

Santa Cruz Metro on the upswing

By GENEVIEVE BOOKWALTER

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz County's bus system is beginning to regain ground after years of political fights with the community, a union strike that grounded the fleet and a series of service cuts.

The Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District "is digging itself out," said Paul Marcelin-Sampson of the Metro Riders Union.

And while the transit district still faces challenges, agency leaders point to signs that the worst could be behind them. For example:

■ A new bus campus, Metrobase, is under construction in the Harvey West neighborhood. The project, which will include a cluster of buildings, broke ground in early 2005, about 10 years after district leaders had hoped, following a heated battle with neighbors over a prized location on the Westside.

The \$8.5 million service building should wrap up this summer, and foundation work is under way for a \$15.2 million maintenance building. A \$22 million operations building should go out to bid later this year.

■ Ridership increased 22 percent last year on the district's most popular route, the Highway 17 Express, to a high of almost 23,800 passengers boarding in the month of October.

See METRO on PAGE A5

Sunday, April 8, 2007 SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL A-5

Metro

Continued from Page A1

The bus shuttles commuters, students and others to Silicon Valley, connecting with Amtrak and the Caltrain Baby Bullet in San Jose. Systemwide, ridership is up 8 percent, with about 18,070 riders boarding each day.

■ Increased sales tax revenue from the county's growing economy helped directors reduce the agency's budget deficit, which was more than \$1 million in 2005 and 2004. This year's deficit dropped to less than \$800,000, and the district expects to be back in black in 2009. Increased revenue should put the district in a better position for contract negotiations with drivers, which begin again next year. Drivers went on strike for 35 days almost two years ago.

In many ways, it couldn't be a better time to be a bus district. With gas prices once again approaching all-time highs, commuters around the nation are looking to the bus and other forms of public transit as a cheaper alternative to driving. Others are searching for a way out of gridlock that regularly snarls highways around the state. In Los Angeles, for example, the Orange Line bus route opened in 2005 to 10,000 to 12,000 riders each day — twice as many as expected.

Meanwhile, bus districts, including Metro, are rapidly turning to compressed natural gas, which costs less and burns cleaner than

standard diesel fuel. The district already owns 10 buses that run on natural gas. It is now converting 40 more buses from diesel fuel.

"I'm happy with the way things are going. We're clearly in a more positive position than we were a couple years ago," said Les White, Metro general manager.

Part of that is driven by increased revenue from a county-wide half-cent sales tax. The money collected makes up almost half of the district's \$35.9 million operating budget and grew 5.1 percent last year. In addition, the new bus complex has allowed the district to start buying fuel in bulk, which should save the agency about \$1 million each year. It previously

bought fuel at retail prices at a nearby gas station.

Despite the good news, fights from the late '90s still haunt the transit district. The agency had hoped to build Metrobase in 1999 for \$26 million on 20 acres next to the old Lipton plant on the Westside. The district's previous facilities, in Watsonville, were destroyed in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

But that plan was derailed by Westside neighbors who did not want the bus yard near their homes. The Harvey West facility is expected to cost almost three times — about \$76 million — what the Westside facility was to have cost.

In addition, the district would not have paid an extra \$2 million to \$3 million in rent and fuel each year, and could have covered the 25 percent service cut the agency was forced to make after the economy tanked in 2001, White said.

"If we had built Metrobase in '99 on the Westside as we proposed, the 2002 and 2003 service cuts never would have happened," White said.

Neighbors don't regret the fight, though.

"How much would it have cost them to build it in Harvey West back then if they had made the right choice, if they had picked the right location?" asked architect and former City Councilman

Mark Primack, whose office on Swift Street sits not far from the proposed Westside site.

Supervisor and Metro board member Jan Beautz said the fight is a thing of the past.

"You have to go on and do the best you can in the next place," Beautz said.

When the new buildings are finished in 2009, White hopes to restore the service that was cut, and more.

For Marcelin-Sampson, that's reason for optimism.

"Things are definitely looking up," he said.

Contact Genevieve Bookwalter at gbookwalter@santacruzsentinel.com.



Supervisor Greg Blackwood, left, shows Metro General Manager Les White the ongoing construction of the Metrobase in Santa Cruz.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel