

BUS SYSTEM



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Metro General Manager Les White speaks about the transit district's dire financial situation during the Metro's bi-monthly meeting Friday morning.

Board urges fewer cuts; no decisions yet

Directors say tapping savings and hiking fares could help

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — Directors of the county's transit district said Friday they will consider making minimal route cuts, tapping reserves, hiking fares and seeking labor concessions to close a \$3.8 million budget shortfall.

The Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District board, made up of appointees from the county and local cities, took no vote after reviewing route cuts of between 12 and 30 percent — cuts that have drawn concern from commuters, parents of public school students and the disabled who rely on the service spanning Davenport to Watsonville. Instead, board members asked the agency's man-

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agers to draft a broader budget plan that spares riders from deep cuts.

"Our main capital is the people we serve," said board member and county Supervisor Mark Stone, whose district includes routes in Scotts Valley and San Lorenzo Valley that are listed among possible cuts. "It's time for us to be creative and flexible. Even though it makes business sense, if it doesn't make community sense, we need to be sensitive to those issues."

Metro managers will craft a plan for the next board meeting April 8, after which public hearings will be scheduled on

whatever route cuts the board pursues to offset steep slides in sales tax revenue and state funding. It was too early Friday to know what service cuts managers might ultimately recommend, but their options include rescuing more routes in favor of reducing weekend and night service.

General Manager Les White said the board also could spend down some of its \$6 million in rainy-day reserves or other funds set aside for bus replacement and improvement projects. The board could also consider hiking fares from \$1.50 to \$2 and accept an offer from bus drivers to freeze wages, he said.

County Supervisor John Leopold said, "We are going to need to draw on all of those buckets" to solve the fiscal

shortage, which equals nearly 10 percent of the district's overall \$40 million budget. Capitola City Councilman Ron Graves agreed, but urged managers to weigh trade-offs, including ridership losses as a result of fare hikes and increased maintenance costs if old buses aren't replaced.

A number of customers said they would rather pay higher fares than see routes deleted, especially those in far-flung corners such as Davenport, rural South County and areas above Boulder Creek. Jim Russell, a representative for the Social Security Administration office in Watsonville, urged the board to preserve a route that delivers the poor, elderly and disabled to his doorstep.

"We are separate from the downtown center," he said.

"Many depend on that bus service to get to our office."

Ken Clarkson, a dad from the Westside who sends his children to Pacific School in Davenport, joked that he would actually appreciate a fare increase.

"Quarters are hard to find," he said. "So, I'm all for paying two bucks or more."

In terms of longer-term solutions, White said Metro is working with UC Santa Cruz to determine if the university could assume control of night-owl service from campus to downtown. White also suggested the board could place a sales tax increase on the ballot or study a consolidation with the Regional Transportation Commission, an agency working to support mass transit countywide.