FLORENCE -- Two new minivans and two new minibuses will soon be added to the fleet of the Pee Dee Regional Transportation Authority, and it's likely residents of Olanta, Timmonsville, Lamar, Turbeville, Lynchburg, Shiloh, Scranton and Coward will get to ride them.

During Thursday's monthly meeting, the authority's board approved purchase of two new Chrysler minivans for $83,704 and two new Ford 18 passenger minibuses for $133,186. Chuck MacNeil, the authority's executive director, told the members state and federal grant money would fully fund the purchases.

Purchasing manager Sandy Garris said it could take 90 to 100 days to complete the transaction. MacNeil is also working to extend service into Darlington County by partnering with Pee Dee Health Care, which is owned by Genesis Health Care in Columbia.

"We're looking at new services at the first of the year," he said, which would require paperwork, public hearings and the determination of how best to balance services. The state Department of Transportation can also help funding, he said, and he's applying for grant money designated for rural communities.

"I'm not ready to present a (final) service plan and financing," he said, "but it's pretty exciting." Residents of those areas might have once-a-week service or on-demand response triggered by a call for pickup, he said.

A quick financial snapshot for the month of October showed no tremendous changes, he said, with the exception of paying for the yearly audit, which cost $13,000 and is being paid in installments.

"When we take out depreciation, as we always do, we had a good month. Every month is a different adventure," he said. "There's always ebbs and flows."

Mary Alice Wilson gave a finance committee report, and reported on the consideration of Christmas bonuses for authority employees. Last year the starting wage for bus operators bumped up from $8.76/hour to $9.25/hour, she said, acknowledging that past financial difficulties have tied MacNeil's hands regarding raises.

James Jackson advocated an across-the-board bonus and not one pro-rated and based upon length of employment. After some discussion, the members decided on an across-the-board bonus.

Vacant authority facilities in Cheraw might soon be used by Northeastern Technical College, MacNeil said, as long as Federal Transit Authority guidelines are followed.

He also said it was time to begin the crucial Federal Transit Authority grant process to obtain roughly $1 million, but the FTA is changing its Web-based grant application process.

A new system map has been printed for the first time in four years, he said, and he's working with the city of Florence on a 10-year lease for use of the Palmetto Petro station at Darlington and N. Irby streets as a transfer station. The three bay car wash facility would need cleaning, upgrades and the inclusion of benches, he said, noting the city has committed $20,000 for that project.

Board Chairman Ed Robinson said it was "bittersweet" and "troubling" as he's been trying to get a building downtown to use.

"They're doing it because they don't want those kinds of people in the middle of elitist downtown," he said. "That's messed up. But the good outweighs the bad."