

San Fernando Valley Business Journal

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Metro Shorts Valley Employees, Diverts Funds to Other Areas

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San Fernando Valley Business Journal Staff

Public transportation passengers in the San Fernando Valley suffered cuts and painful adjustments to their service beginning June 24, which has affected the way they can get to jobs.

This at a time that the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority claims it is implementing new and better bus service.

Metro introduced some Rapid Bus lines and increased bus service by 21,213 operating hours a year for a total of 7.8 million revenue service hours. However, Metro is scrambling to add service where passenger demand already outstrips supply. Since the additional operating hours alone are not enough to meet that demand, Metro must strip service from some areas and deploy them to others.

Service has already been drastically cut in the San Fernando Valley and Metro has siphoned the service hours to the popular Orange Line. This leaves employees with fewer direct services and transfer options.

For example, Metro slashed weekend service on Line 239, which connects the Sylmar/San Fernando Metrolink station with hospitals, a police station, many job sites and numerous schools.

Also cut were several late-night trips and all weekend service on Line 155, which connects the Universal City Red Line station with entertainment and media employers in Burbank.

Thus, people who work weekends at Warner Studios in Burbank or Providence Holy Cross in Mission Hills will be forced to either take their cars or hitch a ride, contributing to traffic congestion and pollution.

Worse yet, Metro sliced lines 90 and 92 into two, thus forcing patrons to transfer if they want to continue their journey, removing important one-seat rides. Metro advertises these split services as "new" lines, despite the longer trip times imposed. This includes 60-minute transfer waits when the split lines misconnect.

Lacking the bravery to slash service themselves, the Metro Board devolved the tough job of choosing which lines to cut to its five Sector Governance Councils across the Los Angeles area. The San Fernando Valley Sector bore the majority of the cuts, since several lines were perceived as underperforming because they lacked riders. However, when compared with other bus service providers, ridership on these lines was not that bad.

Many key north-south Valley arterials lack decent connecting services to the Orange Line. Try getting to or from a job on Topanga Canyon Boulevard., De Soto, Winnetka, Tampa, White Oak, Woodley, Woodman or Hollywood Way.

Most service is hourly or at odd frequencies and stops running at dusk. Many don't offer weekend trips.

But shouldn't the recent fare increases actually pay for more services without cuts? Not quite. In fact, Metro acknowledges the increases alone will not be enough to preserve bus service.

Without a fare change, Metro was facing a projected \$1.8 billion operating deficit over the next 10 years. Even with the recently implemented fare increases, Metro will have to take \$40 million out of its reserves just to operate buses in the next fiscal year.

One could say that we should do more to subsidize service through existing taxes.

However, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has threatened to shift funds for transit operations (known as the

“Spillover”), to the tune of \$1.3 billion, for uses unrelated to transit.

Metro and other organizations are actively fighting the diverting of Spillover funds.

To date, the “Big 4” Senate and Assembly conference committee and the governor have not reached a budget agreement that was due before July 1.

It should also be noted that Metro bus riders pay only 24% of bus operations through fare and pass revenues.

By contrast, passengers in other cities usually pay between 30% and 50% and, in return, get quality transit service that comes frequently and runs everywhere.

With the potential of Spillover funds restored and modest fare increases, Metro can stand on a sound financial footing that can encourage more service, not less.

Some believe that Metro should eliminate rail service and stop construction of rail lines to provide more bus service.

Doing this would violate voter-approved formulas that allocate sales taxes to rail service and projects.

Moreover, rail service is better suited than buses to meet high passenger demand. A train requiring only one operator has more space to carry people. To get the equivalent capacity, you would need six buses, which require six operators at a much higher labor cost.

The best tool to fight further erosion of service is to actively demand that our leaders preserve it.

Though most of the proposed changes were approved, bus riders who voiced their opposition at Service Sector Council meetings prevented several other reductions.

A major letter writing campaign saved Line 168, which connects Chatsworth jobs with Pacoima workers and the Employment Development Department, yet it still lacks midday service.

Bus riders and employers must also ask their state legislators to fight for the transit funds that they deserve.

After all, these are the people who will vote whether the Spillover will fund transit or not.

The threats to public transportation are real, but the best way to counter them is through meaningful action that works.

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