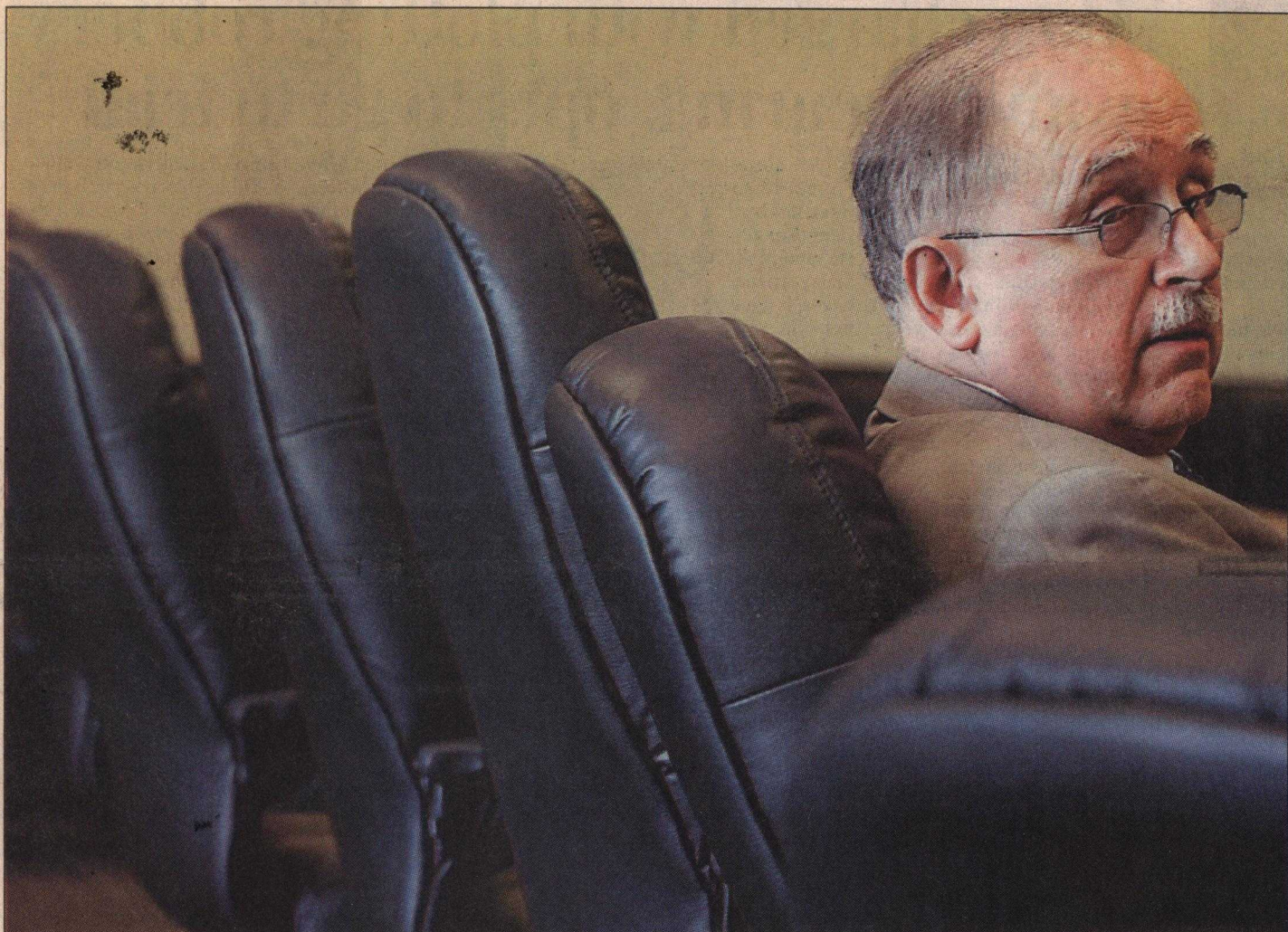


# A 17-year trip comes to an end

Santa Cruz Metro boss Les White retires after seeing modernization of fleet, 2005 strike



SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

General Manager Les White has successfully lead Santa Cruz Metro through some very challenging periods.

*Transportation*  
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**SANTA CRUZ »** After 17 years at the helm, Santa Cruz Metro General Manager Les White turned in his keys Tuesday.

New boss Alex Clifford takes over this week, ending a remarkable run for a man brought to Santa Cruz to help right the ship during a scandal that threatened to bring down the agency. He's overseen the modernization of the fleet, ebbs and flows of service, a 2005 strike, the development of the Highway 17 Express and the construction of new transit facilities.

"I really appreciate the support [of riders]," said White, 66. "They've had a rough ride with us. We've had service expansion, service contraction, we've had a strike, and they stuck with us all the way through, thick and thin."

White will help out through the end of the year as needed, particularly when it comes to legislative development. It is a role he excelled at, having been recruited to Santa Cruz from Vancouver, Washington, by former Santa Cruz Mayor Mike Rotkin.

"He came on board and just was ready to go to work immediately, and helped us work out deals with people," Rotkin said.

"Bringing Les on board was the best decision we ever could have made."

At the time, Metro faced the disgorgement of millions in post-Loma Prieta earthquake relief money and \$15 million more in fines over the unlawful use of FEMA money to fix a Watsonville tank leak and environmental hazard that actually preceded the quake.

White, who headed the American Public Transportation Association at the time he agreed to come here, negotiated a favorable deal with FEMA and helped save the agency from doom.

"The board said, if you're going to levy a fine of \$15 million, then we'll give you the keys to the transit district, because we don't have \$15 million in cash laying around," White said. "We ended up agreeing it would be 10 cents on the dollar, payable over three years. ... That closed it out."

Clifford's name is already on a nameplate outside White's old office, and White's calendar for Tuesday read simply: "Clean out and get out." He showed up at 5 a.m. for the morning bus pullout, saying goodbye to drivers as they hit the streets.

With all the different local, state and federal funding sources that go into running a

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SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District General Manager Les White, left, and Metro Board chair Dene Bustichi spend a moment together Tuesday during White's last day at work after 17 years at the agency.

**"I really appreciate the support [of riders]. They've had a rough ride with us. We've had a service expansion, service contraction, we've had a strike, and they stuck with us all the way through, thick and thin."**

— Les White, retired Santa Cruz Metro General Manager

**"Bringing Les on board was the best decision we ever could have made."**

— Mike Rotkin, former mayor of Santa Cruz



# Retire

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transit system, being a transit boss is like being a puzzle-master, but one who has to negotiate and lobby for every puzzle piece.

It was in that role that White excelled. He can run through the transit landscape with ease, taking off the concerns of members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, who just retired as head of public transportation in St. Cloud, Minnesota and when the new Chinese-funded electric bus factory in Lancaster opened.

White poured that knowledge into relentless advocacy, even convincing the feds to create a new tier of transit service areas to better fund commu-

nities such as Santa Cruz. He even once even drilled Metro Board of Directors Chairman Dene Bustichi's then-13-year-old son with some talking points on a Washington, D.C. lobbying trip, before putting the boy to work on impressionable lawmakers.

"You have managers that look at things from 30,000 feet and aren't too involved. And then you have managers that are down in the trenches and are too involved, and anger everybody," Bustichi said. "To have someone that knows what's going on and can see it at the correct level and be engaged ... that's just a huge difference."

White also oversaw several capital projects, including construction of the Metro headquarters building and a new service building for Metro's natural gas-

powered buses. Construction of the \$14 million Judy K. Souza operation facility is under way, and Metro is in the planning stages of redesigns of Pacific Station and the Watsonville Transit Center.

White said Metro still needs to improve service, particularly in the Live Oak area. He is also skeptical of a possible commuter train, saying the state Legislature may make funding available for Highway 1 HOV lanes needed to include cleaner electric buses in the county's transit future.

"I would hate to see us so wedded to a particular mode or a particular corridor that we would forgo access to a ton of money," White said.

As for retirement, White's plan are much more modest. He said he needs to clean his house.