



TRANSIT TRAUMA

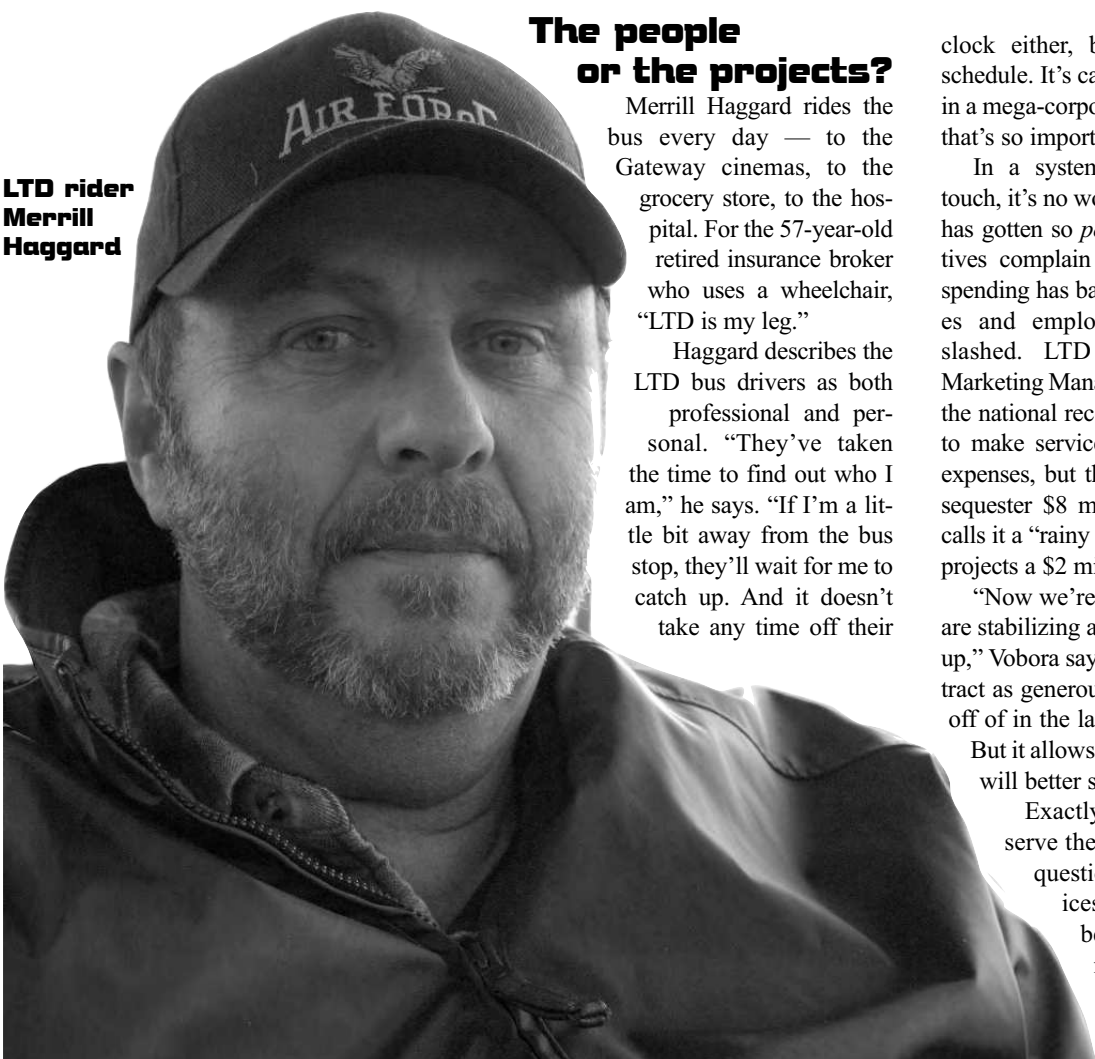
LTD labor dispute gets ugly. BY KERA ABRAHAM

If you're a regular rider, you know: Bus drivers don't have it easy. They have to make it to each stop on their routes on time, every time, while collecting fares and assisting elderly and disabled riders. They often work eight-hour shifts with few breaks, anchored to their seats while the bus vibrates beneath. But someone's gotta do it; 13,000 people rely on Lane Transit District buses to get around Lane County.

LTD drivers and passengers alike are hoping to avoid what seems increasingly likely: a strike by the district's 235 bus drivers and mechanics who are members of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757. The employees' contract expired last June, and the district declared impasse on bargaining in November. Since then, the district and the union have played a game of labor chicken — the union posturing to strike, the district refusing to budge on major issues.

A citizens' committee intervened in late January, and the union accepted its proposal to enter a 35-day cooling-off period. But the district declined, instead implementing its final offer on Feb. 1. The furious union filed an unfair labor practice complaint and a new notice to strike on March 7.

Now it seems the dispute rides on respect.



**LTD rider
Merrill
Haggard**

The people or the projects?

Merrill Haggard rides the bus every day — to the Gateway cinemas, to the grocery store, to the hospital. For the 57-year-old retired insurance broker who uses a wheelchair, "LTD is my leg."

Haggard describes the LTD bus drivers as both professional and personal. "They've taken the time to find out who I am," he says. "If I'm a little bit away from the bus stop, they'll wait for me to catch up. And it doesn't take any time off their

clock either, because they're right on schedule. It's called a personal touch. And in a mega-corporate environment like this, that's so important."

In a system hinging on a personal touch, it's no wonder that the labor dispute has gotten so *personal*. Union representatives complain that the district's project spending has ballooned while rider services and employee benefits have been slashed. LTD Service Planning and Marketing Manager Andy Vobora says that the national recession forced management to make service cuts and trim personnel expenses, but the district has managed to sequester \$8 million in reserves (Vobora calls it a "rainy day fund"), and this year it projects a \$2 million revenue surplus.

"Now we're in a position where things are stabilizing and the economy is picking up," Vobora says. "Is this [employee] contract as generous as the one we just came off of in the last four years? No, it's not. But it allows us to balance a budget that will better serve the community."

Exactly *how* the district plans to serve the community is the critical question. It could expand services and maintain employee benefits, or it could pour money into capital projects. LTD's 2005 budget favors the latter.

Capital spending

When we talk about LTD's finances, there are two main accounts to consider: the operations budget, which covers ongoing expenses such as salaries and bus fuel; and the capital projects budget, which pays for things like equipment upgrades and construction projects. Both funds are fed by LTD's revenues from the local employer payroll tax (65 percent), fares (17 percent) and other sources (18 percent).

When General Manager Ken Hamm was hired in 2000, LTD had budgeted \$2.7 million for capital projects. Now, only five years into Hamm's management, the capital projects budget has increased 10-fold to \$27 million. Although much of that money will come from Washington D.C., LTD is required to match all federal funds with a 20 percent local share. Most of that will come out of the operations budget, putting a squeeze on the money available for personnel.

According to the draft MTIP budget, in the 2005 fiscal year LTD plans to spend about \$14 million on the Bus Rapid Transit project (a plan to create quicker



**ATU officer
Carol Allred**

bus routes around the metro area), \$3.5 million on administrative support equipment and \$5.2 million on relocation of the Springfield station. For union members, the spending doesn't jive with the district's claims of poverty.

Haggard feels that LTD's priorities should be clear: people over projects. Although he's never been a union person, he says he supports the bus drivers in this dispute. "The LTD management has spent money obviously without doing their homework," he says. "The greatest asset that LTD has is its bus drivers."

Health care

Union officer Carol Allred says that 25 years driving a bus has seriously compromised her health. Her bladder's "shot," she's had two bouts of deep vein thrombosis, and she wears compression stockings to improve the circulation in her legs.

Allred's not alone. A recent study by the U.S. Transportation Research Board reports that bus drivers suffer more physical and mental stress than most other professions, often resulting in circulation problems, bladder dysfunction, and back and shoulder strain.