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LA Metro looks to reimagine public safety on county's bus and rail lines

It 'starts by acknowledging that we cannot rely on an armed police presence for every issue and we need smarter, more effective solutions,' said LA Councilman Mike Bonin



LAPD Senior Lead Officers Andrew Cullen and Camille Sosa remove a rider with a shopping cart from a Metro Red Line train on Wednesday, June 28, 2017. The LAPD took over patrols of the LA subway system from the sheriff's Department during that month. (File photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Pasadena Star-News/SCNG)

By **RYAN CARTER** | rcarter@scng.com | Daily News

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The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority's board of directors on Thursday took a first step toward what many residents hoped would be a rethinking of public safety on local rail lines and buses, launching a committee of wide-ranging interests in an effort to find alternatives to armed law enforcement responses to some incidents.

The motion, co-sponsored by Los Angeles City Councilman Mike Bonin and county Supervisors Janice Hahn and Hilda Solis, urges Metro to develop policies for different responses to nonviolent crimes and other offenses.

Amid massive social upheaval over the role of police in society following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, dozens of commenters urged the board Thursday to “decriminalize” the poor on local transit lines by essentially moving away from police on public transit lines.

“We are in a moment of collective epiphany,” when the nation is really waking up to the problem, the catastrophe of systemic and structural racism... and that includes transportation and law enforcement,” Bonin said. “(Residents) are asking us to listen and asking us to act — an act of imagination about how we do things differently.”

Alternatives to armed officers on transit lines would include a transit ambassador program that provides staffed presence at Metro facilities and on Metro vehicles as well as social workers, mediators or mental health professionals.

Bonin said jurisdictions around the country are considering similar approaches to public safety. The Los Angeles City Council is examining the possibility of a new emergency-response model that would have trained specialists, rather than police officers, respond to many types of calls, including those regarding homelessness, mental health and substance abuse issues. And Los Angeles County is also exploring the possibility of an alternative to the 9-1-1 emergency call line that would triage calls to social workers or other non-law enforcement responders.

Board members pointed to reforms developed by “Campaign Zero,” which has identified eight use-of-force policies that have been shown to reduce the number of officer-involved killings. They include:



- Requiring officers to de-escalate situations, when possible, before using force;
- Using a “force continuum” or matrix that defines and limits the types of force that can be used; in responding to specific types of resistance;
- Restricting the use of chokeholds, strangleholds and carotid restraints;
- Requiring officers to give a verbal warning before using deadly force;
- Prohibiting officers from shooting at people in moving vehicles unless the person poses a deadly threat;
- Requiring officers to exhaust all other reasonable alternatives before resorting to using deadly force;
- Requiring officers to intervene to stop another officer from using excessive force; and
- Requiring comprehensive reporting that includes both uses of force and threats of force.

The changes to tactics have garnered support in other forums, such as the L.A. County Board of Supervisors, but even there they’ve been tabled amid criticism that they don’t go far enough. Many on Thursday called for an all-out halt to police on transit lines.

But the discussion on Thursday unveiled varying philosophies — from keeping law enforcement on trains to re-examining how police are trained.

Board Chairman James Butts, Inglewood’s mayor, acknowledged the issues, but argued that the real change needs to happen by reshaping law enforcement culture, not by eliminating it.

Butts noted that law enforcement needs to improve its training on how to police in customer-service environments such as transit. And it needs to set forth values that give law enforcement officers a kind of “North Star” on how to act to defuse potentially troubling situations.

“We don’t do these things, then we wait for everything to fall apart, and then we want to change everything,” he lamented.

But others saw it differently, citing the urgency of a generational moment in American history when officials are looking at alternative modes to incarceration.

Bonin said there are potential practices that can better define “who does what” — suggesting there may be moments when police are appropriate, but others when they are not.



Board member Eric Garcetti, L.A.'s mayor, echoed that point, while magnifying the challenge ahead of weighing the interests of those riders who want to feel safe on a bus or rail line against those who feel police are a threat.

"We can't return to normal," he said.

The Metro motion calls for the creation of a Transit Public Safety Advisory Committee that would develop the new policies and approaches in consultation with passengers and community members representative of the agency's ridership.

In February 2017, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority ratified a \$645.7 million, five-year, multi-agency contract to police the agency's 1,400 square miles. That includes 2,200 buses and six rail lines.

With two years left on that contract, Butts suggested that an obstacle to change is the contract itself — which Metro oversees.

LAPD had the largest law enforcement presence in the transit system — the third-largest in the country — for the first time since 2003. There are were to be 168 officers on trains and buses that make up about 60% of Metro's routes.

The Long Beach Police Department patrols eight stations of the Blue Line in Long Beach.

Bonin said it is "crucial" for Metro to make changes, given a history of complaints of racial bias in policy, particularly from younger Black people and Latinos.

"For years, Metro has heard that its system of policing was making huge segments of its passengers feel less safe and feel threatened," he said. "This is our moment to change that."

A related motion, approved Thursday, looks to review training of law enforcement agencies that patrol bus and rail lines.

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Ryan Carter | editor

Ryan Carter is city editor of the Los Angeles Daily News. He's an assignment editor who revels in the delights of good story ideas and photos.

rcarter@scng.com

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