

Mini-wheels to begin rolling for handicapped, elderly

By TERENCE J. KIVLAN

Fueled by surplus money from a city housekeeping contract, the Staten Island Community Corp. will put its mini-bus service for the handicapped and the elderly on the road next month, corporation officials said yesterday.

"We hope to get this thing off the ground by June 1," Brian Haugh, the agency's public information officer, said.

The agency had hoped to have its seven mini-buses, purchased with a grant of \$113,000 in state funds two years ago, in operation by January, but ran out of money to pay the 10 part-time drivers needed to operate the transportation system their \$3-an-hour wages.

Since then, however, Haugh has worked out a deal for the funds from the Housekeeping Vending Agency, a corporation subsidiary that has a city contract to supply home cleaning and maintenance services to shutins who would otherwise have to be institutionalized.

Under the Department of Social Services contract, the agency is allowed to generate a "surplus" as revenue for the Community Corporation. "This mini-bus program has been sitting around for two years and we have a surplus," agency director Robert Shannon said. "So it should be spent for the betterment of the community."

Shannon estimated that the bus drivers' salaries would cost about \$17,000 a year. According to Haugh, the arrangement for paying the wages is temporary until the anti-poverty agency can find alternate funding, possibly from a federal source.

The 12-passenger mini-buses will be stored at the South Beach Psychiatric Center and are expected to make about 10,000 trips a year, taking the elderly and handicapped to shopping malls, movies, medical centers and Social Security facilities.

Haugh said a corporation committee headed by deputy director Harold Greene is currently working with Metropolitan Transportation officials to work out regular routes for the buses. "But we'll probably have to play it by ear," he said, "and wait to see what patterns emerge."

Haugh explained that the mini-bus service may operate on a "dial-a-ride basis" at first. The headquarters at South Beach will have dispatching facilities and the vehicles will be equipped with radios.

In addition to the routine services, Haugh said, they provide special junkets for its clients. For instance, he explained, the Community Corp. is negotiating with a non-profit organization in Manhattan that gives away blocks of tickets for shows that don't sell out.

"The shows' producers contribute the tickets and take a tax deduction on them," Haugh said.

Staten Island has an estimated 27,000 residents over the age of 65 and some 8,000 physically disabled persons. There are also 2,500 mentally retarded persons living at the Willowbrook Developmental Center.

The transportation service was originally scheduled to begin last fall but that plan fell through when the delivery of buses was delayed. Then the federal employment contract for paying the drivers expired in December.