to connect perhaps hourly during peak periods of the day with a BATA bus in Interlochen, where passengers would transfer and take the BATA bus along U.S. 31 to Traverse City – making only a few quick, key stops along the way.

Currently, Benzie Bus provides service to Traverse City just three times a day and takes an indirect route that meanders from U.S. 31 and requires about 1 hour and 40 minutes to travel from Frankfort to downtown Traverse City.

“The goal is to collaborate regionally to deliver the kind of increased public transportation service among cities, villages, and counties that thousands of people called for during The Grand Vision,” said BATA

Executive Director Tom Menzel, referring to the six-county public-private planning process that Benzie County commissioners helped fund and that several counties are now working to implement through various transportation, energy, housing, and food and farm projects.

The new Benzie Bus headquarters on U.S. 31 east of Honor features a public lobby that could be used as a bus stop for the regional route, and the location also could provide a drop-off point or park-and-ride option for commuters wishing to leave their vehicle behind to save money. The versatile facility is already being used in other collaborative ways by providing cost effective, heavy-vehicle maintenance services to other local governments and functioning as a backup operations center if needed by the Benzie County Emergency Management Department.

This year, Benzie Bus also anticipates an uptick in the number of riders from among local youth with the recent introduction of a “student pass,” which discounts the price of a one-way trip by 33 percent to \$1 for students 6-12 years old and \$2 for students ages 13 and up. The student pass is sold as a 40-ride punch card pass, with each own-way trip requiring one punch. For all other riders, the full fare costs \$3 for a one-way trip, and the discounted fare is \$1.50 for senior citizens, people with disabilities, and children 12 and under.

The Benzie Bus system employs 22 full-time and 15 part-time employees and currently operates 20 wheelchair lift-equipped buses year-round, Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., and Saturday from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. Most of the buses also include a bicycle rack to help passengers extend their trip.

In March, for the first time, Benzie Bus also expects to begin offering rides using two full-size minivans, 2012 Dodge Grand Caravans, which should help reduce fuel costs during less busy times, such as Saturdays. Both vehicles can carry up to seven passengers, with one of the vans modified to accommodate up to two wheelchairs and three other people, as needed.

For more information, or to schedule a ride, call Benzie Bus at 231-325-3000 or toll free at 866-325-3380; the bus system’s website can be accessed at www.BenzieBus.com.

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