

TAPS Referendum Turns Heads

Increased transportation fees spark controversy among transit workers

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As the spring referendum elections near, UC Santa Cruz students are faced with a difficult decision regarding the future of transportation on campus. Currently, busses are packed at high-traffic times and students often have long waits to get a ride.

Transportation and Parking Services (TAPS) faces rising gas and maintenance costs while working with a fixed budget, and currently projects a \$1,038,740 deficit this year simply to maintain this level of service. Without an increase in funds, the future of campus transportation appears bleak.

“We were on a fixed revenue stream, and nobody knew that gas prices would double in three years. We had no idea that Metro fees would rise by 40 percent,” TAPS director Wes Scott said.

Scott proposed a referendum bill, Measure 24, which passed through the Student Union Assembly (SUA) and is due for a school-wide vote May 17-23.

Currently students pay \$69 a quarter in transit fees. Article 24 would increase this fee by \$13.33 per quarter the first year. It would continue to increase for the next three years, reaching a total of \$111.66 in the 2008-09 school year.

These increased funds, according to the referendum, would be used to offset rising costs, and for the “acquisition of new transit vehicles and continued funding of unlimited student ridership on SCMTD [Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District] transit services.”

Julian Posadas, representative to the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), criticized Scott for forcing the choice between cutting TAPS services or raising prices for students.

“Transportation shouldn’t be a luxury, it should be a utility.”

Larry Cheek
UCSC Shuttle Driver

“A lot of the shuttle drivers feel that Wes Scott has lied,” Posadas said. “He calls [the changes in TAPS service] ‘modifying;’ we call it cutbacks. As a director he should have seen this coming.”

Larry Cheek, a union representative and UCSC shuttle driver for nine years, said that TAPS should not ask the student body for more money.

“[TAPS] acts like this is the last resort the students have, but they set it up that way. The whole thing is run exactly the opposite of the way a transportation company should be run. Instead it’s run the way a government would be run,” Cheek said. “Transportation shouldn’t be a luxury, it should be a utility.”

SCMTD made a deal with TAPS to provide additional transportation to the university, to clear traffic congestion during class changes and to provide transportation for an area filled beyond capacity by adding a SCMTD bus that runs a modified Route 20 course four times a day.

However, these changes raised flags among campus union workers and officials, who now fear the outsourcing of transit jobs to SCMTD while TAPS remains so far in the red.

Since the beginning of spring quarter, the new campus-only SCMTD bus has provided services to the university, adding to the over

\$1.4 million the university expects to pay SCMTD this year.

Every time a student uses SCMTD transportation, the university pays between 94 and 98 cents, depending on the time of day. The university also guarantees a minimum average of 67 rides per hour for the supplemental Route 20 bus and the UCSC Night Owl Service, and is committed to paying that amount if it is not reached.

The Route 20 course takes an extended trip down Western Drive, past Delaware near Natural Bridges, and along Pacific until it hits the Santa Cruz Metro Center. SCMTD General Manager Les White detailed the process that led to the increase in service.

“We added service to the Route 20 because we were leaving people on Western Drive at the apartment complexes. There are 20-30 people there every time the bus comes there that are left behind. Our objective was to respond to students who were willing to give us ongoing input in their ability to get to campus,” White said.

In addition, the supplemental buses run past UC buildings at 2300 Delaware, providing a shuttle service for the workers there.

According to Cheek, though, there may be some exploitation of this service due to the free parking provided along Western and Delaware.

Another driver believes, it is a common practice to park cars near bus stops, and then take a “free” ride up to campus, likely causing some of the overcrowding.

For now, driver Larry Cheek feels as though more of the school’s money should be headed toward TAPS, not SCMTD.

“TAPS claims they don’t have enough money to operate TAPS, but they give so much to Metro,” Cheek said. “[The university has] a bad case of Metro addiction, and they pay heavily to fill that need.”