

Transit's unfulfilled dream

Days of easy money give way to tight budgets, higher fares

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SANTA CRUZ — The nightmare of having to shrink the Santa Cruz transit system by 25 percent didn't just happen all of a sudden. It began at least five years ago while district officials were busy dreaming of bigger and better things.

Fueled by passage of a local half-cent sales tax in 1978 and the open-checkbook policy of the federal government, the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District zoomed into the 1980s in high gear.

By 1984, the district had kept its sales-tax campaign promise of sending a big new fleet of

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buses to all parts of the county.

To meet growing demand, a downtown Metro Center was opened that year. A major maintenance base was opened in Watsonville to service all the new buses.

But change was in the wind. Ronald Reagan, who was finishing his first

term as president, already had begun cutting federal support for mass transit.

The next year, 1985, the state of California announced it was planning to end transit subsidies. The district had been receiving some \$800,000 a year in state money.

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Bus riders, like this student on Scotts Valley Drive, are finding it now costs more to ride the bus.

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the same time those revenues were beginning to fall, a consultant hired by the district concluded that expansion efforts had been so successful that the system had saturated the market of residents dependent on public transportation.

"In essence, we were told that everybody who must ride the bus is on the bus," said General Manager Scott Galloway.

Adding to the problem was steadily worsening traffic in the county. "A round trip from downtown Santa Cruz to UCSC which had taken 30 minutes was now taking 45," Galloway said.

The district had to add buses to maintain timely schedules.

The sum total was that the district wound up with the same number of passengers, higher costs and lower revenue.

The dream that had begun in the 1970s was over.

But the district continued to think expansion, says Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the county Transportation Commission. "Those expansion policies were not balanced by budgetary realities," she said.

The district ignored present-day problems in favor of pursuing a plan for a Disneyland-style aerial tramway for the future, said Kathleen Bryant and Bart Barry, longtime drivers and leaders in the United Transportation Union.

District officials began a \$160,000 study of a gondola system to carry passengers to and from the downtown, beach and university areas.

"They spent quite a bit of money on a plan to build a ski lift up to UCSC," said Bryant.

Galloway defends the decision to explore futuristic transit alternatives. The consultant who discovered the district had saturated the market for those dependent on public transportation recommended that sights now be set on capturing other riders, Galloway ex-

plained.

Since drivers weren't giving up their cars for the bus, the district hoped to lure them with a rail line or some new innovation such as the gondola system to UCSC.

In the meantime, the district hoped government funding would somehow be restored.

"I think what happened, in retrospect, is that it took a few years for the permanent nature of the fiscal realities to sink in," said Wilshusen. "You can't just hope you'll get new revenues from somewhere else," she said.

Directors took money from reserves to patch the holes left by the vanishing state funding.

"We did that rather than cut service," said Galloway. "By continuing to deliver service and promote use, we hoped to be able to successfully argue on the state level to obtain new funding."

There was a glimmer of hope last year with talk of new state gas-tax legislation which would provide money again to transit agencies. A proposition to that effect is scheduled for the June ballot.

Then came the October earthquake.

With downtown Santa Cruz and Watsonville in ruins, the district was now staring at yet another funding shortage — this time from a reduced sales-tax base.

And since a large percentage of the ridership was funneled into those two downtown areas, farebox revenues fell, too.

The district estimates its earthquake loss at about \$800,000.

Directors have now projected an operating deficit of about \$1 million next year. Replenishing reserves would raise that total to about \$4 million.

They have raised fares to \$1 and have voted to spend \$100,000 to hire a consulting firm to figure out how to shrink the system.

The new "Metro Lite" will be about 25 percent smaller, Galloway predicts.

"Our job will be to downsize our

system and bring our expenses into line with revenues," said Galloway. "It doesn't mean the end to transit in Santa Cruz," he vows.

John Laird, the district's senior director, still hopes to find new funding so whatever cuts are recommended won't have to be made.

He said he finds cutting service "politically unacceptable."

"If you're going to invest \$17 million a year in transit, you must make sure it serves the people," he said.

He sees some hope.

First, the June state ballot measure, Proposition 111, would provide the district about \$400,000 a year in state subsidy, a figure still less than half of what the district received in 1984.

Then, he said, there has been talk on the county level of asking voters to approve another half-cent sales-tax increase for a number of transportation improvements. A portion would go to the transit district.

Finally, Laird said the district could explore zone fares for its system. The farther a rider rides, the more he or she would pay.

"The big question in transit funding is 'Who pays?'" Laird said. "Is it the 2 percent who ride the bus or all of us paying for less traffic and pollution and the right to drive alone in our cars?"

Driver Barry says now is a crucial time for the public to get involved in deciding where the transit district goes from here.

Barry and Bryant and Berry feel the district should also look toward being more efficient. Having a major maintenance facility in Watsonville, with most of the routes in the north county, is not smart, they say.

"Many drivers have to bring a bus all the way up from Watsonville in the morning just to start their routes," Bryant said.

"Then we'd like to see the district start living in the present and worry about the future when the time comes that there's more money," said Bryant.