Sacramento-area transit makes cuts as revenue falls

By Tony Bizjak
Sacramento Bee, Monday, Aug. 31, 2009

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.

Workshops set on clean air plan

By Denis Cuff
Contra Costa Times, Tues., Sept. 1, 2009

Workshops set on clean air plan: Public workshops on a plan to clean up air pollution in the Bay Area's nine counties will be held Wednesday morning in Mountain View and Thursday afternoon in Oakland.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District and other regional agencies will roll out their proposal with a series of measures to reduce smog, fine particles, and greenhouse gas emissions from industries, homes and motor vehicles.

Workshops will be held from 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Wednesday at Mount View City Hall, 500 Castro Street, and from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Thursday at the MetroCenter Auditorium, 101 Eight St., Oakland.

Each workshop will be followed by a 30-minute meeting on what to study in a report on environmental impacts of the clean air plan.

Despite big reductions in air pollution over 40 years, the Bay Area exceeds health standards for smog and fine particles several days annually.

EPA to declare CO2 a dangerous pollutant

Jennifer A. Dlouhy, Hearst Washington Bureau
In the S.F. Chronicle, Tues., Sept. 1, 2009

Washington -- Carbon dioxide will soon be declared a dangerous pollutant - a move that could help propel slow-moving climate-change legislation on Capitol Hill, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency said Monday.

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson told reporters that a formal "endangerment finding," which would trigger federal regulations on greenhouse gas emissions, probably would "happen in the next months."

Jackson announced her timeline even as top senators said they were delaying plans to introduce legislation that would set new limits on carbon dioxide emissions. Senators had been scheduled to unveil legislation next Tuesday, but the date has now been pushed back to later in September.

The House narrowly passed a broad energy and climate-change bill in June, but supporters have moved more slowly in the Senate, where the issue has been trumped recently by work on the health care overhaul.

The EPA kick-started the regulatory process in April when it proposed declaring carbon dioxide and five other greenhouse gases as pollutants that jeopardize the public health and welfare. EPA scientists believe the greenhouse gases contribute to global warming by trapping heat in the Earth's atmosphere.

The EPA can formalize the finding anytime, now that it has closed a 60-day public comment period that netted more than 300,000 responses.

A formal endangerment finding would obligate the agency to regulate greenhouse gas pollution under the Clean Air Act - even if Congress doesn't pass a final climate-change bill.

President Obama and Jackson have said they would prefer that Congress - rather than the EPA - take the lead in implementing new greenhouse gas limits. Businesses and energy industry leaders also have largely favored congressional action over EPA-imposed limits, because they believe lawmakers are better positioned to combine economic safeguards with any new carbon cap.

"Legislation is so important, because it will combine the most efficient, most economy-wide, least costly (and) least disruptive way to deal with carbon dioxide pollution," Jackson said. "We get further faster without top-down regulation."

But Jackson insisted the EPA would continue on a path that began when the Supreme Court ruled in 2007 that greenhouse gases qualified as pollutants and could be regulated if the government determined they threatened the public.

"Two years is a long time for this country to wait for us to respond to the Supreme Court's ruling," Jackson said.

Supporters of climate change legislation are hoping the threat of EPA-mandated limits will spur congressional action.

Sens. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., and John Kerry, D-Mass., had been planning to introduce their own climate change bill next week. But in a joint statement Monday, the pair said they were delaying the bill introduction until "later in September" because of the death of Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., Kerry's hip surgery in August, and Kerry's membership on the Finance Committee, which is negotiating health care.

Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, the top Republican on Boxer's Environment and Public Works Committee, said the delay "is emblematic of the division and disarray in the Democratic Party over cap-and-trade and health care legislation."

EU presses US on climate change

By Constant Brand - Associated Press Writer
In the Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, Sept. 1, 2009

BRUSSELS -- The European Union urged U.S. lawmakers on Tuesday to ensure the United States makes deep cuts in carbon emissions as part of negotiations to reach a new global climate change accord.

Sweden's Environment Minister Andreas Carlgren said the 27-nation bloc, as well as the United States and other developed countries, "should deliver" on promises to cut emissions by 80 percent by 2050, from 1990 levels.

"It's the real substance of credibility that will be judged," Carlgren told reporters after talks with lawmakers at the European Parliament.

Carlgren, whose country currently holds the EU presidency, is leading the EU team at U.N. negotiations to reach a deal on a successor to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol by the end of the year in Copenhagen.

He said wealthy countries should be able to offer substantial cuts to show they are serious about fighting climate change by meeting promises to prevent the earth from warming by more than 2 degrees Centigrade (3.6 Fahrenheit).

He added that European nations and other rich countries should offer "significant money" to help poorer and undeveloped countries implement more environmentally friendly economic plans. EU nations will seek to agree by October on how much they would be willing to offer as part of their share for such a fund for poor countries.

The U.S. Senate is currently drafting a climate bill but European Parliament lawmakers fear it risks being watered down.

Jo Leinen, chair of the EU parliament's environment committee, said the assembly would send a delegation to Washington later this month to explain the EU's decision to cut emissions by 20 percent from 1990 levels by 2020.

The U.S. plans as currently drafted would bring U.S. emissions about 4 percent below 1990 levels, and EU nations are demanding deeper cuts.

The last global accord, the Kyoto Protocol, is set to expire in 2012. The U.S. did not sign the Kyoto Protocol, citing its impact on the country's economy and the lack of participation by developing countries such as India and China.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses EPA confirms that Obama's administration wants to promote green jobs amongst minorities. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

Confirma EPA que la administración Obama quiere promover empleos verdes entre minorías

Manuel Ocaño, Noticiero Latino
Radio Bilingüe, Monday, August 31, 2009

La administradora nacional de la Agencia Federal de Protección Ambiental, Lisa Jackson reconoció que las minorías étnicas enfrentan mayores niveles de desempleo, y declaró que el plan del presidente, Barack Obama para crear nuevos empleos relacionados con el medio ambiente está orientado a reducir esas tasas de desocupación.

"Las comunidades de color sufren desproporcionados niveles de desempleo y hay oportunidad de cambiar eso en el frente de la energía limpia", dijo la administradora en reunión con el Comité Asesor Nacional de Justicia Ambiental.

Dijo también que hay cierto beneficio al tomar el tema ahora, porque el presidente trata de crear una economía verde, compatible con el medio ambiente, y además trata de construirla alrededor de la energía limpia, que es donde hay planes para incluir a comunidades de color.