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Transit Union Local 757 sounds alarm to 'Save Our Ride'

350 rally in Portland, asking Congress to allow use of federal transit funds for operations



ATU Local 757 held a rally in downtown Portland June 11 to call on Congress to allow transit districts to use federal money for operations and maintenance. Right now, in most cases, federal mass transit funds can only go toward buying new equipment like buses and trains.

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Ridership is steady at mass transit systems around the United States, yet transit districts are cutting service and raising fares. The reason: Most local transit systems rely on dedicated taxes for most of their funding, and those revenues are down in the recession.

In Gary, Indiana, and Clayton County, Georgia, the shortage is severe enough that bus service may be eliminated altogether, says Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Legislative Director Jeff Rosenberg. ATU, which represents workers in mass transit, is teaming up with fellow transit union Transport Workers Union (TWU) to advocate federal rescue of mass transit.

To sound the alarm, the two unions are holding rallies around the country. The rallies call on Congress to allow transit districts to use federal money for operations and maintenance. Right now, in most cases, federal mass transit funds can only go toward buying new equipment like buses and trains.

"It makes no sense to buy a new bus and then leave it sitting in the garage because it lacks a driver," said ATU President Warren George at a June 11 "Save Our Ride" rally in Portland that drew about 350 people. "What we're asking for is the money that's already

been appropriated. We ask that local decisions be made at a local level."

A survey released April 1 by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) reported that 59 percent of public transit systems have raised fares or cut service since the beginning of 2009. Local examples are plenty.

C-TRAN, which serves Vancouver and other Clark County, Washington, communities, cut 6 percent of its bus runs in January, and laid off 12 part-time workers.

"Your system gets to the point of irrelevance if you cut too much," Jim Quintana, senior manager of development and public affairs at C-TRAN, told the Labor Press. "In the worst case scenario, our system would get cut in half in the next five years."

C-TRAN, like most transit systems, is funded by a local sales tax; C-TRAN's is 0.5 percent.

On the Oregon side of the Columbia River, TriMet — the Portland metro area transit agency — is unusual in that it is funded largely by an employer payroll tax — 0.006808 percent. But the result is the same: Revenues fall when times are tough.

On June 6, TriMet instituted its latest round of service cuts, reducing fer-

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On University of Oregon athletic construction projects

Building trades unions squawk at Ducks' no-bid contracting

EUGENE — Oregon's State Board of Higher Education voted at its June 4 meeting to allow a private group to build a new soccer and lacrosse complex, and improvements to the existing Len Casanova Athletic Center — on land belonging to University of Oregon. The buildings would then be given to the university, and would be operated and maintained with funds from UO athletic department revenues and gifts.

Representatives of Oregon building trades unions are concerned that the project is set up that way to skirt competitive bidding and public disclosure requirements, and possibly avoid the obligation to pay construction workers the prevailing wage. Answering some of these concerns, the Board spelled out that the licensee, Phit LLC, will comply with prevailing wage standards, and make a good faith effort to employ emerging small businesses and businesses owned by women and minorities.

Phit, a subsidiary of the University of Oregon Foundation, constructed the recently-opened John E. Jaqua Academic Center for

Student Athletes on the same model; both projects are funded with donations from Nike founder Phil Knight.

Even so, the arrangement appeared to be controversial to the Board, and passed with six 'yes' votes and four abstentions. Some Board members voiced their discomfort over pressure to approve the deal immediately, without time to have their questions answered.

"If it's not approved today, it's the end of the deal," UO president Richard Lariviere told Board members. "I'm convinced it's not a negotiating tactic or ploy. That's a hard line."

"I asked the question, 'Why this structure at all? Why not just make a donation to the university to get this done?'" Lariviere said. "And the answer I was given is that on two previous occasions, that's exactly what the donors did, and the cost overruns were over 30 percent, and the delays were over a year."

Building trades leaders dispute that claim, and say the issue is transparency.

"We just want it to be done above board and fairly," said John En-

dicott, business manager of United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 290. "If our contractors don't get the work and it's done fairly, that's life in the business," Endicott told the Labor Press. "If it's not done fairly, and somebody's been cheated out of an opportunity for work, that's not right."

Other UO athletic construction projects give Endicott cause for concern. After the Oregon Legislature voted in 2008 to approve \$200 million in bonds to construct the UO's Matthew Knight basketball arena, UO used an emergency clause to select a general contractor for the project without a competitive bidding process. National Championship Properties, which got the no-bid contract, is also a subsidiary of the University of Oregon Foundation. Later, a union subcontractor submitted the low bid, and then was called back multiple times for interviews by the general contractor, before losing out to another firm. UO didn't cooperate with requests for in-

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