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Transit District Struggled To Keep Buses Running

The Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District's efforts to keep buses running during the Jan. 4 storm were hampered by loss of communications and electricity.

A complete report on the district's efforts during the storm was presented Thursday to the system's board of directors.

Initial problems, of course, were caused by flooding on roads throughout the county, causing the district to begin dropping routes as early as 11 a.m. on Jan. 4.

One by one, routes were dropped as streets in the Capitola, Live Oak and Soquel areas became flooded and roadways became blocked by slides in the San Lorenzo Valley. All service finally was suspended at 7 p.m., some four hours earlier than normal.

At 8:30 that night, the district's operations center on River Street lost power with the rest of the city of Santa Cruz and the mid-county area.

Whereas telephone service never was actually interrupted, according to Ross, communication with the district was impossible because its phone system is electric and incoming calls did not ring or light up.

Communication, he said, finally was established by using a pay phone in the driver's ready room. That pay phone, he said, became the lifeline to drivers and supervisors reporting accidents and road conditions.

Telephones at the information center also are electric so incoming calls did not ring or light up there either, according to Ross. Information staff picked up lines at random, managing to answer a few calls, but the majority of the public could not make contact.

Ross has recommended the district install two non-electric telephones at the information center and one non-electric telephone at the dispatch center.

Loss of electricity also affected the district's diesel fuel pumps and only 10 coaches had been fueled when power was cut. Those 10 buses were designated for emergency runs, such as evacuations to mobile home parks in Soquel and Live Oak

and to the Beach Flats area of Santa Cruz which the district provided late that afternoon.

Two-way radio communications also were affected by the storm. Loss of radio communications, continued deterioration of roads throughout the county and the district's inability to fuel its buses necessitated curtailment of all service on Jan. 5.

That afternoon, supervisors met and established a list of 18 routes they felt could be operated the following day if fuel became available. Among those not expected to be operable were the heavily-traveled 41st Avenue Express and San Lorenzo Valley service north of Felton Faire.

With power still out, buses were shuttled to Watsonville to be fueled early on the morning of Jan. 6.

At 9:30 that morning, the news media was informed the district would operate a limited schedule with no service beyond 7:30 p.m. By 10:30 a.m., buses were operating all routes possible. Two-way radio communications were restored that afternoon.

With power restored that night, buses were fueled at the maintenance yard and service provided between 7 a.m. and 4 p.m. on Jan. 7. Staff met and decided to try to operate as closely as possible to normal serves levels on Jan. 8, according to Ross.

Near-normal service was restored on Jan. 8, but even now some routes are still being detoured because of road conditions.

In response to emergency conditions in the San Lorenzo Valley, the district sent a special bus to provide free shuttle service between Ben Lomond, Zayante and Felton to Red Cross shelters.

That shuttle service, said Ross, was a "real success" for service was made available to disaster victims who had lost their vehicles as well as their homes.

In the future, Ross told directors, the district should establish free shuttle service in coordination with the Red Cross as soon as shelters are established.