

Holly Butcher

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Superior mayor: Bus service needs improvement

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City taxpayers are picking up more than a “fare” share of mass transit costs in Superior.

Mayor Dave Ross is working to establish a task force in an effort to put more of the city’s mass transit costs back in the fare box.

However, don’t expect the typical political solution — higher fees or cuts to service, he said.

“In a nutshell, we need to look totally at how we provide transit in our community,” Ross said. “The fare box total is the lowest in the state ... our users are telling us loud and clear that it’s lousy service ... we need to increase service, increase reliability, shorten dramatically those stop times.”

Ross said he believes better service will increase ridership and shift the burden from taxpayers to people who use the service. The trick, he said, will be providing those who rely on the bus for transportation with more timely service that will get people to the places they need to be, when they need to be there.< /p>

Federal and state funding pays about \$750,000 — about 62 percent of the cost — for the city’s annual mass transit costs.

Fares pay for another 12 to 13 percent of the cost, said James Heilig, director of administration and planning for the Duluth Transit Authority, which provide bus service in Superior, Duluth and surrounding communities.

But most of the cities Superior’s size probably average in the 13- to 15-percent range, she said.

However, that leaves taxpayers picking up a significant portion of the cost for the city’s mass transit costs annually, whether or not they ride the bus, Ross said.

About 25 percent of the city’s mass transit costs are taxpayer funded.

The Duluth Transit Authority offers Superior riders three routes.

The most popular route for the 12,000 to 18,000 riders each month that take a bus in Superior is the Itasca route. The route runs from the neighborhood on the southwest edge of the city, along East Second Street to the Mariner Mall, Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College, University of Wisconsin-Superior and North End, where riders can connect to the Duluth-Superior bus.

The other routes travel from downtown to Billings Park and South Superior. During nonpeak hours, the routes are combined, traveling through Billings Park before heading to South Superior.

The buses run every 30 minutes during peak hours and every hour during nonpeak hours, Heilig said.

While buses start running between 5:30 a.m. and 6 a.m. each day, the South Superior and Billings Park buses are out of service before 7 p.m. The Itasca bus finishes its final run before 7:30 p.m.

Heilig said after those hours, the ridership drops off significantly, increasing the costs for operations without support from fares. It's something experienced in Duluth as well, where the buses run until after midnight in some areas.

Both Duluth and Superior benefit from federal transportation aid to pay for city bus service, but one of the problems Superior has is that Wisconsin doesn't fund mass transit the way Minnesota does, Heilig said. While the state picks up the tab for about 75 percent of the cost in Duluth, Wisconsin only funds about 50 percent of the cost, he said. Duluth riders also cover a larger proportion of the cost, 20 to 25 percent.

Nationwide, fares pay for about one-third of the cost of public transportation by bus, according to the American Public Transportation Association.

One of the problems Superior's bus service faces is that while the bus can serve neighborhoods really well, it's not able to serve job centers — such as those along the waterfront and other industrial areas like Murphy Oil, Heilig said.

Heilig said in Duluth, the transit authority is able to serve both neighborhoods and job centers because those centers are aligned. But in Superior, buses can't get within a 1/2 mile of certain employment centers.

Ross sees that as an impediment to the city's economic development. If employers rely on a workforce likely to ride the bus, Ross said they are likely to locate outside of Superior because the transit system doesn't meet their needs.

Even now, Ross said the service could create barriers for workers who rely on the bus to get to work.

"What we're doing now is unacceptable," Ross said. "We can't continue in this direction. We can't continue to absorb higher costs and levy more money on our citizens to keep the transit system working when it's not functioning well and it's not serving our riders very well."

Ross is working to create a task force to explore ways to improve the city's public transportation system and shift the cost for operating it from taxpayers to riders.

"People aren't willing to pay — even if it's very little — for lousy service," Ross said. "... What we need to do is increase service under the present budget constraints."

Ross envisions closed-loop system that increases the number of stops and reaches more parts of the city, with a feeder that goes to Duluth's downtown hub at regular intervals.

However, the Duluth Transit Authority is also working with the Metropolitan Interstate Council in an effort to improve bus service in the Twin Ports, Heilig said.

“The rate payer is really smart,” Ross said. “They know it’s lousy service, and they’re not supporting it. If we want to reduce the number of cars going over the bridge with only one person in it behind the steering wheel, we need to have really good bus service.”

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