

Bus drivers: layoff notices for Christmas

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SANTA CRUZ — Ben Blakemore received his layoff notice the day before Thanksgiving. The father of a 2½-year-old daughter, he will lose his job three days before Christmas.

Blakemore is one of 25 transit district bus drivers who will be receiving goodbye checks for Christmas this year. The much-discussed layoffs and service cutbacks for the financially troubled district has arrived, just in time for the holidays.

The district's board of directors voted in September to cut county bus services by 28 percent in order to battle a nearly \$4 million deficit. As of Dec. 20, nine bus routes will be eliminated and 23 others will either be combined or cut back. As many as 70 district jobs — some 60 of them driving jobs — may be eliminated as a result of the budget deficit. That is a loss of close to 20

percent of the driver work force.

As a result, the mood of transit district employees, particularly the bus drivers, is nowhere near joyous.

"Morale is dead," said Alina Hammer, a transit bus driver for 12 years who was recently elected president of the local chapter of the United Transportation Union. "People are really depressed. Nobody feels secure about their jobs."

"They're angry," said Blakemore as he watched a number of his fellow drivers, many of whom are counting the days until they're unemployed, file into a union meeting Wednesday morning. Those who are laid off will lose jobs that pay \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year.

The reason Blakemore's angry is that he left a job he'd had for seven years to go to work for the district 18 months ago. At that time, Blakemore said, he and many others were assured the driving jobs were secure.

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The district's financial woes are the result of being blasted from a number of sides, according to district manager Scott Galloway.

State and federal funds which used to help support the district have withered away, said Galloway. Local sales tax revenues which helped fund the district have also dropped as a result of earthquake damage to both downtown Santa Cruz and Watsonville.

In addition, the district has had to face the fact that not as many people ride local buses as it had once projected. And the Loma Prieta earthquake caused potentially millions of dollars worth of damage to the district maintenance headquarters in Watsonville.

The sum of all those blows has pretty much crippled the district.

"We basically have been in a perilous position for the past two years," said Galloway. "We've been eating our own bank account and now we can't do that anymore."

"I don't feel good about laying off 25 people and I feel even worse about cutting back the level of service, but we have to," Galloway said.

Many of the positions that need to be cut were unfilled because the district had left jobs open, knowing a day of financial reckoning was coming. But, in addition to the 25 drivers who have already received layoff notices, another 10

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— Alina Hammer, transit bus driver

are waiting to see whether the district will provide its own service over Highway 17 in the future or hire a private bus company to travel the route. If another company gets the job, 10 more jobs will be lost.

Not surprisingly, many of those losing their jobs blame the district's management for the layoffs.

"I can't help it if people above me screw up," said Blakemore. "I've fulfilled all my commitments."

"The people who have gotten us into this mess still work there and they're still running the show," said Hammer. "That's what's scary."

Galloway says he hopes that most of the drivers will be able to regain their jobs with the district in the future or be able to hire on with the Santa Clara Transit District, where he said there are job openings for about 50 drivers.

But Blakemore finds it hard to be hopeful.

"This isn't over yet," he says of the layoffs. "Right now the district is just tipping the bucket and letting some water pour out. Eventu-

ally they may have to tip the bucket all the way over."

"They said there had never been a layoff and it was going to be a secure job," Blakemore said. "There was no question about whether it was a long-term job."

Blakemore and others argue that many of those now being laid off should never have been hired. "I believe they knew they were in trouble (before they hired me)," Blakemore said. "They were counting on revenues that weren't there."

"People really feel betrayed that they gave up secure jobs to come here, and now they have nothing," said Hammer.

In January, within seven months of Blakemore's hiring, district officials were already predicting layoffs and board members knew services were likely to be cut. By March, fares for riding the bus had risen 25 cents to \$1, a temporary hike that was made permanent in September. And by August a plan to cut the district's services by nearly one-third was already on paper.