

Bus system in a fiscal meltdown

Transportation Metro district declares emergency, plans more service cuts

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SANTA CRUZ — If you're a bus rider, look out. The Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District is cutting service again.

The district, faced with a \$4 million deficit between this year and next, plans to cut service twice before the year is up.

The routes the board plans to cut are those with as few as three riders per trip. Hardest hit will be

weekend riders, as routes to Santa Cruz's Westside at night, the Harvey West neighborhood, Rio del Mar and La Selva Beach are proposed to be eliminated.

Meanwhile, people who take the bus to Davenport to work in the mornings may have to get up earlier. If the board passes proposed service cuts on April 23, the 6:45 a.m. bus north will be eliminated, leaving just the 6:15 a.m. option.

And people who take the Route 9 bus to the county health offices

on Emeline Avenue will have to find a new way home, because the 5:30 p.m. trip would be gone weekdays.

Bus rider Paul Marcelin-Sampson said he's not happy with the cuts, but "there's nothing we can do to stop them. We understand that they are in a difficult budget year."

If approved, the service cuts will go into effect June 3.

It's all part of what the district is calling a "fiscal emergency."

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The board will hold a public meeting April 23 to cut service on some Mid-County, Santa Cruz and North Coast routes. In August, they'll consider deeper cuts for September.

"All I have for you is bad news these days," said Finance Director Elizabeth Ross at Friday's meeting.

This will be the third year in a row Metro, faced with anemic

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sales tax revenue and a continuing state budget crisis, has cut service. The district also raised fares last year from \$1 per ride to \$1.50.

Here's why the district is looking at a deficit: Sales tax revenue has not rebounded, meaning the quarter-cent sales tax from which it gets most of its money is dwindling.

So that leaves the district with this uncomfortable arithmetic:

- A deficit for the rest of the current fiscal year of \$1.2 million.

- The possibility that the district won't get \$150,000 in Transportation Development Act funds from the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission this year.

- A \$1.3 million projected deficit for 2004-05.

- A deficit of \$1.37 million for capital projects including the long-awaited MetroBase consolidated bus center.

The June cuts will save \$212,000, and General Manager Les White said he expects to propose service cuts to save up to \$700,000 in September.

"We're facing huge cuts in August," said Metro board member Michael Keogh.

White has devised a 24-month budget that moves around some costs, but shows the district with a balanced budget in 2006.

The proposed service cuts has Marcelin-Sampson questioning whether bus drivers, some of whom are getting a 9.4 percent raise next year, ought to renegotiate their contract to save bus service.

"The budget for payroll is going up by \$2 million next year," he said.

The pay raises are part of a union-negotiated contract with

Service cut proposal

Bus riders will have a chance to address the service cuts Metro is considering at its April 23 meeting. Mid-County riders would be hardest hit by the service reductions, especially on weekends. The proposed cuts are to the routes and times with the least ridership. They 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 the 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.

the United Transportation Union Local 23. It calls for a standard 4.25 percent increase for all union workers and a 5 percent raise for senior staff.

Union representative Bonnie Morr said for the past two years no union members got a raise, saving the district \$800,000.

"We can't not take the raise at

this point, because the cost of keeping our jobs is going up with the cost of health insurance and retirement," she said. "We don't like to see service cuts, because for us it translates to loss of jobs."

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