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Downturn may force CATS to reduce bus, rail service

Some riders may face longer waits as the transit system copes with sliding tax revenue.

By Steve Harrison
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A Lynx car makes its way down the tracks between Clanton and Tremont in uptown Charlotte during testing. OBSERVER FILE PHOTO

More Information

- [Possible service reductions/cuts](#)
 - Route 15 Cut service east of Sharon Amity
 - Route 25 Reroute service to New Bern Station
 - First Ward Shuttle Cut service
 - Route 57 Extend to Employment Security Commission but "glean out low ridership trips."
 - Route 59 Cut Marsh Road part of route
 - Village
 - Riders 96, 97, 98, 99 Cut Sunday service. Cut 96, reorganize 98, 97.

All Monday service	End at 12:30 a.m.
Express routes	Shorten the routes of express routes leaving uptown to I-77
Route 18	Cut Sunday service
Route 1	Extend to Paw Creek
Route 238	Cut service
Route 29	Cut between SouthPark and Eastland Mall
Route 30	Cut between SouthPark and Woodlawn train station
Route 234	Cut service
Route 202	Cut service
Route 77x	Cut mid-day, Saturday service
Gold Rush	Change frequency to every 15 minutes 9 a.m.- 11 a.m. and every 15 minutes 1 p.m.-3 p.m.. Stop Red Line at 6:30 p.m. instead of 10 p.m.
Lynx Blue Line	Change rush hour frequency to every 10 minutes, from every 7.5 minutes. Sunday service changes to every 20 minutes.
Route 12	Extend to Carson
Route 36	Will go to East/West train station
Route 11	Add service
Route 24	Change peak service to every 30 minutes, from every 20 minutes.

The Charlotte Area Transit System may eliminate five bus routes and cut the number of Lynx trains during peak times from eight to six an hour as part of \$4 million in budget cuts.

CATS is proposing those and other service reductions in response to the faltering economy. CATS receives more than half of its funding from a half-cent sales tax in Mecklenburg, which could generate about \$5 million less than projected this year.

The transit system isn't in danger of running an overall deficit. But CATS chief executive Keith Parker is worried that if the economy stays in recession, CATS will eat into its capital reserves, jeopardizing expansion plans.

Three of the four routes that may be scrapped are small community routes from the Rosa Parks Transit Center, off Beatties Ford Road. Parker has proposed cutting routes 234, 202 and 238, which are three of the seven routes that stop at the north Charlotte transit hub. The First Ward Shuttle was also to be killed under the proposal, which will be discussed by the Metropolitan Transit Commission on Wednesday.

The routes chosen for the reductions or cuts had low ridership, said CATS spokeswoman Jean Leier. Leier said most of the savings would come from savings on labor. CATS believes it won't have to have layoffs, and that it can reduce the number of jobs through attrition. CATS' operating budget for the Lynx and its bus system is about \$110 million.

Jennifer Roberts, chairwoman of the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners and member of the MTC, said she understands CATS attempted to affect the fewest people with the proposed cuts.

"People will have to adjust their schedules by 3 minutes," Roberts said about the proposed Lynx reductions. "You can still carry the same number of people. If for some reason it doesn't work, if it leads to anger, I'm sure we can come back and look at it."

CATS has also proposed more than a dozen other reductions, such as cutting back Sunday night-Monday morning bus service. The last bus would leave early Monday morning at 12:30 a.m., rather than 1:30 a.m.

In a memo for the MTC, Parker said CATS has anticipated that "low ridership services would have to be reviewed and reduced."

But first-year Lynx ridership has exceeded even CATS' highest hopes. The train has averaged more than 16,000 weekday trips since the summer, far ahead of the first-year projection of 9,100 trips.

Earlier this year, Parker said he was considering whether CATS could add another train during rush hour, which

would mean trains would arrive every 6 minutes instead of every 7.5 minutes, which is the current rush hour schedule. If the cost-cutting plan is approved, trains would arrive every 10 minutes during peak times. Sunday service would go from every 15 minutes to every 20 minutes.

The Lynx reductions would save \$100,000, said CATS spokeswoman Leier.

For riders, that will mean longer waits. Leier said the upside is that CATS would operate all trains at rush hour with two cars, rather than operating some single-car trains.

Many new light-rail systems nationwide operate trains every 5 or 6 minutes at rush hour. Atlanta's MARTA arrives every 10 minutes at peak times, but those trains are longer and can carry more people than the Lynx.

If approved, the cuts would go into effect in February and March. CATS has scrambled all year to balance its budget.

The first crisis came in the spring and summer, when fuel prices skyrocketed. CATS thought it might have a \$4 million shortfall in its fuel budget, and passed an unscheduled fare increase that went into effect in October. That raised the price of a one-way regular bus and train fare to \$1.50 from \$1.30.

The price of fuel has plummeted, ending that crisis, at least for now. Now the economy has become the overriding concern.

Parker warned earlier this fall that cuts could be coming, as the economy weakened. The sales tax – which provides 65 percent of CATS funding – has generated slightly less revenue than in 2007, as consumers are reluctant to shop and eat out. The N.C. Department of Transportation has told CATS it will likely reduce the money it gives CATS more than 10 percent.

Acoya Laney, a senior at West Charlotte High, takes the 202 bus daily to the Beatties Ford Road Library to study. If the 202 is cut, his trip will take about 8 to 10 minutes longer, he said.

"I'll be walking the rest of the way," said Laney, who said he doesn't want the route cut.

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bb41875 wrote on 12/16/2008 12:31:02 PM:

Great. The LYNX trains are horribly overcrowded during rush hour right now. If it gets any worse I'll go back to driving.

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