Seattle transit agency proposes deep cuts in service

Angelo Bosworth
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Metro Transit, one of the main public transport systems available in Seattle and its suburbs, has announced far-reaching cuts to service, pending legislative action. It plans to eliminate one third of the routes and reduce services on another third, if a projected funding shortfall of $75 million is not met.

Public transportation in Seattle is served by several different organizations, including Metro, Sound Transit, Monorail, Amtrak, Greyhound and Washington State Ferries. The city has a land area of 217 square kilometers and 150 square kilometers of water, necessitating over 150 bridges to connect land masses across the many water ways.

Metro, the largest provider of public transportation in the area, made 115.4 million passenger trips in 2012. A cut of the magnitude proposed would devastate the entire system, denying much needed bus service to millions of people.

Metro depends on sales taxes for 60 percent of its operating income, and obtains the rest from fares paid by passengers. From 2008 through 2015, a drop in sales tax revenue has projected a revenue shortfall of $1.2 billion. At a March 1 forum hosted by the Transportation Choices Coalition, Metro General Manager Kevin Desmond described how $750 million of this gap has already been closed by service cuts, increasing fares by 80 percent over four years, using property taxes, coupled with lowering wages and benefits of metro employees.

Desmond also referred briefly to the support given by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) in these efforts in pushing through a concessions contract on transit workers. In November 2010, the ATU agreed to a three-year contract in which transit workers received no cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for the first year, effectively freezing their wages. In the next two years, drivers were given below-inflation raises of 0.7 percent and 0.6 percent respectively. Whereas the previous contract had secured a 3 percent floor on the COLA based on local inflation, the 2010 contract has a 0.0 percent floor, which means the wages cannot be decreased, but may not increase either.

The contract also allowed part-time operators to do more overtime work than their full-time counterparts, for which they would be paid less. ATU Local 587 President Paul Batchel was quoted as conceding that the agreement means “fewer employees working longer hours” with “fewer benefits packages being purchased.” There was a reduction of 100 staff positions following this concessions contract.

In 2012, the King County Council approved a congestion reduction charge of $20 for King County residents on every vehicle registration from 2012 to 2014, forestalling major cuts to the service. The extra fees collected from vehicle owners, coupled with tapping into the reserves, enabled it to cover the $60 million budget gap.

However, Metro still cut services that year. In June, it cut 25,000 hours of “unproductive service” and in September it eliminated the Ride Free Area. Seventeen routes were discontinued, citing “duplication with other routes, low ridership and other performance issues.” Beginning in January 2013, the Westlake Customer Shop, which served as a place where riders could obtain passes and other amenities related to travel, reduced operating hours.

Now, as the congestion charge is set to expire in mid-2014 and having exhausted the limit on tapping into reserves starting this mid-year, Metro faces an cumulative $75 million shortfall to keep the service running at the current level, which includes the replacement of aging buses. Metro will also lose state aid from the replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct with a tunnel route.

In light of this, the county's plan, pending legislation, is to cut 17 percent of service beginning in fall of 2014, while at the same time increasing fares by 25 cents. This means the elimination of 65 routes out of 200, with 86 more routes reduced or revised, negatively impacting 70 percent of the ridership, the equivalent of all commuters served during weekday peaks. Fifty-five percent of Metro's riders take the bus to school or work, and in downtown Seattle 43 percent journey to work using transit alone. As such, the pending cuts are a direct and devastating attack on the working people of Seattle and transit workers in particular.

Sound Cities Association, Seattle and King County have proposed to the State Legislature three regressive measures for increasing revenue, part of which would be used to mitigate the cuts to transit. They include an 8 cent increase in gas taxes, a $20 increase on the current congestion charge, and 1.5 percent local motor vehicle excise tax.

However, Kevin Desmond warned those who attended the March 1 meeting that it will be a "very, very tough road" to get such legislation passed. Even if these measures were passed, it still places the burden of funding public transportation predominantly on the working class of the county.

Metro contends that, in the event of not being able to make up the shortfall, the public will have a say in determining which routes should be cut or reduced, and a public meeting is scheduled on for May 14. The working class should reject such divisive methods completely. The issue is not about which routes to cut, and which to keep, but of expanding public transportation to meet the growing needs of the population.

The attack on public transit is part and parcel of the ongoing destruction of public institutions that provide basic services to working people, in the process shifting untold billions of dollars into the pockets of the rich.

The city's claim that "there is no money to be found" to fund transit and other vital social services rings hollow when the state of Washington is home to eight billionaires on the Forbes 400 list. This includes Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Steve Ballmer and Paul Allen. The combined wealth of these four individuals alone is a staggering $120 billion.

According to a report by Citizens for Tax Justice & the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, Boeing, the airline manufacturing giant based in Washington state, having made $9.7 billion in profits over the 2008-2010 period, actually got a tax refund of $178 million from the IRS over the same period. Another report by Citizens for Tax Justice concludes that Boeing avoided $6 billion in taxes in 2008-2011.