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## RTA cuts threaten Circulator

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Lakewood's popular Community Circulator may soon be gone as the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority attempts to fill a \$5.5 million projected deficit.

The RTA Board of Trustees held an emergency meeting

July 15 where staff members recommended the elimination of Community Circulators and a fare increase of 25 cents.

Due to low county sales tax revenues, RTA's primary source of funding, and a 33 percent transit cut in the recently-passed state budget, RTA is projecting a \$5.5 million deficit by the end of the

year. Based on July sales tax receipts, the organization is expecting 2009 levels to be \$18.5 million less than those last year.

"Our goal is to maintain the as many work-related trips as possible and the traditional Community Circulators don't take people to work," said RTA Media Relations Man-

ager Jerry Masek, adding that the services offered by circulators often duplicate other bus routes which, despite a higher price, would still get passengers where they need to go.

According to Masek, the organization has the power to make these changes now be-

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cause of the public hearings that thousands attended last year.

"If we have any new proposals we have to have more public hearings," he said. "But if we stay in the parameters of what the public commented on last year, we can make those cuts."

Following the public hearings, RTA received a one-time infusion of \$9 million from the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency. This allowed RTA to scale back service cuts from 9 percent to 3 percent and implement a 25-cent increase rather than a 50-cent one.

"Last year's culprit was the high cost of gas. Sales tax is the culprit now. People are missing the point that we did everything we could for a year to stave off these cuts. We've covered some of the gap internally but there's only so much we can do here," Masek said, noting that salaried staff took a 3 percent pay cut in June.

RTA is expecting to save \$1.5 million from the fare increase and \$2.2 million from

the service cuts, a total of \$3.7 million.

"We're not there yet, but we'll look for other ways we can squeeze pennies here," Masek said. "Right now, if nothing happens, we have a \$5.5 million hole that could go up if it gets even worse. We're in the business to provide service, so cutting it back isn't something we do readily but our backs are to the wall and there aren't many options left. Every service cut will affect somebody."

Lakewood Mayor Ed FitzGerald is concerned about the effects of cutting route 804, the most used circulator of the twelve in operation right now.

"We're going to try to mobilize public opinion like we did when RTA first considered these cuts," he said. "We're going to do some statistical analysis to show that it's actually a good investment of public transportation dollars because our circulator is used so much compared to other cities."

According to Masek, it costs RTA an average of \$100 per hour to run any bus route. A presentation made recently to RTA's Board of Trustees stated that the Lakewood Community Circulator costs \$2.22 per hour to run while

the Westshore Circulator, route 808, costs roughly \$11 per hour to operate.

"The board's policy is to go to the places that affect the fewest number of people," Masek said, adding that circulators carry an average of 12 passengers per hour while bigger buses carry an average of 30.

A decision on the matter was expected Friday, but no consensus could be reached. A decision is now expected on Aug. 25.

"We're going to use that extra time to show that Lakewood's circulator is so much more economical in terms of how many people use it and how much RTA spends on it," FitzGerald said. "I think that makes a good case for treating us differently, even if they are going to eliminate other circulators. I hope they don't, but if they are going to, why would they eliminate the one that is working the way it's designed to?"

Lakewood is planning to hold joint public events and meetings with Cleveland's Edgewater community which is also mobilizing against the cuts sometime next week. Check [cleveland.com/lakewoodsunpost](http://cleveland.com/lakewoodsunpost) for meeting times and dates as they become available.