

BUS RIDERS FACE UNCERTAIN ROAD



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Laura Mercado is wheeled aboard a bus at the Capitola Mall on Friday, the day directors cut or reduced 12 routes.

Metro board cuts service; weekends hit hard

By **HEATHER BOERNER**
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CAPITOLA — For senior citizen Carrol Bates, the Route 55 bus between Rio del Mar and Capitola is the bus that “gets me home.” Friday, as she was disembarking from the 55 at the Capitola Mall to visit a 102-year-old friend in a nearby nursing home, Bates said she worries about being able to get home when service cuts go into effect in June.

But she also knows why it's necessary.

“Sometimes I’m the only person on the bus, and I know that can’t be financially feasible for them,” she said.

The Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District is eliminating Route 55 on weekends, replacing that service with another bus that will come every two hours. It’s one of 12 routes the district is cutting or scaling back because of low ridership in an effort to save some of the \$4 million budget shortfall between this year and next.

The district announced the service cuts two weeks ago, but news of their approval by the district’s board Friday morning still hit riders hard.

Jennifer Dole, who is developmentally disabled, sat waiting for the Route 69 bus Friday afternoon at Capi-



“People are going to be pretty surprised when the bus they take isn’t there anymore,” one bus rider at Capitola Mall said of service cuts.

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Bus cuts

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tola Mall. She said she didn’t know the cuts were anticipated, and was angry about their implementation.

“What a bummer,” she said. “I’m going to go to the meeting and complain. We need the bus.”

Jessica Giese-Gardner said she wished the district had conducted more public meetings to let people know the cuts were on tap.

“People are going to be pretty surprised when the bus they take isn’t there anymore,” she said. “Cutting weekends is going to be hard for a lot of people.”

The district held a public hearing Friday morning, at which only three people spoke. Many laid blame for the continued budget deficit on everything from bus drivers’ salaries and the delay in the construction of the MetroBase consolidated bus center to the war in Iraq.

The service cutbacks will affect weekend riders most, with routes to Santa Cruz’s Westside cut on week-

end nights, and weekend cuts in the Harvey West neighborhood, Rio del Mar and La Selva Beach.

Meanwhile, people who take the bus to Davenport to work in the mornings may have to get up earlier. The new schedule cuts a 6:45 a.m. bus north, leaving just the 6:15 a.m. run.

This is the third straight year that Metro, faced with anemic sales-tax revenue and a continuing state budget crisis, has cut service. Last year, the district also raised fares from \$1 per ride to \$1.50.

“Essentially what you’re having is people paying more and getting less,” said bus rider Paul Marcelin-Sampson, who is also a member of the district’s new Metro Advisory Committee.

The loss of sales tax has left the district with a \$1.2 million deficit for the rest of the fiscal year, a \$1.3 million projected deficit for 2004-2005 and a deficit of \$1.37 million for capital projects, including the long-awaited MetroBase.

The cuts approved will save the district close to \$250,000. But the district is also expected to cut more ser-

vice in the fall, with expected savings of \$700,000.

General Manager Les White has devised a 24-month budget that shifts some costs, but shows the district with a balanced budget in 2006.

Everyone on the board expressed regret at cutting service again.

“When you have a \$2.8 million shortfall, the only way to balance our budget is to make these cuts,” Metro board member Mike Rotkin said. “We’ve looked at and made tremendous internal cuts. We’ve cut way back, to the point that the only way to make the cuts is to cut service.”

Still, riders are frustrated. For 20-year-old Kevin Poiterin of Aptos, Route 55 takes him to his new job in Capitola. When it disappears on weekends, he’ll have to walk a mile to the next bus stop.

“I could work around it,” he said. And then, exasperated, he added, “I know the state is having budget problems, but they need to stop cutting things.”

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Service cuts approved

The Metro board approved the following cuts Friday, to start June 3. The district also declared a financial emergency.

Routes with reduced service are:

- Route 3N (Westside nights): Eliminate weekend service.
- Route 4 (Harvey West): Delete 5:45 p.m. trip on weekdays and eliminate weekend service.
- Route 9 (Prospect Heights): Delete 12:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. trips weekdays.
- Route 10 (UC Santa Cruz): Delete 7:25 a.m. trip on weekends.
- Route 19 (UC Santa Cruz/Lower Bay): Delete 8:30 a.m. trip on weekends.
- Route 32 (Scotts Valley/Graham Hill): Delete 2:45 p.m. and 4:55 p.m. trips weekdays. 2:45 p.m. trip will be merged with 1:55 p.m. trip with arrival at Vine Hill School still at 2:45 p.m.
- Route 40 (Davenport): Delete 6:45 a.m. trip weekdays and merge with earlier trip that will depart at 6:15 p.m.
- Route 52 (Capitola/Soquel): Eliminate weekend service.
- Route 53 (Capitola/Dominican): Delete 6:40 a.m. trip weekdays.
- Route 55 (Rio Del Mar): Eliminate weekend service and replace with Route 54 service running every two hours.
- Route 56 (La Selva): Eliminate weekend service and replace with Route 54 service running every two hours.
- Route 58 (New Brighton): Delete 7:30 a.m. trip weekdays.