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San Francisco Chronicle

AC Transit Struggles As Budget Shrinks / Bus agency hopes to keep passengers as it raises fares and slashes routes; [FINAL Edition]

[Tara Shioya, Chronicle East Bay Bureau. San Francisco Chronicle \(pre-1997 Fulltext\).](#)
San Francisco, Calif.: [Nov 20, 1995](#). pg. A.13

Abstract (Summary)

At dusk, **AC Transit's** 51 bus rumbles through downtown Oakland, stopping to collect more passengers until breathing space appears impossible. But the bus that follows carries five riders. Minutes later, a smaller shuttle arrives from Alameda with one passenger.

AC Transit General Manager Sharon Banks not only agrees with the need to change, she sees it as a matter of survival. The challenge for the East Bay bus agency, however, will be to make these efficiencies without alienating its loyal ridership or curtailing its ability to attract new passengers.

In this arid fiscal climate, Banks says **AC Transit** has no re- maining options but to cut bus service and raise fares. Earlier measures to improve productivity and cut costs were not enough. The "new" **AC Transit** will eliminate the least frequently used bus routes, targeting service to areas and routes only where buses are used most.

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Full Text (1584 words)

Copyright Chronicle Publishing Company Nov 20, 1995

At dusk, AC Transit's 51 bus rumbles through downtown Oakland, stopping to collect more passengers until breathing space appears impossible. But the bus that follows carries five riders. Minutes later, a smaller shuttle arrives from Alameda with one passenger.

From a bus stop across Broadway, Alameda resident Beverly Dinkins looks at the empty buses and shakes her head.

"They don't need those big buses going during hours when ridership is down," says the 37-year-old fair housing counselor. "They have to really get out there and ride those buses to see what's going on. They need to make some major changes."

AC Transit General Manager Sharon Banks not only agrees with the need to change, she sees it as a matter of survival. The challenge for the East Bay bus agency, however, will be to make these efficiencies without alienating its loyal ridership or curtailing its ability to attract new passengers.

AC Transit -- the 22nd largest public transit system in the country, with 230,000 riders each weekday -- narrowly averted an \$11.7 million deficit this year, balancing its \$153 million budget at the last minute with help from an emergency \$4 million in state aid and revenues from increased bus fares.

Budget forecasts for the next few years suggest little hope of relief. AC Transit analysts say

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the bus system would face a \$45 million shortage in 2001, if the agency continued its current level of service.

In this arid fiscal climate, Banks says AC Transit has no remaining options but to cut bus service and raise fares. Earlier measures to improve productivity and cut costs were not enough. The "new" AC Transit will eliminate the least frequently used bus routes, targeting service to areas and routes only where buses are used most.

"We're at the end of an era where people could expect a bus at 8,000 stops, seven days a week, 24 hours a day," said Banks.

The agency expects to lose about 45 percent of its federal operating assistance this year, down from the \$5.5 million it received last year.

AC Transit officials have begun an urgent search for other regional sources of money -- possibly a new gas or sales tax measure, which Contra Costa and Alameda County taxpayers would need to approve by a two-thirds vote in the next round of elections. In the meantime, Banks says, cutbacks are essential.

Yet AC Transit's solutions may only create additional problems. While cuts to bus service may reduce the bus agency's operating costs, they could also prompt passengers to seek other means of transportation -- if the buses no longer take them where, and when, they want to go.

Fare increases that took effect in May -- intended to raise revenues -- could drive away some riders, resulting in a net loss to the bus agency.

Banks admits these plans to improve AC Transit's financial situation are far from perfect, but AC has no choice but to re-think its priorities.

"We're stretching ourselves too thinly, trying to be all things to everyone," she said. "It's always been really clear to me that we've had more service on the streets than we've been able to fund."

She acknowledges that much of that service has been underused or misdirected, and says the days when empty buses would trundle through sleepy East Bay neighborhoods are gone. Reinventing AC Transit, Banks said, will inevitably mean fewer buses.

After a first round of cuts to evening bus service in December, the agency in March will cut additional weekend buses that are deemed "unproductive." Before March, AC Transit will monitor the number of riders on each weekend bus.

Buses averaging fewer than 17 passengers an hour will be cut, Banks said.

In the late 1970s, AC Transit was considered a model public transportation system by national transit experts. The bus agency carried about 250,000 riders a day. But by the mid-1980s, ridership fell to 225,000. The agency had lost thousands of transbay passengers to other means of transportation, such as BART and car pools.

Since then, ridership has climbed slightly, with increases mainly among teenage riders. But AC Transit's ridership, while steady, generates only about one quarter of the money it needs to operate.

Banks and other agency officials call the 1978 passage of Proposition 13 a crucial point in AC Transit's history. The ballot measure, which sharply curtailed the authority of local governments to raise property taxes, eroded a major source of financing for public services. AC Transit -- which then relied on property tax for about 40 percent of its money -- was among the hardest hit.

While local governments and public transportation agencies cut services and sought other ways to make up the lost money, AC Transit kept bus service virtually the same -- "artificially high," said board member John Woodbury, "given what our operating resources are."

Christine Zook, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 192, which represents 1,700 AC Transit drivers, mechanics and clerical workers, called AC Transit's search for funding alternatives "long overdue." But she said agency officials were preoccupied with management changes and other internal disputes.

"The money just has not been carefully handled," she said. "There's been this sort of irresponsible attitude that the funding would always be there."

Over the years, both board members and AC Transit riders have strongly opposed efforts by

AC Transit's planners to save money by cutting service. AC Transit's 1992 plan to save about \$10 million by cutting transbay service was blocked by a lawsuit by bus riders. The resulting settlement allowed only minor cutbacks to service.

At public meetings this past summer, hundreds of AC Transit riders and supporters told AC Transit board members that the proposed cuts to service would leave them virtually stranded. Many elderly and disabled riders were especially concerned, contending that the bus is their only means of transportation. Others wondered how they would travel home from their late-night if AC Transit cut nighttime bus service as planned.

AC Transit's general manager Banks said that to avoid cutting service, in the past the agency has dipped into its pool of reserves. "Not a good idea," she said. From June 1980 to June 1995, those resources had dropped from \$41 million to \$10 million.

AC Transit's predicament is by no means unusual. According to the American Public Transit Association, 40 percent of all public transit agencies across the country have cut service or increased fares this year. For the fiscal year that just ended, federal operating grants for major metropolitan transit agencies dropped from \$802 million to \$700 million, and are likely to be cut an additional 47 percent for this fiscal year.

With such dismal news descending from Washington, regional planning agencies are left at a loss. Policymakers at the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which allocates state and federal money to Bay Area public transit operators, say the future looks bleak.

Bill Hein, the commission's deputy executive director, said local sales tax and federal subsidies covered operating costs for AC Transit, BART and San Francisco's Municipal Railway system until the late 1980s.

"We've been fighting to keep federal funds constant over the past few years," he said. "Now we're not even able to keep them."

Bay Area legislators like state Senator Bill Lockyer, D-Hayward, who recently shepherded AC Transit's bailout through the Legislature, might worry about AC Transit. But among most other California legislators, interest is negligible.

Senator Quentin Kopp, independent-San Francisco, who chairs the Senate Transportation Committee, agrees: "AC Transit is just a blip on the legislative screen."

Instead, Kopp said highway projects seem to be the primary focus at the state Capitol – and even those projects are facing tight fiscal times.

Relatively speaking, Kopp said, Sacramento pays little attention to the monetary woes of public transportation operators.

"The respect for public transportation agencies will not change measurably until they change how they consume public funds," said Kopp, who has long criticized the agencies as being poorly administered. "Transit agencies have their own conduct to blame."

Banks is more pragmatic than pessimistic. AC Transit riders, she says, must change their expectations.

"Their expectations are the result of habit, and we've encouraged what they've expected," Banks said. "We need to do things differently. It's going to be a sacrifice, but on balance there are going to be improvements. We're going to be different – but we're going to be better."

----- AC TRANSIT RIDES OUT TOUGH BUDGET TIMES

AC TRANSIT RIDES OUT TOUGH BUDGET TIMES

Faced with shrinking federal and state subsidies, AC Transit must struggle to balance its budget while still serving its passengers. The bus agency carries 230,000 riders across the Bay and throughout the East Bay, west of the hills from Crockett to Milpitas.

-- Ridership

-- Federal Subsidies to AC Transit

[Table]

1985-1986 \$8.25 million
 1994-1995 \$5.50 million
 1995-1996 \$2.8 - \$3.1 million
 -- Age of Riders
 65 and older 6%
 Age 18-64 60%
 Age 13-17 31%
 Younger than 13 4%

-- Ethnicity
White 32%
Asian 14%
Black 39%
Latinos 11%
Native Americans 3%
-- Trip Purpose
Shopping 7%
Recreation/social 4%
Appointments 4%
Medical 4%
Work trips 45%

School/university 36% Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. (x) Esitimated.
Source: AC Transit

[Illustration]

PHOTO (2), CHART: SEE END OF TEXT; Caption: (1) McGhee, 71, waited for the 88 bus to Oakland, (2) Lucille McGhee of Berkeley, on the 51 bus to a doctor's appointment in Oakland, says the bus is her only means of transportation / PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MALONEY/THE CHRONICLE

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