

Seattle: Hundreds condemn Metro Transit service cuts

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Over 400 people attended a public hearing on May 14 to oppose a proposed 17 percent cut to Seattle's Metro Transit.

On April 1, Metro announced an annual revenue shortfall of \$75 million that, unless addressed by the legislature, would necessitate deep cuts in service. The cuts, to be implemented in the fall of 2014, would impact two-thirds of the existing 200 routes—the elimination of 65 bus routes and service reductions on another 86, affecting 7 in 10 riders negatively—and would devastate Metro.

The funding shortfall arises as one-time measures taken to offset a gap of almost \$1.2 billion from 2008 through 2015 are coming to an end. Along with a “congestion reduction charge” levied on vehicle registrations and the use of reserve funds, fares were increased four times, a hiring freeze was instituted, and workers' cost-of-living increases were relinquished by the Amalgamated Transit Union.

The large main hall of the Union Station was set up with a variety of displays showing how cuts would affect riders. Around a dozen transit employees stood by and tried to answer, as best they could, questions from the workers and students who had come in for an “open house” prior to the public hearing.

The City Council chaired the public hearing, ostensibly to hear specific grievances from people affected.

Those who had come to provide testimony signed their name on sheets of paper located on a few tables and were each given a number. Around 4 p.m., all those gathered at the main hall were asked to cram into a room that had seating capacity for around 130 people. Many stood in the aisles and in the back and others waited outside the small room for their turn to come in to provide testimony.

Young, old, blind and disabled people were all seen in attendance. There were several people who were being assisted by guide dogs. However, they all had to wait while Kevin Desmond and a few other members of the council took the floor and took another 40 minutes to rehash the sorry state of Metro Transit. Those in attendance were more than likely well aware of this news—hence their presence—and did not need to hear this again.

The objections to the cuts were however, far and wide, at times even cutting across class boundaries. While much of the testimony was given by those who could least afford to lose this valuable service, there were a few representatives from local hospitals—Virginia Mason and Swedish Medical—who complained about the undue hardship imposed on their workforce and patients. A representative from the Chamber of Commerce, while noting approvingly the cuts already made, stated that a cut of this magnitude would make the employee benefits related to transit that Seattle companies provide less effective; employees may choose to not ride in a deeply gutted public transportation system. There were a few other employers who echoed this same concern.

A disabled man spoke on behalf of all disabled riders, noting that public transit was the only way this group got around for all their needs. “If you go through with this, they'll be the ones dying in their apartments,” he said. An elderly woman pleaded movingly to not cut the route that she uses to visit her 87-year-old mother.

A student from the University of Washington spoke about how its universal U-PASS program, which mandates every student to pay for a bus pass, would become unpopular after these cuts.

A metro employee, who associated himself with the “Transit Riders Union,” spoke about how a reduced

staff, already over-burdened with back-to-back schedules “did not have enough time to grab a meal, get a drink of water, or use the bathroom.” He spoke of adverse health effects borne by drivers due to these inhumane policies of Metro Transit.

A representative from the “Transit Riders Union” pledged to work with the state legislators to come up with a solution to the transportation needs of Seattle. Another Group, “Save Metro,” unfurled a long roll of paper on which it claimed to have gathered upward of 2,000 signatures opposing the cuts. These two organizations upheld the view that a solution to the crisis in public transportation could be found by appealing to the legislators in Olympia, the state capitol of Washington.

A supporter of the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke, addressing those who had gathered, noting that while the city planners acknowledged this sorry state of affairs being a result of the recession, they were intent on having the working class, who did not cause the recession, to pay for it. He explained that this was the policy of the ruling class, the resistance to which must be built by the working class with a socialist program.

After the meeting, a bus driver spoke with him and expressed interest in learning more about the WSWS and socialism. She spoke of having to do forced overtime as sometimes it took longer than the regular work hours to finish the schedules that had been sped up. She expressed concern that routes would be cut from neighborhoods where people could ill afford the steep fare. (Metro raised fares by 80 percent over the last four years.) “If somebody gets on the bus and can’t pay, I won’t insist as I know what it’s like to not have money to pay for it...” she said.

At the hearing, a woman angrily spoke about metro police’s manhandling of poor people who were caught without a ticket. She said that one could be charged \$250 for not being able to pay \$2.50 for a ride. Metro considers riding without a valid pass a criminal act which can be punished by a citation and fine up to \$1,000, and/or arrest and imprisonment in the county jail.

It is telling that while none of the financial parasites who caused the 2008 financial crisis—acknowledged by Metro Transit’s General Manager as the direct cause of the transportation woes—have spent a single day in jail, but have had their wealth restored to pre-recession

levels, a poor man caught without a ticket is punished to the full extent of the law.



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