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Sacramento-area transit makes cuts as revenue falls

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Sacramento buses will take another turn Tuesday down an increasingly bumpy road.

Riders on the blue and gold Regional Transit fleet will begin paying one of the steepest in-city fares in the state, \$2.50 per ride. And forget about a transfer slip; it's been eliminated.

Elk Grove commuters face tough news at the bus stop, too. The city's e-tran service will drop 19 runs starting Tuesday, and shut down weekend service Saturday – just months after raising fares.

This week's moves by two of Sacramento's major commute carriers are clear signs: Transit in California is in trouble.

A year after high gas prices drove tens of thousands of commuters out of cars and onto buses and rail, a bad economy is causing dozens of agencies to bandage budgets with fare hikes and service cuts.

The cutbacks have exposed the state's transit financing system as a flawed patchwork, prompting calls for change.

"Just when more people need transit, you have less money to operate it," said Larry Greene, the Sacramento region's air quality chief. "We have to fix this. It's not responding to society's needs."

The core of the problem, said transit advocates and critics alike, is that bus and light-rail fares alone do not come anywhere near paying for the cost of transit service.

On average, a Bee review found, the five largest transit agencies in the Sacramento region collect less than 25 percent of their revenue from passenger fares.

Federal, state and local governments make up the difference by tapping gas pump taxes, local sales taxes and offering grants.

That system is unraveling.

Sacramento County's transportation sales tax revenue plummeted more than 30 percent below expectations this year.

At the same time, faced with its own budget deficit, the state withheld more than a billion dollars from transit agencies, including tens of millions for agencies around Sacramento.

"It's a ripple effect; actually, these days, it's more of a tidal wave effect," Yolo transit executive Terry Bassett said.

California's transit agencies have sued the Schwarzenegger administration to get back the money. The case appears to be headed to the state Supreme Court.

Sacramento Regional Transit, the largest of the region's 14 transit agencies, appears to be in the worst shape locally.

The agency has been on a two-year run of cost cuts, service reductions and fare hikes. And it's resorted to creative budgeting, using \$14 million in federal stimulus funds to plug gaping budget holes for two years.

But the federal emergency money disappears next year.

RT board Chairman Steve Cohn warned riders last week: "We may be back here (soon) talking more cuts."

Sacramento-area transit agencies are discovering that they face a problem their compatriots in San Francisco and Los Angeles don't: Tens of thousands of daily riders in Sacramento are state workers who no longer show up at bus stops three days a month on "Furlough Fridays."

RT has reduced the number of cars on light-rail trains to scratch out some savings.

Some area agencies are talking about cutting back Friday service to weekend levels, but they say the situation is so new that they don't know how to deal with it.

"There are just so many unknowns right now," Placer County Transit head Will Garner said. "Things are in limbo until things stabilize."

Garner's buses made headlines last year when they became so jammed with commuters avoiding \$4-a-gallon gas that people had to be turned away. Others stood in the aisles while buses headed down the freeway to downtown.

Despite raising monthly passes for long-distance riders to \$131, Placer and other local agencies continue to pack their buses with commuters most days during peak hours.

But with sales tax revenue dropping, Placer, Yuba-Sutter and other smaller local agencies say they could well find themselves in the same service-cutting mode as Regional Transit and Elk Grove's e-trans.

"The worst may be yet to come," Placer's Garner warned.

Riders universally lament the fare hikes. But many say buses are still worth it if agencies can keep enough buses on the street near homes and jobs.

Standing at RT's 16th Street light-rail station last week, state worker Therese Zavadil said she accepts the fact that she must pay more for her ticket. She doesn't have a great choice.

"We've been furloughed," she said. "There'd have to be cheaper parking downtown for me to drive."

The financial crisis coincides with several new state laws that push metropolitan areas to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and grow in a more transit-focused way.

Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, wrote one of those laws, Senate Bill 375. He said he wants to work with California's transit agencies to find more stable financing. His staff said that could happen in January.

State transit officials say they appreciate Steinberg's overture but are frustrated.

"We'd like to get this conversation started," said Jeff Wagner of the California Transit Association.

Transit advocates have made a point of blaming the state for their woes, in particular Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger for his willingness to withhold transit funding while promoting himself as a national leader in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

"I have yet to see a rational explanation of how you can tout those accomplishments while eviscerating the program that helps meet those goals," Wagner said.

Regional Transit head Mike Wiley said transit agencies need to free themselves from reliance on the state for funding. He is pushing for a Sacramento County ballot initiative for more local money to stabilize RT financially and allow it to grow.

The effort is backed by a coalition of business leaders, developers and environmentalists.

But one of those advocates, Dennis Rogers of the North State Building Industry Association, cautioned that the money won't just be handed to RT and other agencies. People want to know that transit agencies are well-run before they agree to a sales tax hike or other public funding, he said.

"We are insistent that RT become more efficient," Rogers said. "We have to do our work to shows folks additional investment in transit is the right thing to do."

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