



NEWS

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MTA BUYING HIGH CAPACITY BUSES, PURSUING OTHER OPTIONS TO FURTHER REDUCE BUS OVERCROWDING

MTA continues making progress in reducing overcrowding on Metro buses but has reached the point where it needs higher capacity buses, exclusive busways and more Metro Rapid bus lines to improve service even more.

That's the message MTA will deliver next week to the special master who oversees the Consent Decree MTA signed nearly six years ago to ease overcrowding on Metro buses.

Since the decree went into effect in October 1996, MTA has spent close to \$1 billion on new buses and expanded service. The agency has purchased 2,000 new compressed natural gas buses and while many of these replaced aging diesel buses that were prone to breakdowns, the MTA also has expanded peak hour bus service by nearly 500 buses. This year MTA has budgeted for a record amount of bus service that will be operated by MTA and its contract carriers.

MTA also launched special high tech Metro Rapid service that cut travel times by about 25 percent on Wilshire and Whittier boulevards between Santa Monica and Montebello and on Ventura Boulevard in the San Fernando Valley. The MTA Board has approved expanding Metro Rapid by 23 more lines starting with Vermont Avenue and South Broadway this December.

Metro Rail expansion also has helped ease bus overcrowding. Customer surveys have documented that the vast majority of riders on both Metro Bus and Rail are low-income riders who are transit dependent. Many opt for Metro Rail because it's faster than traffic on surface streets.

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The transportation agency also began decentralizing its bus operations this summer in an effort to be more responsive to local community needs.

Yet, some overcrowding persists on the busiest Metro bus lines. In its latest quarterly report monitoring the Consent Decree, MTA will acknowledge that. However, MTA officials note the solution is not just adding more regular buses.

"On busy streets such as Olympic Boulevard, we're running buses every 80 seconds during peak hours and we still can't keep up with demand," noted MTA Deputy CEO John Catoe. "That's an example where we need to be creative and switch to higher capacity vehicles or run Metro Rapid buses that can extend green lights for us."

MTA has gone out to bid for up to 200 articulated buses that are 60-feet long and can carry about half as many more passengers than a regular 40-foot bus (56 - 60 seats compared to 40 on a low-floor bus or 43 for a traditional high-floor bus). The MTA Board is expected to award a contract this fall and the buses will start arriving about 18 months later.

In addition, the first of 30 "CompoBUS" coaches will begin arriving in summer 2003. The CompoBUS can transport 47 seated passengers.

"Another way to increase capacity is Metro Rapid and starting in December we will add at least two new lines on our busiest routes every six months as the signal priority equipment is installed in the streets and buses," Catoe noted.

Catoe said the optimum solution is to build exclusive busways along former railroad rights-of-way MTA owns, and that's what the MTA is doing in the San Fernando Valley. In other areas, MTA is seeking bus-only lanes on existing streets so the buses don't compete with traffic.

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"The reality is MTA buses operate 12 percent slower on crowded Los Angeles area streets than they did 15 years ago because of worsening traffic which we can't control," Catoe said.

Indeed, Washington, D.C. lawyer Donald Bliss, the special master who oversees implementation of the Consent Decree, recently acknowledged that there are circumstances beyond MTA's control that cause buses to become overcrowded and adding more buses in those cases may not be justified.

For example, there may be accidents, weather, schools, work or theaters letting out that may cause temporary overcrowding. Metro buses that cross Alameda along Florence or Vernon have been delayed by freight trains.

Under the Consent Decree, MTA must meet load factor targets that limit how many passengers can stand, on average, on MTA buses. The busiest Metro Bus lines are measured by schedule checkers who count everyone who stands on buses as they pass key intersections and then calculate the average number of standees for all the buses that pass by in a 20-minute window.

Before the Consent Decree was signed six years ago, an average of 18 people stood during rush hours on some busy bus lines. Today, the load factor targets have cut that at least in half.

Like other transit agencies, MTA meets load factor targets by scheduling sufficient service. MTA schedules extra service far beyond what is necessary to meet the targets.

"We meet those targets 98 percent of the time systemwide, but there is no way any transit agency can do so 100 percent of the time because of circumstances beyond our control," Catoe said.

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't strive to do better and we are," added Catoe, who joined MTA last fall after managing the Big Blue Bus in Santa Monica, one of the country's most highly regarded bus systems.

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Catoe said MTA is concentrating on factors it can control such as deploying new coaches, preventive maintenance and better on-street supervision of drivers to adhere to schedules.

"Our plans for articulated buses, Metro Rapid expansion and construction of new busways as well as new Metro Rail service all are critical elements in that effort," Catoe added.

It's an expensive undertaking. This fiscal year MTA has budgeted more than \$1.2 billion, nearly half its total budget, for buses although the agency is responsible for streets and highway improvements, rail, paratransit for disabled persons and many other mobility programs that serve the 10 million residents of Los Angeles County.

"It's a tough balancing act but we're doing our best to continue improving bus service while fulfilling the other programs which MTA is mandated by legislation to fulfill," Catoe noted.