

Local

EQ-1989-San Lorenzo Valley / Summit Rebuilding

Highway 17 commute bus faces uncertain future

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Ridership on the over-the-hill bus service inaugurated after the Oct. 17 earthquake has dropped to less than half of its peak since Highway 17 reopened.

Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District General Manager Scott Galloway told the county's Transportation Commission yesterday that ridership on the commuter bus service operated jointly by the Santa Cruz district and the Santa Clara County Transit from Scotts Valley to several points in the San Jose area, has dropped from a peak of 700 daily while Highway 17 was closed to about 320 a day now.

Although commute traffic from Santa Cruz to the Santa Clara Valley is almost back to its pre-quake levels, Galloway attributes the dropout in the commute bus ridership to a sense of confusion among the public about the permanence of the service.

Many people believed that the service stopped when Caltrans reopened Highway 17 the weekend before Thanksgiving, Galloway said.

And there is no longer a time advantage for a commuter to take the bus. The commute buses had head-of-the-line privileges when traffic was being convoyed over Highway 17. There were no agonizingly long waits then for a bus rider.

But the buses have lost that edge since the repairs have been completed. Now, the buses face the same traffic jams and slowdowns as the solo driver.

Plus, a bus rider still must drive to the park-and-ride lot at Santa's Village, park the car and then wait for the bus. On the other side of the hill, he or she must transfer to another bus to get to work or school.

Money is a big factor in any decision to continue the over-the-hill bus service, Galloway said,

and so is the availability of a park-and-ride lot.

Right now, over-the-hill commuters pay \$2 for a round-trip ticket that also allows them to transfer freely onto any of the

spending \$20,000 a week to charter buses from Peerless bus company as well as run their own buses on the route. With only 1,600 trips a week, it costs \$6.25 to carry each rider from Scotts

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Santa Clara County Transit buses in the San Jose area.

That is far below the levels needed for the two districts to operate the service cost-effectively on a long-term basis, Galloway said.

The two districts are now

Valley to San Jose or back to Santa Cruz County.

The transit district manager said half of the \$20,000 a week cost should come from the fare box. To reach that point, Galloway said, would require about 1,200 trips daily.

The post-quake bus service was underwritten by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but transit officials believe the subsidy is being cut off because Highway 17 has been reopened to normal commute traffic.

Santa Clara transit officials have indicated their willingness to continue to underwrite the service until mid-January, Galloway said, if the Santa Cruz transit district is willing to cooperate.

Galloway said he is recommending that the over-the-hill service be continued, but the final decision will be up to the transit district's directors. They will meet next Friday.

Regardless of the transit directors' decision on the bus service's future, they will have to find a new terminus in the Scotts Valley area. The transit district has been using the old Santa's Village parking lot as a park-and-ride lot since the Oct. 17 quake.

But Dividend Properties, owners of Santa's Village, have told Galloway that the lot won't be available for the commuters after Jan. 15.

It won't be easy to find another large lot in the Scotts Valley area, Galloway said. The transit district owns a park-and-ride lot near Dominican Hospital and the city of Capitola has a beach shuttle bus lot next to New Brighton Beach state park. Caltrans operates a park-and-ride lot at Resurrection Church in Aptos. All could be used by over-the-hill commuters, Galloway said yesterday, but each poses a new set of problems.

The present commute bus schedule works nicely for buses shuttling back and forth between Scotts Valley and the Santa Clara Valley. Extend the run into Santa Cruz or out to Soquel and Aptos, Galloway said, and more buses have to be added to the run — increasing the costs.