

TAX: 'If what the community sees is significant, it will be supported.'

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"For some small employers, any amount is significant so they are passionate," Vobora added. "Bigger businesses don't see it as a big deal, since it's part of being in the community. In the middle, some see it as not a big deal and others say we shouldn't subsidize public transit. Those dynamics over the years haven't changed."

One thing that has changed over the years has been the level of LTD service, but even their pared back level of service would make Salem-Keizer Transit officials take notice. Cuts in 2004 meant the latest buses Monday through Saturday left at 10:45 p.m. Restoring more service this year means the latest buses leave at 11:45 p.m. Monday through Friday (and Saturday next year). Sunday service runs from 8 a.m. until 7:30 p.m.

That's a big difference in service from what Salem-Keizer Transit offers. Currently service here ends at 9 p.m., with no weekend service.

Passage of the the ballot measure 24-388 would extend service until 11 p.m. during the week. Cherriots general manager Allan Pollock said weekend service hours aren't certain yet.

"The final exact times haven't been finalized but the draft plan generally has Saturday starting at 7 a.m. and ending at 9 p.m.," Pollock said. "Sunday would start at 8 a.m. and end at 7 p.m."

Another change in Eugene-Springfield is faster service.

In 2007, LTD started the Emerald Express (EmX) rapid transit system, connecting downtown Eugene with downtown Springfield. The service was expanded in Springfield in 2011 and is scheduled to expand to west Eugene in 2017. The cost of that expansion is pegged at close to \$100 million; the Federal Transit Authority last month announced plans to fund \$75 million of that.

With EmX, buses come every 10 minutes and travel in

part along specific EmX lanes paid for with federal money.

Vobora said LTD gets \$7.6 million a year in fares, which helps the transit district get \$6.1 million in federal formula funds, which are used for capital projects like buses and buildings. For example, the EmX buses are separate from regular LTD buses and new stations have been built for the extended service.

"The funding can be flexed, so it can be used for maintenance as well as buses," Vobora said. "It become operating revenue. Out of the \$6.1 million in formula funds, we flex over \$4 million into the general fund, mainly for maintenance."

During a community conversation last month, one suggestion for bringing more transit revenue for Cherriots was putting advertising on buses. Robert Krebs, chair of the transit board, said costs to administer an advertising program cost more than the program was bringing in, so

that was scrapped.

Vobora said LTD uses Lamar Advertising, which used to handle the Cherriots account as well. All told, Vobora said LTD brings in about \$410,000 a year in bus advertising. That includes a separate amount for a EmX-specific contract.

"Lamar had a hard time selling ads for EmX, since we had it at a higher cost to keep the buses looking sleek," Vobora said. "When we rewrote the contract in 2013, I carved out the EmX fleet and sold that to the University of Oregon directly. That's a separate contract with the UO and then they work with Lamar to do the placement. We get about \$150,000 for that."

Having the UO in Eugene highlights one of the key differences between LTD and Cherriots: LTD doesn't have much state government use to depend on, while Cherriots gets much higher revenue in that category while having a far lower student population than



Craig Murphy file photo

U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio drives an LTD EmX bus at the January 2011 opening of the new Gateway station in Springfield.

the UO provides LTD. State employees have a .6 percent tax to fund transit through the Mass Transit Assessment fund. That pays about \$5 million a year to Cherriots. By contrast, Vobora said LTD gets about \$200,000 from the fund. The fund used to pay LTD about \$1.5 million a year when UO employees were considered state workers, but that funding is now part of the payroll tax with the university's current governmental structure.

Vobora acknowledges starting a new payroll tax now would be a tough sell.

"It would be interesting," he said. "Businesses are feeling that with new regulations like sick leave and the minimum

wage increase, everything piles up on them. It would be a harder sell to the business community at this point. It would be a good discussion. If what the community sees is significant, it will be supported.

"Part of that is the education about what the rate equates to and what the average business would pay," he added. "We did focus groups this year, to get business people to know all the details of where their money goes. When you show them the numbers, the average payroll tax doesn't pay a significant amount of money. (In Salem-Keizer), having people understand what that amount is is helpful in the dialogue."

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