



FED UP WITH HAMM

LTD drivers blame transit troubles on their boss.

By Kera Abraham

The turning point might have been when the managers of Lane Transit District cut 14 percent of its service hours, forcing bus drivers to move more passengers in less time. Or when LTD unveiled its \$7 million Springfield station, only to reveal that it didn't contain a break room for drivers. Or when the district stopped hosting its annual employee banquet, a tradition for 25 years; or during the build-up to the first worker strike in LTD's 35-year history, which threw the county into a transit crisis for a week last March.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when LTD's drivers got fed up with their general manager, Ken Hamm, but now a vast majority of them want him fired. They say that under his leadership, LTD's service has gotten worse and relations between drivers and managers have soured. "Employee morale at LTD is at an all-time low," said Dave Barton, an LTD driver who has been spearheading the push to fire Hamm. "We are just outraged and we want him gone."

LTD managers and board members acknowledge that the district is facing tough times, though they don't place all blame on Hamm. Ridership is at an all-time high, and so is the volume of complaints. Some of the bus routes that have been scaled back are now regularly overcrowded and behind schedule; drivers barely have time to use the bathroom. LTD's services (and drivers' bladders) are being squeezed partly in order to fund the first phase of EmX, a \$23 million bus rapid transit project for which public enthusiasm is mixed.

Facing anger from most of LTD's drivers and negative feedback from some in the community, board members are now turning to their evaluation of Hamm. The pivotal question: If he goes, will things get better?

Dan Dreier has been an LTD driver for 21 years, and to say that he cares about the district is an understatement. An eloquent writer, his observations on bus driving and life have appeared in *The Register-Guard* and in "The Safety Review," a monthly LTD newsletter that he wrote and edited. He was the keyboard player and leader for Running Hot, a band comprised entirely of LTD employees. In his view, his fellow bus drivers and passengers are some of the finest people on the planet.

Now, there is no newsletter and no band. The district cut the funding for the newsletter in 2003, and the band quit in protest in March 2004 after the district made its first contract proposal, which would have made 20 drivers work part-time with no health care, no retirement, no seniority or right to promotion. Union employees were so upset that they voted to cancel the district's annual picnic and rodeo.

After the strike ended last March, many of LTD's drivers remained miffed. In their eyes, the district was wasting its money on capital projects (like EmX and a failed \$1.8 million experiment with hybrid electric buses) while cutting service and making their jobs harder. The drivers say they are willing to make sacrifices if they are in the best interests of the community, but they wonder why, even after LTD's finances improved, the service cuts remain.

"We're not blaming Hamm for the economic downturn," Dreier said. "We're blaming Hamm for the service downturn that continues to this day after the economy has improved."

Dreier was one of 164 LTD drivers and mechanics, representing 93 percent of the district's non-probationary operators, who signed a petition calling for Hamm's termination. It states that Hamm has squandered LTD employees' trust and respect and that they no longer have confidence in his leadership. The Amalgamated Transit Union, which represents LTD drivers and mechanics, did not endorse the petition; officer Carol Allred has been meeting regularly with management and says she wants to give Hamm time to implement changes. Regardless, driver Dave Barton delivered the petition to board chair Gerry Gaydos in July.

"What we don't have, and what we need, is effective and inspired leadership," Dreier said. "Getting a new general manager is like getting a new coach for a struggling team."

Dreier feels that the problems at LTD go beyond Hamm, but because Hamm is the board's only employee, board members could show LTD employees and riders that change is coming by changing its leadership. Dreier has a motto for it: "Healing can't happen with Hamm at the helm."

Dreier and Barton describe Hamm as a "golf course executive" who can be charming to other businessmen, but who is condescending to drivers and talks too much without listening. That leaves drivers feeling disenfranchised.

"The enormous potential of employees is being squandered," Dreier said. "It has to do with how we're being disrespected as human beings. We have a huge emotional investment in what we do, and we're not getting the support we need."

Melinda Raven, a driver and instructor, says that her primary concern is for her passengers. "I love LTD, and I want to do a quality job," she said. "But the way the system is now, I cannot provide quality service to my riders."

For that, she blames Hamm. "He's general manager," she said. "The bus stops there. I mean, the buck!"

From 1991-2000, Hamm was the first general manager for Link Transit in Wenatchee, Wash., and he launched the agency with \$17 million in construction projects. In 1999, when Washington voters repealed the excise tax that provided half of Link's funding, Hamm slashed services and laid off more than half of the district's drivers. According to articles in *The Wenatchee World*, Hamm was accused of overspending and mismanagement at Link.

Meanwhile, things were looking good for LTD. When former General Manager Phyllis Loobey announced her retirement after 26 years at LTD, the economy was strong and negotiators had just settled the most generous contract in the district's history. According to LTD spokesman Andy Vobora, employee morale was high.

In early 2000, the board chose Hamm as LTD's new gen-



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