

TriMet's first priority is service, regardless of budget crisis



Neil McFarlane is the general manager of TriMet

BY NEIL MCFARLANE
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Your Feb. 17 edition had both an editorial and a guest column on TriMet budget issues, and I want to set the record straight.

We all agree that TriMet provides a vital service to our riders and to the region, especially to low-income people and communities of color. It's the most important thing we do. And when we face budget challenges, service cuts are the last place we look to fill any shortfall.

We're facing a budget shortfall of up to \$17 million for several reasons.

The biggest cost driver is the unresolved contract with the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), in the range of \$5 million to \$10 million. The current contract expired more than two years ago, and the benefits under the existing contract are likely among the richest in the country.

The union proposal continues the status quo of the expired contract, which includes a \$5 co-pay, employees paying no deductibles, premiums or co-insurance. Plus, the same level of health care benefits continue for life after age 55 with just 10 years of service. An employee with Blue Cross coverage costs \$22,000 per year, nearly twice the industry average and twice that of non-union TriMet employees.

With no change, TriMet becomes a health care agency instead of a transit agency.

It took two parties over 30 years to reach

this point, and we need the ATU to come to the table and begin to negotiate a trajectory to long-term sustainable benefits.

Our employees are among the best in the industry. This isn't about blame.

It's about the math.

The benefits need to realign for us to restore service and keep fares affordable for our entire community.

A transparent budget

State law requires a balanced budget, and we cannot borrow to fill shortfalls. Our \$400-plus million operating budget lists all revenue sources and expenses for every program and employee at TriMet. We are transparent, in compliance with all state budgeting requirements and our forecasts incorporate estimates by independent experts.

Contrary to your editorial and claims by OPAL, our economic growth assumptions are sound and based on forecasts by independent economists and actual tax receipt data.

Due to the Great Recession, we've reduced our budget by \$60 million, eliminated 200 jobs and laid people off, frozen administrative salaries now for the fourth year and required non-union employees to pay more for their benefits. With the primary source of revenues from employer-paid payroll taxes, less revenue means less money for transit. It's prudent budgeting to realign our costs with revenues, so we're estimating about \$3

million less in revenues.

Federal funds

Transit agencies across the country are preparing for a potential loss in federal operating assistance, and TriMet is no different. Anyone watching the machinations in Congress knows this is a real possibility. OPAL is wrong and irresponsible in stating we shouldn't plan for a potential reduction of \$4 million in federal operating funds because we receive large amounts of federal capital construction funds. Capital funds can only be spent on our light rail construction projects, not for operations. So we have to plan wisely for a potential loss.

We have few options to either reduce costs or raise revenue. We are having internal layoffs and program cuts, in addition to proposing service cuts or fare increases. None of these are what we want to do, but we face a serious budget crisis and must take prudent steps to resolve it.

As we resolve these budget uncertainties – the union contract, federal operating funding levels and payroll tax revenues – our first priority is to restore service.

Meeting the transportation needs of our entire region, especially those who are low-income or communities of color, is our mission. Transit plays a critical role in moving us to energy independence and reducing carbon emissions. Realigning our cost structure for long-term sustainability will allow us to expand service to meet the growing transit needs of our riders.

The winter of our studded-tire discontent continues

BY ROB SADOWSKY
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Every time I hear the sound of a car bearing studded tires, I cringe. Part of it is the sound for me, and part of it is the wonder of why. Why use them? There are

other solutions. Part of it is the knowledge that studded tires are creating additional wear and tear on roads at a time when we are cutting maintenance budgets. It is why

we don't allow studded tires year round.

I recently learned that studded tires are only minimally effective in doing the job they set out to do. Drivers can gain better traction with snow tires and get better fuel efficiency.

According to an Oregon Department of Transportation estimate, studded tires cause more than \$40 million of damage annually on roads across Oregon. The state spends about \$11 million per year fixing that damage.

Jeff Bernards is organizing a campaign to

prohibit studded tire use in Oregon. He has established a petition drive to ban studded tires at www.preservingoregonroads.org. Here are some of the simple reasons Bernards points to for the campaign:

"Science & technology have made the new snow & ice tires out perform studded tires. Recent tests have shown drivers have a safe choice when choosing a winter tire. The ruts caused by studded tires create unsafe driving conditions on our bridges and highways. They also create unfunded infrastructure damage, which is a long-term burden to all people who depend on our roads. Our food comes down that road, it's in our best long term interest to protect our roads."

For example, a typical 30,000-mile studded tire will destroy between one-half and three-quarters of a ton of asphalt during its useful life. Given that there are questions about the efficacy of studded tires to begin with, it should be a simple step to take to ban the tires, right? Well, Oregon loves its studded tires as we brave our icy roads. We also love our civil rights, our sense of individuality that asks government to get off our back. I wonder if we can continue to afford the damages that studded tires cause.

The campaign first needs to gather enough signatures to get on the Oregon ballot. You can learn more about the campaign and get copies of the petition on line along with finding out more details about studded tires as well as alternatives.

There are other routes to an outright ban included requiring permits, raising fees on their purchase and reinstallation, and restricting the locations that studded tires can be used. The campaign has much work to do. I remember very vividly the images of cars sliding down hills during the winter of 2009. It is easy to sympathize with residents of the West Hills who fear their daily commute on cold mornings. Yet I find it hard to believe that those residents of the West Hills would have any trouble with switching to snow tires. The tire industry should embrace the change and not fight it. After all, people will need to upgrade to snow tires creating an economic boost.

While the battle might be an icy uphill battle, my hat goes off to Jeff Bernards for the effort. He truly is Don Quixote facing a mighty windmill that we should all be inspired by.



HEALTHY STREETBEAT

Bicycle
Transportation
Alliance

Healthy Streetbeat is a monthly column for Street Roots written by the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (BTA). Our contributors are Rob Sadowsky, executive director, and Margaux Mennesson, communications director.

Fallen Off the Edge

A new book by Art Garcia

"Fallen Off the Edge" is a chronicle of one man's experiences after returning from the Vietnam War. Told through the eyes of Street Roots columnist Art Garcia, this book celebrates the major victories born from a series of questionable choices. Art's jocular storytelling takes the reader along with him in and out of the California prison system over the course of 10 years until he found the strength and courage to pull himself up from the fall.

The book is available online at www.blurb.com under searchword Art Garcia.

people's
FOOD CO-OP

good food. free classes.
real community.

3029 SE 21st Ave
open 8a-10p daily
EBT accepted
(503) ORGANIC
www.peoples.coop

