

# BlueGo deficit demands route and fare adjustments

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – To stop a projected annual deficit of \$449,500, overseers of the South Shore public bus system on Friday agreed to proceed with route changes and fare increases.

Although ridership numbers are 8 percent higher than projected, the people on the BlueGo buses are not paying full price because they are seniors, disabled or youths. This is making income from the fare box less than expected.

“Eighty-five percent of the ridership is discounted,” consultant Gordon Shaw told the Tahoe Transportation District board March 11. “Thirty percent of that is ADA. The others really need the service especially with how hard it is to get around on foot in this community in the winter.”



Heavenly is the largest contributor to the BlueGo bus system.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Those facts coupled with the private funding partners that had been part of the bankrupt-lawsuit riddled South Tahoe Area

Transit Authority not agreeing to put their money with Tahoe Transportation District has created the red ink on the ledger.

TTD Executive Director Carl Hasty told his board he is meeting with MontBleu casino officials next week in an attempt to get them back on board. Harrah's and Harveys remain on the sideline when it comes to putting in money for public transit.

"If we get back to the level of private sector participation, which I think we will, then we wouldn't be having this discussion," Hasty said.

Shaw outlined a plan to stem the cash flow problem, which would bring BlueGo within about \$95,000 of having a balanced budget. The board agreed to the changes, which staff will iron out. The intent is this spring the route changes and fare increases will be implemented.

No longer do these types of changes have to be approved by the South Lake Tahoe City Council. That stipulation had been part of the operating agreement the city had with STATA. However, as a formality, Hasty said he wants to bring the plan to the council and Douglas County commissioners so the electeds know what is going on. Both those entities pay into the operation of BlueGo.

One of the first things that will be put in place is what's called the Triangle Plan. It will replace routes 20X and 21X with a circulating route between the South Shore, Carson City and Minden/Gardnerville.

Shaw pointed out how the Nevada Department of Transportation is the largest public funder of BlueGo at \$470,000 year. NDOT bases its allocation on the percent of miles driven by buses in Nevada. This is one reason the consultant urged not to pare down availability of buses in the Silver State.

With Heavenly Mountain Resort's \$850,000 contribution, it is the largest contributor of any entity – not just the private

sector.

Cutting the oncall hours 10 hours a day to 26 hours will also save money. No longer will it be available on weekends from 12:30-5:30am.

"We can't afford to be a taxi cab service," Shaw said.

Shaw said Ridge Tahoe guests, Lake Tahoe Community College students and BlueGo employees may use the oncall service for free. To which he added this is not standard operating procedure in other bus companies and recommended doing away with this practice.

"This is probably the most complicated fare system I have seen," Shaw said of the various fees.

He wants to eliminate tokens. To this idea a bus driver in the back of the room said to someone else in the audience this is a good idea because a number of fake tokens, many from arcades, pass through the BlueGo fare box.

Most of the rate increases affect the oncall service.

Shaw is not recommending the base one-way fare be increased.

Board member and South Lake Tahoe City Councilman Bruce Grego asked what happens if gas prices reach \$5 a gallon.

Although this would substantially increase the fuel budget, Shaw said it would bring more passengers to BlueGo, which would create a positive cash flow.

To fill the remaining budget gap, Hasty said \$100,000 in savings from the California Transit Insurance Pool is possible. He is also looking at reducing workers' comp expenses.

However, Jason Van Havel, NDOT's rep on the TTD board, said he is not convinced enough contingencies are in place to prohibit

more cost-cutting measures in the future.

In other action:

- TTD is looking for a transit manager who would report directly to Hasty. Grego was adamant in not wanting the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's Human Resources Department to be part of the background checks, implying it did a poor job in hiring the former transit administrator.
- Ten bus shelters for BlueGo riders are expected to be erected this summer – five in California, five in Nevada.
- Martin Jimenez, BlueGo operations manager, said bus shelters are not cleared right after storms because his crews have to use personal vehicles to get to the stops to shovel out the areas that sometimes have been bermed by plow drivers. He added BlueGo has no snowblowers to do the work.