

## Metrolink may alter local routes, raise fees

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Commuters heading south Tuesday morning on Metrolink were surprised to learn about proposed rate increases and the possible elimination or curtailment of half the train routes serving Ventura County.

A flier left on seats listed eight routes that could be discontinued and another six that may see significant changes in service because of a budget crunch.

"It's a major change," said Phil Ballard, who commutes from Camarillo to his job in Burbank. "There was a lot of rumbling and outrage on the train this morning. Honestly, I'll pay 5 to 6 percent more if I have to, but I don't have another option if they eliminate the route."

Attorney Keith Millhouse, chairman of the Metrolink board and a Moorpark City Councilman, said the changes look bad but they are not likely to be all approved.

His advice to the 4,000 riders on the Ventura County Line — with perhaps as many as half of those from Ventura County — is to push back a bit.

"Be vigilant, speak out to the county board (Ventura County Transportation Commission) and Metrolink about your needs, but don't panic," Millhouse said. "Because some of this is just required by law for us to have a discussion on."

The Metrolink board of directors will consider making route changes and fare increases at an April 2 meeting in Los Angeles.

The expectation is that most of the less used midday routes will be eliminated and that fares will go up from 3 percent to 6 percent to help the commuter train system close a budget gap.

Millhouse said crucial morning commuter trains will continue to run.

The proposed changes could decrease services in each of the five counties served by Metrolink. The cuts are primarily aimed at weekend and midday routes. Metrolink CEO Eric Haley said at a board meeting in February that the projected shortfall for the next fiscal year is \$17 million.

Francisco Oaxaca, a Metrolink spokesman, said the biggest factor in the shortfall is a 10 percent reduction in ridership. The criteria for identifying the cuts on service were routes with low ridership, during nonpeak hours and that result in true cost savings, Oaxaca said.

“The list is meant to be all inclusive of what is being considered but it is doubtful that all will be approved,” he said.

Previous shortfalls have been made up through administrative cuts, but the agency is down to the bone now and must make significant changes, Millhouse said.

The proposed changes on the Ventura County Line would save the most money, according to Metrolink estimates. The elimination of the eight routes would save \$716,000. The next highest savings from route changes would be on the Antelope Valley/San Bernadino line, which could cut \$451,000 by eliminating two weekend trains.

VCTC Executive Director Darren Kettle said part of the problem locally is that the county depends on state and federal money to underwrite public transportation.

“We don’t have a local transportation fund (a half-cent sales tax) like the other four counties,” Kettle said.

Cuts in state and federal funds have meant a 40 percent reduction in revenue for all mass transit locally, he said.

“We have to look at a variety of options,” Kettle said.

The changes being considered by Metrolink’s board of directors comes, partly from recommendations drawn up by the transportation commission.

Kettle said the only silver lining at the moment is a move by the governor to forward state transit assistance money to local agencies.

“That could give us more room to work,” he said.

