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Tennessee Gears Up for Statewide Rural ITS Program

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The state of Tennessee recently awarded a statewide Intelligent Transportation Systems contract for rural public transit providers to RouteMatch Software Inc., an Atlanta-based company that is currently handling statewide software deployments in Iowa, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

By combining funds from 5311 and earmarking funds from 5309, the state has almost \$6 million to spend on outfitting 11 rural transit agencies, which collectively provide service in all 95 of the state's counties.

"Many agencies in our state have been anxious to automate and reap the benefits of technology-driven dispatching," said Diane Davidson, director of Tenn. DOT's Division of Public Transit, Rail and Waterways. "I'm a firm believer that technology is the foundation for achieving the goals of United We Ride and coordinated human service transportation. This statewide implementation will enable us to achieve the coordinated planning, operational efficiency, and level of service that our customers deserve."

The Mid-Cumberland Human Resource Agency, one of the state's leading rural providers, procured the ITS project for the state. Tenn. DOT formulated an ITS evaluation committee made up of public providers and department staffers to assist in the process, with technical support coming from TranSystems. Now that the contract is completed, Tenn. DOT noted that other agencies across the state can "piggyback" off the same contract and avoid having to go through the procurement process again.

"ITS is exactly what rural public transit in Tennessee needs. Especially in these times of decreasing transit dollars and rising fuel costs, we must operate more efficiently and cut costs where we can," said Jeff Simpson, MCHRA's transportation director. "And since the last thing any transit system wants to do is raise fares, ITS will help us cut operational costs and keep fares from being increased."

The statewide project has clearly defined goals: the state's rural providers will be able to purchase ITS software and hardware to get better fleet and service data and operate each

system more efficiently. The project will bring paratransit scheduling and dispatch software and computer-aided dispatch and Automatic Vehicle Location technology from RouteMatch, and Mobile Data Terminals from Mentor Engineering.

MCHRA, like the rest of Tennessee's rural public transit providers, hopes that ITS will move it toward a paperless system. Tennessee's ITS program possibly could also add other services to rural transit in Tennessee, such as video surveillance systems, transit passes/cards, automated fareboxes, and Interactive Voice Response to confirm trips.

"This program is long overdue. We really look forward to gaining valuable knowledge and being able to serve our current and potential customers better," said Rebecca Harris, transportation director at the Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency.

"Coming from FedEx, I know how important technology will be to reducing fuel and maintenance costs and really helping every aspect of our organization," said Wesley Fowler, transportation director at the Delta Human Resource Agency. "We can also eliminate the downtime experience by our drivers and make everyone much more productive."

While each agency can determine the appropriate mix of technologies to help its specific operation, Tenn. DOT will continue to oversee development from the state perspective. "Our role is to continue to provide leadership and stay alert to additional funding, process, and procurement opportunities," said Davidson.

Although the state is just now kicking off the implementation, many are looking ahead and already have their sights set on additional benefits. "This is truly going to transform the way we look at dispatching, and we look forward to the day where adjacent systems can share service response and even prepare our rural system to participate in the 511 program," Davidson added.