

Bus routes in jeopardy— not enough passengers

By JAMIE MARKS

Changes may be on the way for nine bus routes that aren't carrying enough passengers to sustain existing service, Emery Ross, Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District manager of transportation said today.

Six of the bus lines in question serve the Pajaro Valley and may be in need of "refining and adjusting," Ross said. The others are Soquel/Cherryvale Avenue and several in northern areas of the county.

An additional 11 routes carry their share of riders during the day, but run nearly empty at night.

In an effort to get more passengers on all these routes, the transit district is gearing up for an all-out media campaign to encourage ridership.

But if that effort fails, service may be cut back or rerouted on the earmarked lines, Ross said.

"We're not talking about eliminating service to these areas," Ross said. "But in an effort to meet the needs of the riders, we've realized that we may need to refine and adjust the existing routes."

The transit district management has been studying the problem of low ridership since the beginning of the year and has set a standard of 20 passengers per hour (average). Routes carrying a smaller number of

riders are considered underutilized and are part of the district's ad campaign.

These routes include: Airport via Buena Vista Drive; Brewington Avenue; Arthur Road; Pajaro; East Lake Avenue; Corralitos; and Soquel/Cherryvale Avenue; as well as some in the north of the county.

The night routes under scrutiny include several to the Midcounty area — Aptos/La Selva Beach; Capitola/Soquel; Park Avenue, and Live Oak.

If these routes don't pick up more riders by June, Ross said, the transit district will be asked to consider changes in the schedules.

Before any alterations are made, though, the district will attempt to woo riders with a more aggressive ad campaign. Ross said the Watsonville area will be hit with a direct-mail survey asking residents where they want buses to go; flyers in grocery stores; surveys to employers and employees asking their preferences, and a possible free ticket to encourage people to take the bus at least one day.

Ross said he wasn't sure whether ridership was up or down throughout the county, and didn't think the three-week strike in October had anything to do with low ridership on these routes.

Some of the Watsonville routes have never approached an average passenger load of 20 riders per hour, particularly in the East Lake Avenue run that begins on Main and Beach, he said.

"It may be that it's impossible to get 20 riders an hour in Watsonville," he said, adding that ridership on the lines from Watsonville to Santa Cruz appear to be doing well. "It doesn't make sense to run empty buses when it may be that our schedule is misdirected. With a little adjustment, we may be able to pick up enough riders to continue operating as many buses in the south-county area."

Last year, the transit district made some changes in the Watsonville city routes, but Ross was unsure whether those changes resulted in loss of ridership.

The problem with the existing schedules is that there often are not enough buses to pick up all the passengers on the more heavily used routes. By redirecting buses to these runs, the district could pick up more fares and put the buses where they are needed most.

Ross said another survey in June will assess the ridership in the targeted areas, and adjustments will be made on those results. The transit board will have the final say on any adjustments.

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