

Detroit transit officials say fare hike coming, abysmal service continues

By Mitch Marcus and Debra Watson
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At public meetings held by the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) last week, city officials made it clear that fare hikes are coming and the impact of already implemented service cuts will continue to cause major hardship in the daily lives of tens of thousands of residents.

Last week's transit hearings were called for mandated public comment on service changes, labeled "bus service enhancements" by the transportation department. But an exchange at one of the meetings between a bus rider and newly appointed DDOT Director Dan Dirks revealed that the Detroit bankruptcy is being used to push for even more drastic transit cuts.

Phyllis Williamson, a rider, brought up the loss of 24-hour service, which occurred two years ago. She asked: "Will we be able to get 24 hour service back? People work at night. Will we be able to get back at night?"

In response Dirks indicated that the level of service would be dictated by the city's wealthy creditors. "Right now the Emergency Manager is negotiating with creditors about what level of service all departments should be operating under. Transportation is one of those. Creditors are suggesting that you should only have service weekdays from 8am to 4pm, and nothing else. We are advocating for more. The Emergency Manager is advocating for more. I think that eventually what's going to happen is that the bankruptcy judge is going to decide what levels of service there are — what folks are going to make, how many people you need, and what the fares are."

There is no plan to replace the roughly \$30 million in annual funding cuts that have crippled daily operations of the city bus system over the past four years. Half of the buses disappeared when routes were officially

slashed in 2009 and again in 2012. Over this time the number of city bus drivers was also cut in half.

Crain's Detroit Business recently reported that "DDOT has a fleet of 445 buses, of which 295 are active." Annual ridership has fallen by 5 million over the past three years, to 31 million last year. The drop in ridership is attributed not to the loss of city population, but the service cuts.

However instead of restoring routes and 24-hour service, an immediate fare increase from \$1.50 to \$2.00 is planned, with an eventual fare hike to \$2.50 planned in coming years. This amounts to a 67 percent rise in a family's transportation costs, a devastating blow in a city where more than 60 percent of children live in poverty.

Long wait times for the buses that remain on the bare-bones schedule have been exacerbated by a lack of funds for parts and repairs, meaning coaches do not go out on the road. Bus waits of an hour to as much as four hours have been reported over the past year.

There were vague promises at the meetings that money would be found to buy buses somewhere, but the threat was also made that bus repairs now being performed by DDOT mechanics will be sent out to low-bid vendors. Reiterating that no new money is going to transit, Dirks said: "We as a staff are going to have to be as creative as possible in finding additional sources."

He made it a point to emphasize that this and all major changes are being implemented through union-management committees. The bus drivers union, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 26, far from uniting the population of the Detroit area against the cuts, is participating in the cost cutting and stoking divisions between passengers and drivers by demanding security cameras and police on buses.

Dirk's announced, "Fifty buses are being equipped right now with cameras. This time next year virtually every bus is going to have cameras. We will begin to see transit police by the end of February. It's going to take a little time before we get all 35 transit police on the bus system."

Identifying wholly with management and the creditors, the ATU operatives, protecting their own positions, incomes, and perks as opposed to the drivers, imposed a concessions contract on drivers three years ago, cutting pay by 8 percent with the promise that the cut would be restored in the next contract. The cuts have not been restored.

Drivers have reported that the key issue is not police on buses, but getting more buses on the routes, and this requires maintenance. Bus riders echoed this sentiment and transit advocates at the meetings.

A state Department of Human Services worker, Craig Smith, came to the meeting on his own time to represent, outside of the normal structures, the population he is charged with serving. Smith said, "My concern is in regards to jobs. I deal with people who in the past can't get to their job, are losing their job, because we have a two-tiered bus system, and it's not fair to the residents.

"They knocked out service to certain communities in the suburbs years ago, so you could be walking one to two hours before you get to the bus, and to me that's a travesty. How will you be servicing people and communities that are affected by not having a bus running?"

Officials responded with references to the new Job Access Reverse Commute program, their most ambitious "enhancement." Details were not available, though management promised they'd be forthcoming.

Some modest route changes were also announced, "service [that] is being expanded based on manipulation and adjustments made on routes that were squeezed out," as one manager put it.

One such expansion is to a produce company located about three miles outside city limits that is in the process of hiring low-wage workers. This indicates that the system is being reconfigured to meet the needs of business first and foremost and any plans to build a comprehensive transit grid in the greater Detroit area are being scrapped.

Charles, a 52-year-old crossing guard, said: "I'm

concerned that I have to walk half a mile or a mile each day. And I have to walk my sister too. The 5 am and 6 am buses make us late to work. I might catch that 6 am bus one time out of the week, and sometimes it does not come at all. If it comes, it comes late, so I'm trying to figure out what's going on. We've been doing this since October. She'll be 63 next month. She's with a cane. She's still walking, but it tires her out."

The DDOT scheduling manager responded, "There's a shortage of equipment."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you!" Charles said, voicing the frustrations of thousands of passengers. "There's a bus at 5 am and a bus at 6:40. Where's my 6:00 bus? I need that because my sister can't keep doing that. It's cold!"

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