



Transit Watch: Public Transit in Crisis



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[BART to slash costs, with possible service cuts, layoffs on horizon: 'This is not sustainable'](#)

By Mallory Moench

BART's board approved a cost-cutting plan Thursday that includes an employee retirement incentive package as the pandemic robs the train system of its ridership and some directors fear for the agency's long-term financial viability.

BART covered expenses for the first three quarters of the fiscal year that ends in June 2021 with federal funding, but it faces a \$33 million deficit in the fourth quarter. General Manager Bob Powers told the board Thursday he was "very confident" the seven-step cost-cutting plan will make ends meet by the end of the year, with Board President Lateefah Simon pledging "we will close the gap."

But the agency still faces a projected \$177 million shortfall in the next fiscal year. Leadership said a potential change in federal administration after the election would likely bring funding, but wouldn't solve long-term problems.

"We cannot lose sight of the magnitude of the challenge that we face looking ahead," budget director Christopher Simi told the board Thursday. "This is a problem that cannot be solved with a one-time solution."

BART is hemorrhaging money as the agency records only 13% of pre-pandemic ridership, with no expectation numbers will bounce back fully until July 2022. The train system, traditionally the commuter bloodstream of the Bay Area, is now desperately cutting costs while maintaining equitable service, especially to essential workers and disabled riders.

The approved seven-step plan to save money includes making contracting more efficient, continuing a hiring freeze, offering a retirement incentive program and redeploying staff to capital projects.

At the November meeting, the agency will also consider four different scenarios for service plans, trying to avoid the worst case options of closing stations or eliminating weekend service, which would start in February.

One way to cut costs is a retiree buyout, which the board was crafting in closed session Thursday. BART has 4,192 employees, and an estimated 1,540 - 37% - are eligible for retirement. Labor unions have not yet been consulted on the details of any potential deal. The aim is to avoid layoffs, which the agency would announce in December if necessary.

"I'm very fearful for what will potentially end up happening at the end of this budget year," director John McPartland said.

The cost-cutting plan passed 8-1, with director Liz Ames dissenting. Ames feared the plan as passed didn't take swift enough action to save the agency from potential financial ruin.

"There's so much uncertainty and I'm worried that bankruptcy could happen to BART. This is not sustainable," Ames said. "I don't see how we're going to survive in the future. I think we need to sacrifice more and tighten the belt on our expenditures."

Other directors rejected the idea that bankruptcy is imminent, but agreed the situation was serious.

"If we continue to not take any action and not do the responsible thing, maybe we will be talking about that at some point. I hope not," Allen said. The director added the economic crisis was a chance to make the agency more efficient.

Some of the cost-cutting measures approved Thursday are already in place. BART began shifting approximately 200 staff from operations to capital projects to new roles in mid-March.

"One way we are making the system better and safer is by using the expanded hours when trains are not in service to get years ahead on the needed capital infrastructure maintenance and upgrades," said John Arantes, transit vehicle mechanic and president of SEIU 1021's BART chapter, which represents nearly 1,900 workers.

Staff presented four service levels to the Board Thursday and will recommend one at the November meeting to be implemented in February. One would reduce Saturday service from five routes to three routes, and vary weekend train lengths. The second would also close select stations and the third would additionally eliminate weekend service. A fourth option would keep current service.

Ending weekend trains was anathema to multiple directors.

"It's devastating and even apocalyptic even considering that BART would not run on the weekends," Director Janice Li said.

BART data shows that the busiest stations during shelter-in-place, such as Fruitvale, continue to serve essential workers with few other transit options, especially on the weekend.

"We would be completely stranding some riders," Saltzman said.

Alita Dupree, a frequent public commenter at the agency's meetings, opposed both closing stations and eliminating weekend trains.

"Seven day a week service needs to be preserved. BART is a lifeline and a fast and efficient one at that," Dupree said. "These are hard decisions to balance a budget, but we have to remember most of all that BART's mission is serving the people."

For more information, please contact the California Transit Association at COVID-19@caltransit.org.