

# Benzie Bus requests millage hike amid rising costs

**Executive director: 'We know it is a big ask, and everybody is feeling the rising costs'**

By [Colin Merry](#), Reporter, Benzie County Record Patriot May 15, 2024



Benzie Bus is asking voters to approve of a new operating millage to cover the costs of increased demand for services, such as the weekend trolley services in the summer. Jacqueline Southby/Benzie Bus

The [Benzie County Transportation Authority](#) will be asking voters for a new operating millage for [Benzie Bus](#) to accommodate an increase in riders and expenses.

The authority [is asking for 1 mill, up from the 0.50 mill operating millage](#) last approved in 2020. If the new millage is approved, it would go into effect in 2026 for five years and raise an estimated \$1.7 million in its first year.

## **Benzie Bus at a glance**

Benzie Bus reported seeing the following increases:

- 15% increase in riders from 2022-23;
- On track to have another 15% increase for 2023-24; and
- A nearly 40% increase in expenses from 2019.

The current millage rate is 0.48 mills, reduced from the original 0.50 [due to the Headlee Rollback Amendment](#). The Headlee Rollback Amendment requires that tax rates be rolled back if the increase in equalized value is greater than that of the consumer price index.

The millage request will be on the Aug. 6 ballot.

"We know it is a big ask, and everybody is feeling the rising costs. We have had an increase in demand for our services."

"This millage goes toward general operating expenses," said Benzie Bus executive director Jessica Carland. "Everything from labor and employee benefits to tires, oil and gasoline.

## **Increase in riders**

Carland said Benzie Bus has seen the biggest increases in seniors and students using ride services. She also said medical rides were increasing.

"We had a 15% increase in riders from 2022-23, and we're on track to have another 15% increase in the 2023-24 year," she said. "We've also seen nearly a 40% increase in expenses from 2019."

Carland said an aging population in Benzie County, and more parents using Benzie Bus as transportation for students to and from school, as well as extracurricular activities, is driving both the increase in riders and expenses.

She also said labor and fringe benefits, as well as insurance costs, are driving the increase in expenses.

An aging fleet is adding to the expenses.

"There are still supply chain issues for transit buses," Carland said. "We have an old fleet and we are waiting on buses we ordered two years ago. We're spending more on major mechanical needs. We recently had to replace some engines."

## **Benzie Bus services**

Benzie Bus is a curb to curb response transit system, offering rides from people's homes to destinations in Benzie, Manistee and Grand Traverse counties, Carland said.

"We do more than just take people to and from a bus stop," she said. "We will take you from your home to the grocery store, doctor appointment or your job."

She said trips to Grand Traverse and Manistee counties were often for medical appointments or work related.

"They are more personalized medical rides," Carland said.

Benzie Bus also has a trolley service in the summer from 5 p.m. to midnight on Friday and Saturday.

"It helps reduce the strain on traffic and parking in the summer and helps some hourly employees get to work and home from work," Carland said.

Aside from usual medical appointment rides, Benzie Bus works with Benzie Senior Resources to provide health rides on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

Benzie Bus was started in 2007.

## **Ballot language**

Benzie Transportation Authority millage proposal

Shall the Benzie Transportation Authority, county of Benzie, Michigan, be authorized to levy annually an additional new millage in an amount not to exceed 1.0 mill (\$1.00 for each \$1,000 of taxable value) against all taxable property within the Benzie Transportation Authority limits (the jurisdictional limits of Benzie County) for a period of five (5) years, 2026 to 2030, inclusive, for the purpose of providing funds for all public transportation authority purposes permitted by law, including all capital and operating expenses and providing transportation services to seniors and persons with disabilities?

The estimate of the revenue the Benzie Transportation Authority will collect if the millage is approved and levied by the Benzie Transportation Authority in the first year (2026) is approximately \$1,707,000.

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