

Change in Bus Lines Between Valleys Drawing Criticism

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The City of Santa Clarita has eliminated three bus lines serving the San Fernando Valley and added one new line with fewer stops but with more connections to Metro trains and buses.

The move has drawn the criticism of a transit advocacy group that says the city could have done things better and has disenfranchised one group of riders to attract a new group.

The bus lines served some of the major employers in the Santa Clarita Valley, including Princess Cruise Lines, Six Flags Magic Mountain and medical device manufacturers Boston Scientific and Advanced Bionics.

Employees at those companies may now find themselves having to leave earlier and make more transfers to use the new No. 757 line terminating at the North Hollywood Red Line station.

“There are some interesting situations employees will face after the first of August,” said Bart Reed, executive director of the Transit Coalition.

There have been no changes to other Santa Clarita Transit commuter lines serving Warner Center in Woodland Hills, Burbank, Century City, and the Antelope Valley.

Also being eliminated are two lines serving areas in north Santa Clarita to the Metrolink station; and mid-day service between the city and downtown Los Angeles.

The Santa Clarita budget for FY 09-10 allocates \$21.4 million for transit services. The city owns the buses – five different models for local and commuter routes – and contracts out their operation and maintenance.

The lines being eliminated are the No. 8 between the McBean Transit Center and the Metrolink train station on Sylmar; No. 793 between Santa Clarita and areas of Van Nuys, North Hills, and the LAX Flyaway station near Van Nuys Airport; and No. 798 between Santa Clarita and Sherman Oaks and Van Nuys.

While ridership on the No. 8 line was among the highest for the system, cutting the service was due to a federal Job Access Reverse Commute grant having run out and the city not having the money to pick up the cost of continuing its operation, said Ben Gonzales, an administrative analyst with the transit division.

The new No. 757 line serves many of the same stops in Santa Clarita as the No. 8 did. But instead of stopping in Sylmar, buses will continue south down the Golden State (5) and Hollywood (170) freeways to the Metro Red Line Station in North Hollywood.

That terminus allows connections to the train going to Universal City and Union Station and the Orange Line busway to the West Valley.

To bring in more than just commuters going to and from work, the new line will operate seven days a week with weekday hours starting as early as 5 a.m. and going to 9 p.m.

“The reason for that was to help the current riders, attract new riders and open them to more options,” Gonzales said.

The coalition, however, doesn’t see the new route being much of a help at all.

It doesn’t take into consideration work shifts or that some workers traveling to Santa Clarita will have to make extra transfers to get to North Hollywood, Reed said.

“It puts a hardship on employees who want to get to work on time,” Reed said.

Victor Clay, who works in the mailroom at Boston Scientific, was taking a single bus from where he lives in Panorama City to get to Sylmar to catch the No. 8 bus. With No. 757 he now has to take two buses to go 11 miles south to get to North Hollywood

Starting this month, Clay will need to take four buses just to get to his job.

“That is too much time (on the bus),” Clay said.

Rather than shutting down one of the lines serving Van Nuys, the city should have extended it to include Sylmar, Clay suggested.

Reed and the Transit Coalition drew up a map showing how an existing local line in Santa Clarita could be brought south to include Sylmar, Van Nuys, Sherman Oaks and North Hills.

Extending that line, Gonzales argues, would add riding time and the cost of operating the buses. Currently the city pays its contractor \$43 per service hour and 92 cents per mile, he said.

Also, it is not as though there is a gap in service between Sylmar and North Hollywood and there is an option to use Metrolink as well, Gonzales said.