Anger boils over at meetings on Detroit bus cuts

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27 February 2012

Hundreds of furious Detroit residents attended hearings last Friday called by the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) to announce, once again, cuts to the beleaguered city bus system.

The city will eliminate 24-hour service to all routes in the city, with no bus service available from 1:00 am to 4:00 am. Service will also be cut substantially on the weekend, with several lines shut down entirely. Scheduled waiting periods between buses have been extended for as long as an hour. The drastic cuts take place almost immediately, on March 3.

As a result of five years of systematic cuts in the "Motor City," DDOT service is chronically late—sometimes by hours—and notoriously unreliable. Nevertheless each day 140,000 Detroiters are dependent on public transportation in order to get to work, school or the doctor's office.

Two meetings were held on Friday, one in the morning and another in the evening. The cuts were presented as already decided. The only reason the meetings were held was to conform to city law.

Tim Roseboom, the moderator of the meeting and DDOT's manager of strategic planning, arrogantly told the crowd, "We're only taking comment at this hearing. We will not be able to answer questions." When Roseboom suggested the meeting split into smaller groups, "so that your views would be recorded," the meeting erupted in anger.

"We came to the meeting to have our voices heard," shouted Allison Woodfolk in protest. Another bus rider demanded to speak from the podium and addressed the city officials, shouting, "You don't care. You are only doing this to look good."

Cassandra Emerson added, "You want us to work at your stores. You want us to work at Comerica Park [the baseball field for the Detroit Tigers]. We can't even get a bus to work," she said, in tears.

"I missed my doctor's appointment for seizures because the bus was so overcrowded and another bus broke down. I was over an hour late for my doctor's appointment. If I don't see my neurologist for my seizures, and can't get my medicine, I could die; it is just that serious!

"The same here," declared another woman.

The evening meeting was even shorter than the morning. It was less than a minute before the audience exploded in opposition. Residents were incensed that neither the mayor nor city council bothered to attend any of the meetings. Others denounced the meeting as an empty formality since the cuts had already been decided upon.

Included in Democratic Mayor Dave Bing's January plan to cut 1,000 city workers jobs was the proposal to lay off 78 bus drivers and 60 mechanics. However, last week this decision was postponed as Bing named a new director, Ronald Freeland, employed by the private contractor Envisurge, to manage the system.

Charles Stedman, a student at Wayne County Community College (WCCC), told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I don't accept the claim that they don't have the money to pay for these things. This is especially going to affect students who go to WCCC. Many of us don't have cars. Most of my friends take the bus to school."

Michelle Higgins said that she opposed the cuts

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because it is the only means of transportation for her and her family. “I don’t like it because we do everything on public transportation,” she said. “We like to go to the Fox Theatre and to go out to dinner, and for that we use public transportation. And sometimes we do not get home until early in the morning because we have the 24-hour bus service.”

“Once when my son got sick I took him to Providence Hospital, and we took the bus. It was easier for me to take the bus than to call EMS. So, now we will have to call 911 for a lot of trivial stuff. With the bus on Dexter you could go to Sinai Grace, you could go to Henry Ford Hospital. A lot of people that I know get on the bus to go to the hospital.”

John Heard said that many people work late and will not be able to go back and forth to work. “Look at this schedule. They plan to end the Gratiot bus at 12:03 am, but the SMART bus ends at 2 am. So what are people going to do who need to make the connection? And this is in the middle of the night?”

“This is not a 9-to-5 city. We need buses all hours of the night.”

Alison Woodfolk said there have been times when she has taken 11 buses in a single day when she goes to different houses as a home health worker. “I might take 30 buses a week, and now they are going to cut the service so that we are waiting longer. They just don’t care.”

Viveca Watson said that she came to the hearing at 11:00 am even though she gets off work as a security guard at 7:00 am. “I’m dead tired, but I came here because I am concerned about how I am going to get back and forth to work. I take two to three buses to work each way. No one is listening to what we have to say. People are angry and frustrated.”

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