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City rallies to try and save RTA Circulator service

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The Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority will be cutting all 12 Community Circulator routes Sept. 20 and will enact a 25-cent fare increase beginning Sept. 1.

According to Chief Executive Officer and General Manager Joe Calabrese, the actions will help RTA close a projected deficit in the 2009 operating budget. Due to low county sales tax revenues, RTA's primary source of funding, and a 33 percent transit cut in the state budget, RTA is estimating a \$5.2 million deficit by the end of the year.

The organization estimates that the service reductions will generate \$1.6 million this year and more than \$6 million in future years. The fare increase is expected to generate an estimated \$1.5 million this year. Current fares are \$2 for

buses and \$1.25 for the Circulators.

RTA also plans to modify between 12 and 15 other routes with low ridership but has not yet finalized the list.

Both the service reductions and fare increase were included in RTA's 2009 budget and discussed at six public hearings a year ago where thousands protested the cuts. Thanks to a one-time infusion of \$9 million from the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency, RTA was able to scale back its planned service cuts from 9 percent to 3 percent and implement a 25-cent increase rather than a 50-cent hike. The organization is now implementing some of those cuts they had avoided, said RTA Media Relations Manager Jerry Masek.

According to RTA studies conducted this year, circulator routes impact only 2.5 per-

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cent of riders and often duplicate other large bus routes. Officials estimate that the elimination of Community Circulators will affect 1 percent of all riders.

"Our goal is to maintain as many work-related trips as possible and Community Circulators don't typically take people to work," Masek said.

Mayor Ed FitzGerald has expressed his opposition to RTA's decision and the city will hold an RTA Community Circulator Rally at 6 p.m. today in front of the Lakewood Public Library Main Branch, 15425 Detroit Ave. He and other officials will urge RTA to reconsider its decision regarding the Lakewood route, No. 804, which has the highest ridership of all 12 Community Circulators.

"I am outraged that RTA would make this decision without the opportunity for public input," he said. "This decision will greatly impact the Lakewood community. RTA has a public duty to have community conversation before making a decision of this nature. Many seniors and students rely on the circulator as

their primary transportation. We want our residents to help us tell RTA how important the circulator is to our community."

Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-10, is also opposing the eliminations, saying that although RTA held public meetings last year, the proposed cuts are effective this year.

"The people of northeast

Ohio, who pay for RTA with their fares and tax dollars, are entitled to an explanation this year," he said in a letter to Calabrese. "I strongly recommend that RTA hold public meetings throughout its service area to explain its intentions before a single line is cut or eliminated."

Kucinich also argued that "While there may be room to

cut some of the Circulator lines with very little passenger use and high costs-per-passenger, other lines are widely used with quite low costs-per-passenger."

According to an RTA board presentation, Lakewood's Community Circulator costs \$2.22 per hour to run while the Westshore Route 808 costs RTA roughly \$11 per hour.