

Metro settles on new boss

Alex Clifford, formerly of Chicago's Metra, likely to succeed Les White

By Jason Hoppin

jhopin@santacruzsentinel.com
@snewsdude on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ » Santa Cruz Metro is set to hire Alex Clifford, a Midwesterner with California roots, as its new boss.

Clifford, 55, would bring a range of transit and political experience, having most recently run Metra, the Chicago-area commuter rail authority with 300,000 daily riders. He would replace retiring general manager Les White, whose contract expires at the end of the year.

"I think it's an exciting property," Clifford said of Metro. "Les White is just phenomenal. I think his ... years of stability there is just remarkable. He's done a great job with the agency. I hope to come in and take up where he leaves off."

A native of Southern California, Clifford was also an eight-year city councilmember in Riverside, with experience serving on county and regional transportation councils. He later oversaw bus service in one

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of five Los Angeles County service areas, a job he held for five years.

But Clifford found controversy after taking a job at Metra in February 2011, where he was asked to clean up a scandal-plagued agency. He resigned in June 2013 after refusing political pressure to hire and give raises to selected employees, Clifford said.

"I enjoyed serving Metra as their CEO and would have enjoyed continuing to serve in that capacity, but unfortunately Illinois' political environment made that impossible," Clifford said.

Clifford was selected from a field of 46 applicants vetted by a five-member search committee and Metro's executive search firm, Mercer Group. Of those, the field was narrowed to 12 before the committee interviewed four in person.

"The feeling was, all were great candidates and all were qualified candidates," said Metro Board of Directors Chairman Dene Bustichi, who led the search committee. "The final deci-

sion was, who was the best fit for Santa Cruz. And that's how we coalesced around Alex Clifford."

Metro faces several challenges, including one common to transit agencies across the U.S.: funding. Metro gets revenue from a dedicated ½-cent local sales tax, but more can be done to improve on-time performance and ridership among commuters. In addition, planning for renovations of transit centers in Santa Cruz and Watsonville is in the early stages.

"We've got to figure out a way to grow the funding, and that means being diligent in working the halls of Sacramento, and being diligent in working the halls of Washington, D.C.," Clifford said.

Clifford also said Metro has some budget issues that need to be addressed, citing its use of reserves during the most recent fiscal year. He said he closed a \$60 million deficit at Metra during his first year, without reopening public employee contracts.

Metro's board is set to vote on a five-year contract for Clifford on Friday.

White, who was not involved in the search, said he expected to leave shortly

after Clifford's anticipated May 7 start, but that he would be available to assist with the transition.

"I think the key for him is to have the support of everybody here, on the board and in the community," White said. "I think it's important for people to realize that transit is an integral part of the community."

Bustichi said he is comfortable with Clifford's history in Chicago, which included a hefty buyout that also came under criticism. In addition to a settlement, he is being paid his full Metra salary of \$252,500, and Metra will cover the difference between what he makes here and his former salary through August 2015.

"I don't fault him for doing that," Bustichi said, saying Clifford has family to look after. "I think that's common sense. I think anybody would do the same thing."

In an April 3, 2013 memo that later became public, Clifford alleged political pressure from members of the Illinois Legislature, including Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan, as well as the leadership of Metra's board of directors.

"I was being asked to engage in political patronage and I refused to do that, and I was also being asked to violate the laws that govern procurement and I wouldn't do that. And it led to this unfortunate separation agreement," Clifford said.

Metro's board is also being asked to approve a change in title and salary increases that would eventually pay Clifford more than White currently earns. At the end of the five-year deal, Clifford's starting \$181,000 salary as CEO and general manager would rise to \$210,000.

He also negotiated added benefits on top of Metro's already-generous management compensation package, which includes use of a car for on-call employees, cash stipends for those who don't require Metro-sponsored health coverage and healthy packages of holiday, administrative and bereavement leave, which applies even when aunts and uncles die.

If approved, Clifford would receive four weeks of paid holiday leave after six months, which can take Metro employees nine years to accrue.