

Grant OK'd for farmworker van program

By Chuck Schultz/Senior Staff Writer

About \$3.1 million in state grant money has been approved for a pilot program to buy and operate vans for safely transporting hundreds of Santa Maria Valley farmworkers to and from the fields each day.

That grant of Ag Worker Transportation Funding, the largest of five doled out statewide by Caltrans Thursday, will be used over the next 30 months to buy a total of 31 vans in several phases, beginning early next year, said Matt Dobberteen, alternative transportation manager for the county Public Works Department.

“We're absolutely thrilled,” he said Friday, that all the grant money sought for the startup program was awarded by the state.

Daily operation of the van pools will be overseen by the Santa Maria Organization of Transportation Helpers (SMOOTH).

The program will be closely patterned after one that has been successfully operating in Kings County for more than five years.

“I'm pleased to say ours was the largest of five grants given out” by Caltrans, which totaled just under \$10 million, Dobberteen added. “The state is extremely excited to work with us, and is pleased with our efforts” in launching the program with nine, used vans purchased last month from Kings County.

Money for those vehicles was allocated in late October by the county Board of Supervisors, from \$150,000 previously set aside by the county and Santa Maria city.

Farmworkers using the van pools will be each charged between \$3 and \$6 per day, depending on how far they ride. Drivers won't have to pay the fares, but otherwise won't be paid.

To qualify as drivers, they must have to have valid licenses, be insurable, pass a physical exam and clear a DMV check of their 10-year driving history.

Dobberteen said some of the used vans are expected to be in operation by the end of this month. The first batch of new vans probably will be purchased by spring.

Advocates, who have repeatedly urged such a program for more than two years, contend it will reduce the number of farmworkers being driven to and from work by unlicensed or uninsured drivers, often in unsafe vehicles.

The supervisors unanimously agreed to fund the program through June 2008, but will hear a report on its operation prior to that before deciding whether to extend it through June 2010, when the state grant expires.

Anyone interested in being one of the vanpool drivers is encouraged to call the project manager for SMOOTH, Rosemary Luque, at 922-8476.

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