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# 'Stop Requested': On board Christmas Valley's once-a-week bus

By **Lillian Karabaic** (OPB)

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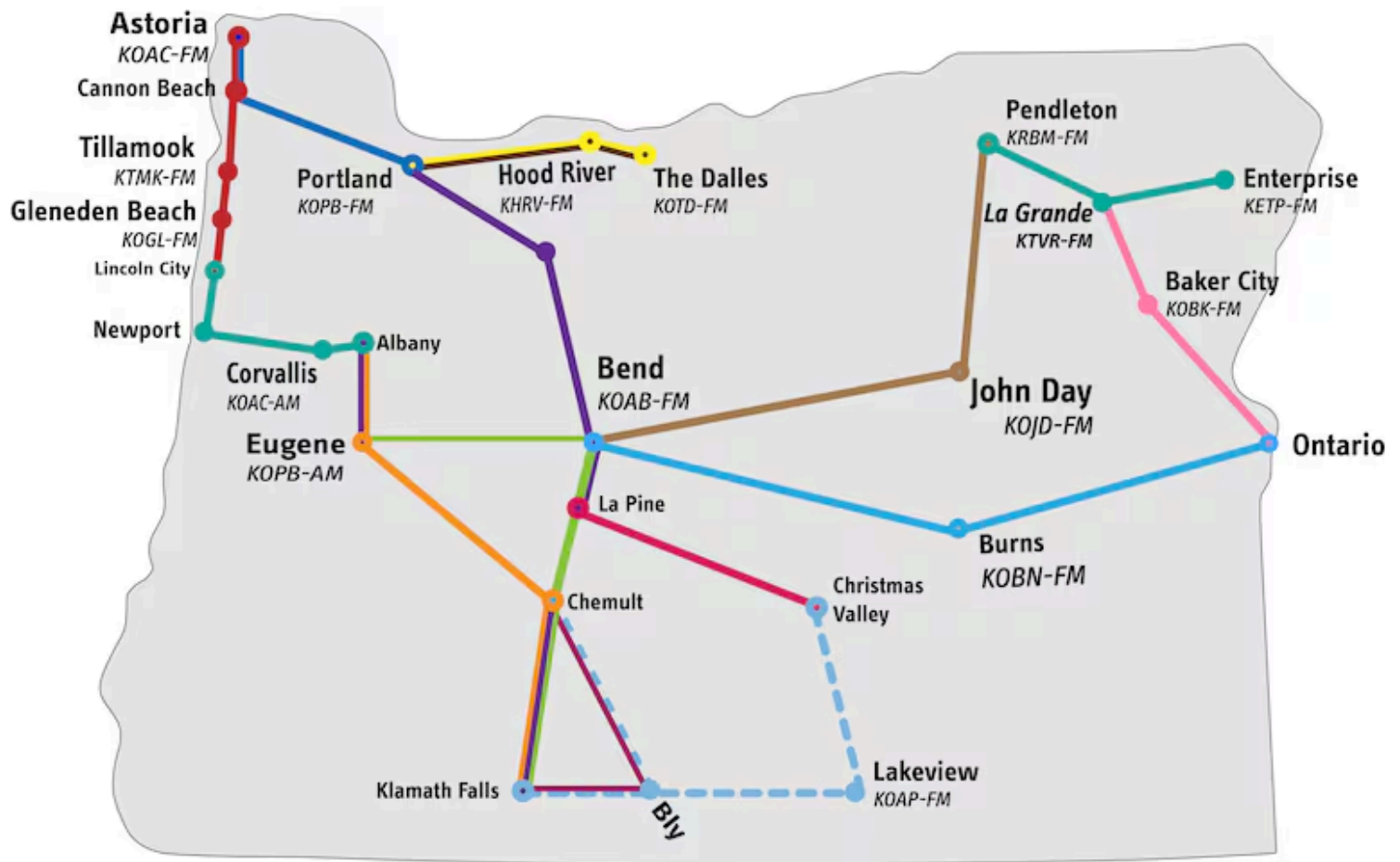
## Christmas Valley is more outback than tinseltown

**Editor's note:** This is the fourth in "[Stop Requested](#)," OPB's multi-part series about a journey to the corners of Oregon by public transit. You can read the [first](#), [second](#) and [third](#) installments of the series published last month.

For 14 days, and using more than 30 buses, OPB's Lillian Karabaic and Prakruti Bhatt experienced the joys and difficulties of rural transit — and talked to many people along the way.



00:00 / 05:37



"Stop Requested" is a journey by public transit to all the communities that OPB says on the radio every hour. This is a map of the route which took 14 days and 38 buses to complete.

Lillian Karabaic / OPB

## Wednesday, Sept. 18

### Bus 12: Downtown Lakeview > Downtown Christmas Valley

*Lake County Transit, \$0, 101.2 miles*

Today, we're headed to north Lake County, which is even more sparsely populated than the [southern part of the county](#). With fewer than one person per square mile, it's truly Oregon's outback.

Early in the morning, we are picked up by bus driver and photographer Joshua Lee in a Lake County Transit four-seater vehicle. It's a hybrid car, which isn't the most practical

in Lake County since the electrical grid is inconsistent and the weather can be extreme for batteries, but it gets better mileage than the big buses for long trips like this with only one or two passengers.



Lake County Transit four-seater vehicle is parked at Table Rock in Lake County. It's a hybrid car, which isn't the most practical in Lake County since the electrical grid is inconsistent and the weather can be extreme for batteries, but it gets better mileage than the big buses for long trips with only one or two passengers.

*Prakruti Bhatt / OPB*

Lee is one of eight part-time drivers for Lake County Transit. According to transportation manager Linda Mickle, none of the drivers rely on the work to pay their rent, but some want the extra income more than others. None of the rides from Lakeview are on a fixed route or schedule. Instead, people call for rides a few days in advance and Mickle will match them with one of the drivers in her giant ride spreadsheet.

“Plus, it’s a chance for them to get fast food or do a little shopping themselves,” she says.

Many of the people that ride Lake County Transit for medical transport have their rides paid for by Oregon Health Plan or the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Joshua Lee also enjoys the desert photography opportunities he gets when out on driving gigs. He drives us the 101 miles from Lakeview to Christmas Valley’s “downtown” — a



collection of small buildings and businesses concentrated along a mile of the county highway.



Table Rock is situated between Lakeview and Christmas Valley in Lake County.

*Prakruti Bhatt / OPB*

We drive during sunrise around the rim of Lake Abert and on a National Back Country Byway. There's very little civilization on the scenic byway, except a few ranches and a single information sign at Table Rock, which Lee notes has bullet holes in it — a bit of a theme in this part of the back country.

## **Bus 13: Christmas Valley > La Pine Shop Smart**

### ***Lake County Transit, Christmas Valley Shopper Service, \$0, 62.2 miles***

At 8:20 a.m., we pull up in a gravel parking lot behind a white 14-passenger bus. It has a fading Lake County Public Transit sticker on the side featuring the silhouette of a cowboy in front of a blue sky. This [Christmas Valley shopper service](#) has been driven by Silver Lake resident Debbie Warren for 16 years. Warren is a retired school bus driver and used to do some of the medical runs for north Lake County. For several years, this

bus lived at Warren's house. Now, it's stored at the community center in Christmas Valley.



Debbie Warren has been driving the Christmas Valley shopper bus for 16 years and she knows everyone. "I've been here 28 years. North (Lake) County is a great place to live, but everything is far...shopping is far, transit service is far... but you can see the antelope play," she says.

*Prakruti Bhatt / OPB*

The service travels Wednesdays at 8:30 a.m. from Christmas Valley into La Pine and back as long as three people sign up to ride. "We prefer to have at least five," Warren says.

Sometimes, that means locals have to call around and recruit others to ride into town with them. "I might make a few phone calls and twist a few arms, too," Warren says.

The bus has eight riders already on board when we join, all of whom are regulars who know one another. Someone jokingly calls it the senior party bus. But they also want us to know that someone in their early 30s ride it a few years back; it isn't only "old people."





Some of the regular riders on Christmas Valley shopper bus. In center is OPB 'Weekend Edition' host Lillian Karabaic, who joins for one of the rides. Rider Bobbie Nicoliadis (in pink shirt) says Christmas Valley is a close-knit community, "Especially this bus, we are like family."

*Prakruti Bhatt / OPB*

Rider Bobbie Nicoliadis says Christmas Valley is a close-knit community, "Especially this bus, we are like family."

"We have fun here. We get loud and rowdy sometimes," Warren says.

Nicoliadis moved to a few miles from Christmas Valley's downtown to live off-grid several years ago. She recently got a propane fridge and is excited about it, but has been waiting for weeks for the gas utility to come out to get it running.

Most of today's riders say they moved to north Lake County for cheap land. Unfortunately, lower land prices come with higher costs for utilities and basics, like groceries and health care. Getting a residential well drilled in Christmas Valley can cost more than six figures, according to riders.

Fort Rock basin's Christmas Valley is one of the state's critical groundwater areas. As previously [reported by OPB](#), local springs have been in steady decline since wells began

pumping water to nearby hay farms.



Lake County's ranch land is sparsely populated but has beautiful vistas, as seen from Lake County Transit on September 17, 2024.

*Prakruti Bhatt / OPB*

Nicoliadis is riding into La Pine today for a blood draw and some shopping at the thrift store. She has been fasting all morning for her blood draw and other riders are politely delaying fragrant snacks in order not to tempt her on the way out.

Nicoliadis says she loves the community but there are downsides to being so remote. In Christmas Valley, there is only a small food market, one bank, one gas station and very few medical services.

“North (Lake) County is a great place to live, but everything is far,” says Warren, who has lived in nearby Silver Lake for 28 years. But some things make it worthwhile. “There’s peace and quiet. You can see the antelope play, you know.”

The bus rides 60 miles through the high desert to La Pine. Our first stop in town is a quick potty break at Shop Smart, as there are no public restrooms between Christmas Valley and La Pine.

Next, we drop Nicoliadis at the medical lab. We pick her back up after her important post-blood-draw snack.

There's no set route to this trip. Warren figures it out on the fly based on a handwritten list of everyone's errands. It's pretty impressive to watch her pivot and figure out who needs to go where and in what order. Everyone has Warren's cell phone number and will call if they need to be picked back up earlier than expected.





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The name Christmas Valley suggests twinkling lights and sleigh bells.

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Christmas Valley in Oregon's Lake County is more desert frontier than tinseltown. Debbie Warren has lived in North Lake County for 28 years. "North county is a great place to live, but everything is far ... doctor's appointments are far, shopping is far, transit service is far ... but you can see the antelope play," she said.

For 16 years, Warren has driven a weekly shopper bus from Christmas Valley to La Pine for Lake County Transit. There's no set route — she figures it out on fly based on rider's errands — from doctor's appointments, grocery shopping and bank runs.

There's a committed group of regular riders. The Wednesday journey to La Pine happens as long as three people have signed up, though Lake County Public Transit prefers more than five. The riders really have gotten to know one another. Rider Bobbie Nicolas said the town is close-knit, and "especially this bus, we are like family."

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Warren says she's never forgotten someone in La Pine, even though it's a bit of organized chaos to manage all the flexing schedules. She did come close once when a new rider wandered off in the Shop Smart.

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