

# Transit district OKs new buses

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SANTA CRUZ — Some of the wheezy buses that mechanics are holding together with know-how and bailing wire have gotten their retirement date.

An \$8 million vote by Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District directors on Friday means that 30 new buses will begin rolling off the assembly line sometime next spring.

The buses, to be built by New Flyer of America, will replace about half the Metro's fleet once they all have been accepted by local officials. The average age of the local fleet is 14 years, with some having been on the road as long as 20 years.

Accessibility issues surrounding the new buses had delayed the decision for two weeks so staff could ensure that handicapped riders would be accommodated at all bus stops throughout the county.

New test rides in late March, however, alleviated many of the concerns, and staff assured the board that any remaining issues would be discussed with New Flyer of America.

At issue was whether the new buses offered adequate access for wheelchair-bound riders at stops where there are no curbs. Staff assured the board that drivers would help riders aboard if there were problems. The long-term solution would be to improve the rural bus stops that lack curbs, but there may be little money available for that project in the coming years.

It's this lack of curbs that caused access problems because the angle of the ramp is so steep that people in wheelchairs found it impossible to get inside without help.

The district plans to buy the widest buses available to offer as much room for handicapped riders as possible. The low-floor buses also make access easier at most of the countywide bus stops.

"It sounds to me that on balance this is going to increase access," said Celia Scott, one of the Santa Cruz City Council's representatives on the transit board.

Originally, new buses were to be purchased from the Flexible Corp. with a delivery date of January 1996. But the company filed for bankruptcy, forcing the district to cancel its order and begin the purchasing process again.

The \$8 million price tag will be paid with federal, state and district funds. The district's contribution will be about \$1.6 million.

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