



Transfer of Chile Line could save town \$180K a year

By J.R. Logan

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Local leaders are working out the final details on a deal that would make bus service free in the town limits and save the town government \$180,000 a year.

The town is considering whether to transfer ownership and operation of its Chile Line bus service to the North Central Regional Transit District, operators of the “blue buses.”

The council discussed the proposal at length at a meeting March 24. But staff with the town and transit district were still working out the details and making changes to a written agreement just before its meeting midday Tuesday.

The Taos Town Council was poised to officially approve the transfer at that meeting. However, the council chose not to make a decision because it was not entirely clear how current town employees would be absorbed by the district.

Councilors said they’d like to be sure employees would not lose accrued benefits or be subject to a pay decrease if moved to another agency.

If the transfer does occur, the Regional Transit District would take over service starting July 1.

The council is expected to revisit the issue at a meeting in the coming weeks.

In an email to *The Taos News*, transit district director Anthony Mortillero said there would be no immediate changes to existing routes and schedules if the transfer is approved. Mortillero wrote that the district would gather its own data on ridership, and ask for suggestions from bus users and the community on how the service could be improved.

As with most of the blue bus routes, Mortillero said bus service now provided by the Chile Line would be free, with the exception of the seasonal ski route to Taos Ski Valley.

The town now charges riders 50 cents to use the bus.

Passing control of the Chile Line to the transit district is expected to save the town about \$180,000 in lodgers tax revenue that it now puts toward the buses. Even with that amount, plus more that \$500,000 in state and federal grants, the Chile Line is still operating in the red.

According to Taos Town Manager Rick Bellis, the bus service loses about \$25,000 a year.

Bellis said handing the Chile Line over to the district would free up the \$180,000 in lodgers tax funds, which must go toward attracting visitors to Taos.

Officials with the transit district say they're better suited to operate a bus system.

The district operates free buses throughout Northern New Mexico on a \$10 million budget. More than half of that money comes from a gross receipts tax first approved in 2008. Voters in counties served by the district (including Taos) are currently paying the tax.

There are already blue routes to Questa, Red River, Pe-asco, and Tres Piedras, as well as routes from Taos to Espa-ola and Santa Fe.