

Officials struggle to continue commuter service

SANTA CRUZ — Transit officials are trying to seize the moment and keep post-quake Highway 17 bus service going for commuters.

But the future of the bus lines depends on whether Santa Cruz County and Santa Clara County authorities can come up with a plan they can afford, keep enough riders and find "park and ride lots," Scott Galloway, transit district director, told a Transportation Commission committee Thursday.

While Highway 17 was restricted for repairs, the public buses were carrying about 700 commuters a day over the hill, Galloway said.

They were paying \$2 for a round-trip ticket — far short of the actual cost of the service.

Since the highway reopened Thanksgiving week, the ridership has fallen more than 50 percent.

Galloway said some of the riders probably always intended to go back to using their private automobiles once the emergency passed. But he said he believes many of them stopped riding the

bus because they were originally told the service would stop as soon as the highway opened.

Galloway said Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties and the private Peerless bus company have banded together temporarily to offer 37 departures daily between Santa's Village in Scotts Valley and downtown San Jose.

From Oct. 17 to Dec. 1, the \$20,000 a week cost of running the program was covered by federal and state disaster dollars, Galloway said. From Dec. 1 on, the two counties are splitting the cost.

With only 320 riders a day, it is costing the two counties about \$13 per rider round trip, far below the \$2 they are collecting from passengers.

Galloway said the bus line needs to attract about 600 round-trip passengers a day to keep the program going. With that many riders, the ticket fares would cover about 50 percent of the cost, and the two counties could cover the other half, he said.

Transit authorities in the two counties will probably decide by the end of next week whether to try to continue the bus service or give up, Galloway said.

Linda Wilshusen, director of the Transportation Commission, said her office has received many letters and petitions with hundreds of signatures asking for the service to continue.

The county shouldn't miss the opportunity to recruit mass-transit users and reduce single-driver

autos on Highway 17, Wilshusen said.

"There's a will to continue this service," agreed Santa Cruz City Councilman John Laird, a committee member. But it will "take something to stitch it together."

Laird suggested that the Transportation Commission send out "promotional letters" to the people who have signed petitions, informing them that the bus service is still available but will only continue if the interested commuters use it.

"That is a ready-made group (of bus riders)," Laird said. "We need to say, 'OK, we've done our part (to keep the service going), now you need to do yours.'"

Peerless bus company already has a state contract to carry passengers over Highway 17, at a cost of \$4.05 each way. Galloway said that service is aimed primarily at travelers, and doesn't work for most commuters because there are no parking lots where commuters can leave their cars in Santa Cruz

County for the day.

Peerless officials have objected to the competition from the subsidized public bus services. But Galloway said the counties and Peerless are negotiating to make Peerless a contractor in the transit deal.

Ron Schubert, a Peerless representative who attended Thursday's meeting, said company officials seem to be interested in the continuing commuter service as long as Peerless is included.