

Report warns of financial challenges for bus system

By Milan Simonich

The New Mexican

Reprinted in *The Taos News*, 4/17/2014

The state says more people are riding buses operated by the North Central Regional Transit District and the agency's costs are down, yet gloomy financial data persist.

Only 24 percent of the seats are occupied, and government spending on some routes can exceed a whopping \$75 per rider, the Legislative Finance Committee staff said in a report released Thursday.

Passengers don't pay fares to ride on the Blue Bus system, which links various Northern New Mexico communities, including Santa Fe. The system is funded with taxpayer dollars, including a share of gross receipts taxes collected in four counties.

The average cost per passenger was \$17.77 in 2013, the report said. Certain Blue Bus routes cost considerably more, notably the Los Alamos-Espanola-Pojoaque run, where costs for each passenger came to \$76.87.

Anthony Mortillaro, executive director of the transit district, criticized the report in a written response, saying the analysis was oversimplified and incomplete. He said the Legislative Finance Committee staff made no mention of poverty in Northern New Mexico, and it barely touched on how important bus service is to the economy and to residents of the transit district. The district covers 10,079 square miles in Santa Fe, Rio Arriba, Taos and Los Alamos counties and, he said, mostly serves people struggling to pay their bills.

About 63 percent of the transit district's customers make less than \$17,000 a year, Mortillaro said. Nearly 19 percent don't own a vehicle, and 25 percent say they ride the Blue Bus to save money.

Also missing from the committee staff's analysis, Mortillaro said, was any mention of how buses reduce pollution. Because of the transit district's Blue Buses, he said, car travel was reduced by 4.35 million miles last year. Ridership on the ever-changing route system in the transit district has more than doubled in four years, rising from about 78,000 in 2009 to 193,000 last year. Mortillaro challenged the state's methods of evaluating ridership.

For instance, he said, the number of seats occupied is not a standard used by public transportation agencies. Mortillaro said the legislative staff made no attempt to compare routes in rural New Mexico with similar operations, instead citing Arlington, Va., for one comparison,

even though it is a densely packed urban area with excellent taxi service. A better measuring stick, he said, is passenger- miles traveled, notably during peak times when riders are going to work or returning home.

The committee staff praised the transit district for its money management. Costs are in line with revenues. But even at that, the state report said financial challenges are ahead. It said the transit district's own projections are that expenses will exceed revenues in the next decade.

The state Legislature in 2003 authorized creation of regional transit districts as an initiative to reduce reliance on personal cars. Four such district now exist throughout New Mexico.

The North Central Regional Transit District directly serves 20 routes and is a feeder for other transportation systems, such as Santa Fe Trails buses in the city of Santa Fe. Funding for the transit district comes from federal taxpayers and gross receipts tax revenues from county regional transportation operations.