

[By Mike Faher](#)

Deerfield Valley Transit Association finally is getting a home.

It comes courtesy of a \$3 million federal grant announced Wednesday by Vermont's congressional delegation, money that will cover most of the cost of the association's new, centralized headquarters and biodiesel-production facility in Wilmington.

Landing the grant is the culmination of years of planning and work by leaders of the organization, which is known for its Holstein-themed "MOOver" buses.

"We couldn't be happier, and we couldn't be more grateful," said Susan Haughwout, chairwoman and a founding member of the association's board.

The transit association had humble beginnings in 1996; the initial goal was to pull Mount Snow skiers into local shops.

The early bus fleet included former airport shuttles. But Haughwout said the service has expanded "exponentially" since those days, with Deerfield Valley Transit now the third-largest such system in the state in terms of ridership.

The association gives nearly 300,000 annual rides and recently surpassed the 3 million-ride mark.

"We're a regional, year-round bus," General Manager Randy Schoonmaker said, noting that the service extends from Bennington in the west to Brattleboro in the east and from Wardsboro south to the Massachusetts line.

But administrators still are making do with administrative offices in West Dover and a garage in Wilmington at the former Barnboard facility on Mill Street. That will be the home of the new headquarters, with the association already having cleared some land for the project.

"Last summer, we tore down 60,000 square feet of the facility," Schoonmaker said. "Roughly 22,000 square feet remain, and that's where we're living now."

That will change soon, as officials envision a building that will house Deerfield Valley Transit's administrative, maintenance and operations functions. It also will host production of biodiesel fuel; the association's website says nearly 1,000 gallons are produced annually.

U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., previously secured more than \$1 million for planning, demolition and permitting for the Deerfield Valley Transit project. In announcing the \$3 million Federal Transit Administration grant, the Democrat said the organization "finally will be able to move forward with this key transportation and economic development project to consolidate these operations in Wilmington."

Leahy added that, after Tropical Storm Irene struck in late August, "the transit agency's excellent work in furnishing emergency transportation under trying circumstances and in areas that were hit hardest certainly underscored the vital need for a new and modern facility."

U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., also cited Irene's impact, saying the transit project represents "a much-needed economic boost to an area of the state that is still recovering from some of the worst damage caused by Tropical Storm Irene."

Deerfield administrators still are hoping for a final piece of federal funding for the estimated \$4 million project. They're applying for a \$915,000 low-interest loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

If all goes well, the project will be finished later next year or in 2014.

Though the association will move its offices out of West Dover, Haughwoot said that should not be perceived negatively.

"Dover and Wilmington were the two towns that basically birthed the MOOver," she said, adding that the new headquarters "will enhance the entire Deerfield Valley and all the towns we serve."

Also, Schoonmaker said the project paves the way for future expansion of the transit service. Officials already plan to purchase three additional buses to expand the fleet to 26.

"We've been limited with a one-bay garage and two little offices," he said.

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., concurred.

"Access to public transportation in rural areas is always a challenge. Deerfield Valley Transit Association has been leading the way in meeting that challenge by finding ways to make public transportation work in rural areas," Welch said. "These funds will ensure more Vermonters have access to reliable public transportation."