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PUBLIC TRANSIT HITS A SPEED BUMP: NOT ENOUGH DRIVERS

After pushing for growth, systems are now cutting service because of staffing shortages

By David Harrison
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DENVER – For more than a decade, Denver has been on a public-transit expansion spree that so far has added 66 miles of new rail lines, 18 miles of new bus routes and 43 new stations. But now the system is considering reversing course and cutting service because it can't find enough people to drive its buses and trains.

The city's transit system and others across the country are facing a severe labor shortage familiar to employers nationwide. A historically low unemployment rate combined with a wave of retiring baby boomer operators has left transit agencies understaffed. Officials say they'll frequently recruit and train new drivers only to see them jump to jobs with better hours or higher pay at private bus or trucking companies.

The shortage has forced agencies to mandate overtime and cancel scheduled trips, frustrating employees and customers and hindering local governments' efforts to promote transit as a reliable alternative to driving.

"When you start to erode that reliability you start undercutting the core support for transit and that's not a direction you want to be going," said Andrew Goetz, a professor of urban studies at the University of Denver.

That makes it harder for transit systems to reverse a multiyear decline in ridership. Passenger trips for all types of transit nationwide recorded their fourth annual decline in 2018, the latest year for which data are available, according to the American Public Transportation Association. That is partly because of the strong economy, which has allowed more people to afford cars. But the service disruptions brought on by a labor shortage have also made it harder for agencies to hold on to riders, Mr. Goetz said.

Denver's Regional Transportation District, or RTD, needs to fill 94 of its 1,084 bus driver and 67 of its 216 train operator jobs. Minneapolis is looking to fill between 60 and 100 of its 1,500 bus driver jobs. St. Louis is short 36 drivers out of 873. In those cities and elsewhere, scheduled bus runs are occasionally canceled because there is nobody available to operate them, officials said.

"Ten, 15 years ago, and forever before that, we had wait lists of people who were waiting to join the ranks of our team," said Jessica Mefford-Miller, executive director of Metro Transit St. Louis.

After the recession, transit agencies slashed service and pared back workforces. But in subsequent years, they have expanded service faster than head count, forcing many employees into overtime. In 2018, the last year for which data are available, the growth in transit service slowed as agencies tried to beef up hiring in response to the labor crunch.

In many places it is common for new drivers to work six days a week or to have to work both the early morning and late evening rush hours with a long break in between.

"As a mentor to new operators, I try to tell them that their life is RTD's at that point, coming in the door," said Ron Short, a 20-year bus driver for the agency and an official with the union representing the city's transit workers. "The shifts are extreme and the days are extreme."

Denver's approach to dealing with the labor shortage is particularly dramatic. The agency is considering cuts that would affect more than two dozen bus and four light-rail routes starting in May. Officials say the reductions are meant to be temporary until they can get enough new operators behind the wheel. That won't be easy in a region where the unemployment rate is 2.4 percent, well below the national rate of 3.5 percent.

"You've got an upside-down situation where you're adding service out on the street but you don't have enough people to operate it," said Michael Ford, RTD's chief operating officer.

Agencies have been raising wages and loosening requirements to draw new people. In Denver, starting pay has gone to \$20.58 an hour this year, with the possibility of bonuses and other incentives, from \$17.59 in 2017. The agency has also lowered its minimum hiring age to 19 from 21. Transit officials frequently point to their agencies' pension and benefit plans and say they offer one of the few middle-class jobs available to people without a college degree.

Denver's cuts could have broader repercussions, particularly in the city's thriving core. Roughly 43 percent of downtown workers take transit, according to a survey by the Downtown Denver Partnership.

Tami Door, the partnership's president, said the group has spent years promoting the benefits of transit to employers and their employees. "Our goal is to hold on and keep faith in the system," she said.

Walter Isenberg, president of Sage Hospitality Group, which operates several Denver hotels and restaurants, said roughly 70 percent of the employees in the company's corporate office take transit to work. While the service cuts are "inconvenient," he said he hoped to see the agency's labor shortage resolved soon.

Riders, meanwhile, are bracing for more disruption.

One of the lines slated to be discontinued is the 16L, an express route that Entrinity Armijo relies on to get to her fast-food job. Switching to the local route – with more stops along the way – would add about 15 minutes to her commute each way.

"They should just leave it," she said.

Jessica Palmer, a civil-engineering student at the University of Colorado Denver said she has already altered her commute to take into account the light rail's unreliable schedules.

"I find it very disappointing because the demand for service is there," she said. "During rush hour, the trains are full."