

Metro Picks L.A. Official, D.C. Native As Manager

By Lena H. Sun
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Metro's board of directors has chosen a bus expert who is the second-ranking transit official in Los Angeles to become the new general manager of the Washington region's rail-and-bus network, according to Metro officials.

John B. Catoe Jr. is discussing contract terms with the board in a deal that is not final, said two high-ranking Metro officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the ongoing negotiations. Catoe, 59, is deputy chief executive of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the nation's third-largest public transportation system.

Catoe, the son of a taxi driver, is a D.C. native who grew up in public housing complexes in Northeast and Southeast Washington and graduated from Spingarn Senior High School.

Reached yesterday by telephone, Catoe would not comment on the development. In an interview last week, he confirmed that he had applied for the job and said he was eager to return to his home town.

If hired, Catoe would take over Metro in January, roughly a year after Richard A. White was forced out as general manager amid controversy. The interim chief who took over from White, Dan Tangherlini, was a leading candidate for the job until he was tapped for the No. 2 position in the incoming administration of D.C. Mayor-elect Adrian M. Fenty (D).

The prolonged transition created a leadership vacuum at a crucial time for the nation's second-busiest subway and fifth-busiest bus fleet. With record ridership, the system is straining to keep up with demand. Metro officials also are trying to persuade Congress and the state governments of Maryland and Virginia to provide dedicated funding to keep trains, tracks, stations and buses in good repair.

"We do expect to have a new general manager on board during the month of January," Metro board Chairman Gladys Mack said yesterday. "Our search process is nearing completion." Mack would not elaborate.

The Metro board has six voting members, two each from Maryland, Virginia and the District. It takes four votes -- including one from each jurisdiction -- for a general manager to be hired. The board has interviewed eight candidates over the past two weeks, all from outside the agency. The acting general manager is Jack Requa, who had been Metro's chief bus manager.

As second in command in the Los Angeles agency, Catoe oversees a bus-dominant system with

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about 2,600 buses, three light-rail lines and one heavy-rail line. Average weekday bus ridership is more than 1.3 million trips; average weekday rail ridership, about 262,635 trips. By comparison, the Washington system is dominated by Metrorail, with an average weekday ridership of about 700,000 trips. Metrobus ridership is 450,000 trips on the average weekday.

Catoe, who also was courted this year by officials in Atlanta for a top transit job there, has spent 26 years in public transportation. He has a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Redlands in California. He started his career in that state at the Orange County Transit District, working there 17 years and rising to operations director, according to his official biography. He also headed Santa Monica's transportation department. He joined the Los Angeles authority in 2001.

In Los Angeles, Catoe won kudos as a behind-the-scenes broker this summer during successful negotiations for bus drivers and mechanics union contracts. In the past, the Los Angeles system had been disrupted by transit strikes.

To improve customer service, Catoe restructured the formerly centralized transit operations into five service sectors, each with a general manager and staff.

In October, a federal judge ended a decade of court oversight of the Los Angeles transportation authority, saying transit officials had "substantially complied" with their promise to improve bus service for poor and minority riders. Improving service for such riders is also a major issue for Metrobus.

Catoe's background in bus operations could bring more focus to Metrobus. The region's bus service has long been overshadowed by the subway, which carries tourists and downtown professionals and draws the attention of Congress. Transit officials have repeatedly promised to put Metrobus on equal footing with Metrorail -- this year is supposed to be the "Year of the Bus" -- but the buses have never been able to attract the same kind of money and institutional support.

White, who was Metro's longest-serving general manager, was forced out after board members concluded change was needed to fix an agency that had suffered from service problems, management missteps and the widespread perception that its leaders had lost touch with riders and employees.

Tangherlini, then the city's transportation director, was picked to be interim chief. A regular rider of the bus and subway, Tangherlini made customer service a priority.

Negotiations with Catoe are sensitive because the Metro board was heavily criticized for the generous severance package White received when he left. White's salary was \$285,644, and he also had a \$50,000 living allowance. His severance package included a \$238,000 one-time payment and an annual pension of \$116,000, making it more generous than ones offered by several other large transit agencies.

White's deal also allows him to receive health care for life, and if his wife outlives him, she will receive \$58,000 a year until she dies.

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

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