

Santa Cruz County bus ridership jumps, money does not

by Genevieve Bookwalter

SANTA CRUZ — Ridership is up significantly on Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District buses. But there may be fewer buses to ride, as the state slashes almost \$50 million in funding over the next five years.

That's unwelcome news for the strapped transit agency, which in the past five years has dealt with multimillion-dollar deficits, a drivers' strike, extremely high fuel costs and other issues.

"My frustration is we're managing a problem that shouldn't have been created," said General Manager Les White.

In a state that places a high priority on reducing greenhouse gases, he said, it doesn't make sense to cut money for agencies that help get cars off the road.

In addition, this was the year that things seemed to come together for Metro, after five years of tough times.

For example, the district this year finished its own pumping station, allowing it to tap into a regional consortium and buy fuel at below-market rates. Bus drivers last year also negotiated a new contract without striking, as they did for more than a month in 2005. And ridership is up significantly: The Highway 17 Express to San Jose, for example, saw its passenger count jump 22 percent on weekdays and 42 percent on weekends over last year, White said. According to district figures, 25,536 rides were taken on the route in November and 20,932 in December, the latest statistics available.

Other routes have seen similar jumps. Routes to UC Santa Cruz, for example, have increased ridership by more than 21 percent this fiscal year, according to agency reports.

The only problem, White said, is while ridership escalates, the state has frozen all public transit money for the next five years to balance its ballooning budget deficit in the midst of an economic recession. That could cost Metro \$46.6 million in money marked for natural gas buses, a new operations building and bus shelter improvements, among other projects.

City Councilman Mike Rotkin, who sits on the Metro board, was equally irked: "We have people begging us to take the bus. So right in the middle of that, the state cuts all public subsidies for transit."

Now, the district must ask the state Air Resources Board to extend a deadline to switch buses from diesel to compressed natural gas, which is safer for the environment. Metro originally planned to finish the transition by 2012.

If the board does not grant that extension, 31 of the 83 buses that run during peak hours could be parked. In addition, 150 workers could be laid off.

White said he sees hope from President Barack Obama, who said while campaigning that public transit would be a priority. Already, his administration has marked economic stimulus money to help buy new ParaCruz vans for riders with disabilities and fund a frequent-rider card for low-income passengers.

"On the federal side," White said, "you see a real value in public transportation."