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Members of the Communications staff signed up hundreds who signed speaker requests for Thursday's public hearing. Other members of the Metro staff assisted speakers and helped maintain crowd control, along with Metro Security officers and Sheriff's deputies.



Photos by Ned Racine

Hundreds Crowd Metro Headquarters for Public Hearing

- 'We are at a crossroads,' CEO Roger Snoble tells Board
- Board poised to vote on fare policy, proposed fare restructuring

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(May 24, 2007) By 7:30 a.m., Thursday, they began lining up on the 3rd Floor at Metro Headquarters, hundreds of bus riders and transit advocates all anxious to score a seat in the Board Room or to speak – most against, a few in favor of – fare restructuring.

By 9 a.m., all seats were full in the Board Room and in the three conference rooms and the cafeteria where TV monitors would carry video of the public hearing. Still they came, perhaps 1,000 or more altogether. Some 200 wore yellow, red, orange and green T-shirts, crowding the Plaza level entry where they clapped and chanted as the hearing got underway.



Administrative Analyst Anna Mercaldi works with members of the Bus Riders Union to set up a speakers' list. Below, more than 200 who could not find seats in the Board Room or conference rooms gathered in the Plaza level entry to chant and clap their opposition to a fare change.



Members of the public crowded into the cafeteria to watch the public hearing on four TV monitors. Monitors also were set up in three conference rooms. Below, a member of the Bus Riders Union makes a presentation during the public hearing.



With about 300 signed up to speak and with Board members in their seats, Board Chair Gloria Molina called the public hearing to order at 9:30. Eight or more cameras from local TV stations lined the back wall, while photographers and reporters from local newspapers and radio stations squeezed in among the crowd.

In his opening statement, CEO Roger Snoble said, "We are at a crossroads... We have created a multi-modal network that spans the county and we provide quality service to millions of people. Our fares are lower than other systems our size. We have been extremely effective and efficient, yet costs continue to outpace revenues. We have a great system, we just can't pay for it."

Snoble said that, although he had been asked to solve the agency's structure deficit in three years, "our proposal solves it in five years but with very steep increases... achieving...a 38 percent fare recovery rate which will enable us to maintain quality service and to operate some future services."

'Reasonable path to financial stability'

He urged the Board to support the staff fare restructuring recommendation "or a similar fare change that puts us on a reasonable path to financial stability. It is needed for the sake of our transit customers and all those that count on us for their mobility."



Local media turned out in force for the public hearing.

After the CEO spoke, representatives of local elected leaders made statements and the Bus Riders Union made a 10-minute presentation. Molina then limited other speakers – among them Bart Reed of The Transit Coalition, Goldy Norton of the United Transportation Union and even longtime activist Jerry Rubin – to one minute each.



UTU spokesman Goldy Norton called for a plan to communicate any fare increase to both bus operators and patrons to avoid confusion. Below, Bart Reed of The Transit Coalition supported a modest fare increase.



Wally Shidler, a member of the Gateway Cities Governance Council, addresses the Board during the public hearing. Below, Board Chair Gloria Molina called those making presentations to the podium and directed the proceedings during the public hearing.



At 10 a.m., Molina announced that, due to the numbers who had come to the public hearing, the fire department had closed the building. She also asked speakers to leave the 300-seat Board Room after their presentations to free up seats for those outside.

As the hearing drew on, speaker after speaker came to the podium to make their one-minute talk. Spectators remained quiet and attentive to the speakers, usually clapping at the end of each speech.



A member of the Bus Riders Union made his presentation to the public hearing from his wheelchair.

Once the hearing ended, the Board was poised to consider a resolution required by the California Environmental Quality Act, stating that the purpose of Metro's fare restructuring plan is to pay operating expenses. The issue came up prior to the public hearing when the BRU called for an environmental impact review of the proposed fare changes.

A Board report notes that the Environmental Quality Act "does not apply to the restructuring of fares

charged by public agencies, which the public agency finds are for the purpose of meeting operating expenses."

Action on that resolution was to be followed by discussions of the proposed Fare Policy and the fare restructuring plan proposed by the Metro staff, as well as proposals by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Molina.

