

## Deep cuts to county's bus service coming

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2009-11-09 15:39:10

Orange County transportation officials moved forward today with a plan to slash thousands of hours of service from the bus schedule – and described it as a gamble that things don't get much worse.

The plan will eliminate about 8 percent of the county's bus service by early next year. But it's an improvement on the cuts the Orange County Transportation Authority had expected to make, which would have been twice as bad.

Today's vote to move forward with the lesser cuts sets up an even more divisive decision in two weeks. That's when the OCTA board will have to decide where to make those cuts – whether to eliminate whole routes or spread the pain across the entire system.

Board members described the lower-cut option as a bet that the economy will improve, that millions in state funding will come through and that they'll find millions more in savings. But it was a hedged bet, with a provision that clears the way for the board to cut at least 8 percent more bus service if a big chunk of state money doesn't materialize.

The board's vice chairman, Jerry Amante, warned the few dozen bus riders who turned out for today's meeting that they should expect deeper cuts next year "unless some good fortune smiles on us." He was quick to add: "I wouldn't bet the farm on it."

Many of those riders zeroed in on a project in Santa Ana to widen busy Bristol Street, which is being paid for with money that could be used for bus operations. Why, they wanted to know, couldn't the OCTA pull that money from the project and use it to further ease the cuts to bus service?

The OCTA considers the Bristol project a key priority in its regional transportation plan, a way to ease traffic through one of the most densely populated areas in Orange County. It's already underway, and OCTA officials said it would cost the agency big to stop it now and re-start it later.

Board members asked for a full report in the coming weeks on what exactly those costs would be. And board member Miguel Pulido, the mayor of Santa Ana, said he would lead an effort to look for other funding for Bristol Street, to free up its money for bus service.

"If we have a backfill and the project goes forward, hallelujah," he said. But he cautioned that cutting off funding to Bristol and siphoning it away for buses would be a "major mistake" that would lead down a slippery slope and put other long-term projects on the block.

About two-dozen people spoke up at the meeting, urging the OCTA board to find some way to keep as much bus service as possible; one man even offered to pass a hat for donations. They warned that cutting bus service would harm people who can't afford another ride – college students, poor workers.

"You have people that are using these (bus) lines as a lifeline," said Matthew Leslie, who described himself as an "intermittent" bus user. "They cannot survive having them chipped away and chipped away."

The OCTA board voted 12-1 after more than an hour of discussion to cut 150,000 annual service hours – about 8 percent – from the bus system. Board member and Orange County Supervisor Janet Nguyen cast the only no vote.

The OCTA had been preparing to cut 300,000 service hours by March. But that was before the state lost a lawsuit over how it handles millions of dollars in transportation funds – a ruling the OCTA thinks could send \$18 million its way annually starting within two years.

That still leaves the OCTA with all those hours to cut. The board has set a vote for Nov. 23 on what areas or routes will bear the brunt of those cuts.