

Why so low: State law caps fee

City can only recover actual costs of administering pilot

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At the end of 2013, protesters began blocking the big buses at designated route stops, equating the shuttles with a host of social ills, from gentrification of neighborhoods to greed — billion-dollar tech companies contributing nothing to the cost of maintaining streets their buses travel ponderously.

Within weeks, the MTA board voted unanimously for a Commuter Shuttle Policy and Pilot Program. Its costs, estimated at \$1.7 million, will be paid for by shuttle providers who will ante up \$1.06 for each red zone stop each weekday for 12 months. For the final six months of the pilot, their fee will rise to \$1.10.

The calculation looks like this: \$1.06 x 4,121 stops per weekday x 260 days for the first 12 months, then \$1.10 x 4,121 x 130 days for the next six months.

Shuttle providers will be required to apply to MTA for a permit, display placards that identify their buses as part of the pilot, give Muni buses priority in the red zone, pay penalties for permit violations and agree to carry a GPS device on board that tracks routes, stops and distances traveled.

Protesters see the bus fee as scant repayment for the damage to the city's fabric. It is, however, a legal tit for tat: A 1996 state law, Proposition 218, restricts local governments from collecting fees totaling more than the cost of administering that service or program. MTA says it created the program, then calculated the maximum fee.

The budget is divided into labor — \$762,445 for existing MTA personnel, no new hires — and about \$1 million for consultants and hard costs, with almost half of that for the GPS devices.

Seventeen positions comprise the labor line items: A project director will put in 25% time, assisted by a project manager at 15% (312 hours) and an assistant director at 1.2% time (25 hours). Their hours logged may be small, but, we asked, why so many staff at the top?

“These positions are titles associat-



PHOTO TOM CARTER

ed with staff classifications, not necessarily specific individuals' roles in the project,” Kristen Holland, MTA public relations officer, wrote in an email.

Other project “positions” are two transit planners working quarter time, an assistant engineer, an accountant and a student design trainee, all 15% time.

The biggest single labor cost is for eight parking control officers. Working quarter time, they'll log 4,160 hours at a hefty \$44.67 an hour plus fringe benefits, for a total of \$307,205, almost 20% of the total program budget. A senior controller officer will spend 520 hours overseeing them.

The Extra asked MTA to explain the eight officers' duties and how so few can oversee 200 stops.

“(They) are responsible for enforcing parking regulations ... GPS feeds (will) focus this team's efforts,” Holland said, without explaining what that entails.

The staff positions total only 3.41 FTE. Holland wouldn't comment on whether the low FTE was unusual for 18 months of work and a \$1.7 million program: “Budgets and staff for (MTA) pilots vary based on the particular needs of the projects.”

In the nonlabor category of the budget, the costliest item, \$405,000, is for onboard GPS devices, \$60 a month for 375 vehicles. Holland couldn't say if the \$60 tab was rental or purchase, insisting that two months before the pilot is scheduled to start, none of the plan costs and fees are final.



PHOTO MARJORIE BEGGS

A double-decker behemoth, above, cruises up Frederick Street in the Upper Haight. Left: A worker gets out on Valencia Street with freshly cleaned laundry.

She did give us a brief explanation of what the GPS devices will do: “Provide feeds to MTA, allowing for auditing, follow-up on complaints, focusing enforcement, and understanding operational activities (e.g., hot spots for delay). All commuter shuttles will be required to share data, regardless of

whether they're operating within the city or regionally.”

The Extra wondered if MTA had worried that the \$1-plus fee might raise some hackles. Holland responded, “The MTA's interest is to recover all costs allowed by law.” Period. ■

1st 'Google bus' protest — egged in '08

Private shuttles on San Francisco streets were a subtle presence 30 years ago when vans started carrying employees and students from one business or institution site to another. The vehicles didn't use red zones, just the white zones in front of their buildings, which most still do today.

In 2004, a white Google bus ushered in the era of intercity commuter shuttles. It made two stops in the city and carried 155 employees down to Silicon Valley daily. Yahoo buses came a year later, then Genentech, Apple, Facebook, Netflix, Electronic Arts, eBay and LinkedIn added buses.

By 2012, MTA said it knew of 20 employers offering intracity shuttles and 17 sponsoring regional bus services for tens of thousands of employees daily.

In the Haight in 2008, frustrated resident Richard Beggs, in the first known direct action taken against a tech shuttle, egged an idling Google bus on his narrow residential street. The bus, early for its pickups in a red zone a block away, had stopped for a few minutes, a pattern that continues to this day.

The egging didn't do much more than make a little, blobby mess. When more shuttles started appearing over the next few months, Beggs called Google headquarters to complain.

“I was told that Google had no transportation office or coordinator,” he says. “The person denied any knowledge of shuttles and insisted, ‘We're not a transportation company — sorry, I can't help you.’”

Beggs — this reporter's husband — says today that Google and other shuttles ply his street starting at 6 a.m. and sometimes run every few minutes until mid-morning. The reverse drop-off commute begins around 6 p.m. and ends four hours later.

“When I stand in my first-floor living room and there's a bus outside, it fills the entire window,” he says with irritation.

Google has come a long way from denial. It's proud of its fleet, even if wary of protesters who've blockaded their shuttles in the city and the East Bay. According to its Website, Bay Areawide “5,000 Googlers take the shuttle to work on any given day ... 1.8 million rides in 2012.” ■

— Marjorie Beggs

Supes scrutinize shuttles

Report offers ideas to reduce impacts

The pilot may be delayed not only because of the lawsuit filed May 1 by protesters, but because the Board of Supervisors wants to look harder at the larger issue of the shuttles' impact. At Supervisor Eric Mar's request, the supes' budget and legislative analyst, Harvey M. Rose Associates, produced an independent report on the private shuttles and released it at the end of March. (Rose Associates works with 22 other California cities besides San Francisco.)

The budget analyst's report summarizes five years worth of various agencies' shuttle studies, then lays out eight actions the supervisors might take, if they wish, to mitigate the shuttles' impacts.

Several recommendations to MTA are stated as “inputs,” for example defining what rate of shuttle-Muni bus conflict is acceptable. Other options are “requests” — such as that during the pilot program shared red zones be allowed only on streets without bicycle lanes. Some requests are more dramatic: that MTA require shuttle providers to sign community benefit agreements with the city to lessen any negative effects the pilot identified. Another is that voters be given the chance to impose a special tax on some or all shuttle providers.

One appealing suggestion is that shuttle providers find a central location in the city for loading and unloading their employees, rather than indulging them in a few minutes' walk to a red or white zone near their home.

“It's up to MTA as to the extent to which they incorporate the (supervisors') input,” says Fred Brousseau, principal at Harvey M. Rose Associates and author of the report.

Sometime in May, the Land Use Committee is going to consider the report, Brousseau says. “The supervisors will look at the options for action we suggested, not the details of the pilot program. It will be a forum to discuss impacts, and they will take public testimony.” ■

— Marjorie Beggs