TRANSPORTATION 1990-

Express bus fare to double

Highway 17 commuters voice support for increase to $4 roundtrip

By TOM LONG
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SANTA CRUZ — The Metro District doubled fares on its Highway 17 Express service to San Jose Friday, but there were few boos heard from the public over the rate hikes.

"You are taking some 300 to 400 autos a day off the roads between here and San Jose," said commuter Jean Gervaes, who brought a petition signed by 285 commuters supporting the Express, to the district board's hearing on the proposed rate.

Gervaes said most of those who signed the petition had no problem with the rate hike, from $1 to $2 for a one-way ticket. The increase will take effect July 1. Tickets purchased on the Express also entitle riders to unlimited use of the Santa Clara Transit System.

"We earn our paychecks there, we spend our money here," said Gervaes. "If we start taking our cars again, we're going to start stopping at those glitzy shopping centers over there."

There were some reservations about further rate hikes.

"The more you raise fares, the more people will be forced back in their cars," said commuter Jim Roszell of Watsonville, who nevertheless said he supported the current increase.

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>
> — *Scott Galloway*

And district director Scott Galloway did say the increase would discourage some of the 700 commuters who ride the Express daily. "We're anticipating a drop from 700 to 630 daily riders," Galloway said. "But over time we anticipate we'll get them back."

The overwhelming number of people who addressed the board supported both the hike and the continuation of the Express, quoting statistics showing reductions in traffic accidents, air pollution and gas consumption.

The Highway 17 Express began after the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989. Extensive highway repairs caused massive traffic problems and many elected to jump on a bus instead of slowly grinding their way through the gridlock.

Many passengers have stayed on the bus since those repairs were completed. Even so, the line, which runs from park-and-ride lots in Santa Cruz County to a light rail center in Santa Clara County, has been losing money steadily.

The service, which has been a joint venture between the Metro District and the Santa Clara County Transit District, costs about $867,000 a year to operate. Even with the fare increase, the district estimates the program will still run about $470,000 short.

Some of that money may come from the Santa Clara Transit District, but about $230,000 will be reassigned to the project from the transit district's annual contribution to its employees' retirement fund. That fund, according to Galloway, now has a $1.5 million surplus.

Some union leaders were displeased with the diversion of those funds.

"That money is coming from Santa Cruz workers' pension fund and going over the hill," said Bart Barry, chairman of United Transportation Workers Union Local 23.

"It's a gamble," said board member Ron Grave of Capitola. "You really don't want to mess with those funds if you don't have to."

But, the district may not have to use the full $230,000 it plans to take from the retirement fund because of lower-than-expected bids from companies competing to run the Express line, according to Galloway.

The Express was the focus of a lawsuit filed by Peerless Stage Lines in April charging that the transit line undercut Peerless business from Santa Cruz to San Jose by charging less. That suit was thrown out of court last week.

And the board underscored its support of the Express line Friday by also approving a new park-and-ride link point at the Skypark property in Scotts Valley to replace the Scotts Valley Santa's Village park-and-ride site, which will close July 1.