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COLTS: Saturday service to continue, no major route cuts

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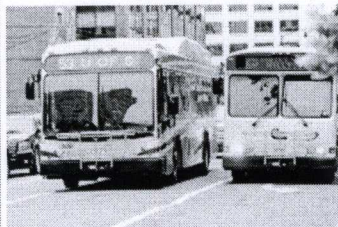
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Colts bus in Scanton. Jason Farmer / Staff Photographer

County of Lackawanna Transit System buses will continue to roll on Saturdays.

A series of measures that included the elimination of several management positions has allowed COLTS to shelve its plans to end Saturday service and implement major route cuts, the agency said Wednesday.

COLTS riders are still likely to see some changes, Executive Director Robert Fiume said.

Over the next few months, COLTS will make what are expected to be mostly minor adjustments designed to improve its system, Mr. Fiume said. He would not rule out cutting underperforming weekday routes "that we can't adjust in any way to make them work."

"That is what should be done anyway," Mr. Fiume said. "It is what all transit systems do every so often — look at their routes and make the changes they need to make."

Faced with the repayment of \$5.7 million in state Department of Transportation subsidies for overstating its senior ridership over a six-year period, COLTS proposed in November to end all Saturday bus service, eliminate six bus routes, curtail service on several more routes and lay off nearly a third of its drivers.

COLTS backed off the plan and agreed to explore alternatives after a late November meeting with PennDOT officials in which several state legislators and county officials also participated.

Although COLTS is still obligated to reimburse PennDOT — at nearly \$1.9 million annually over three years — the agency announced a number of steps that will let it accomplish that without eliminating Saturday service or undertaking major route changes:

- COLTS eliminated two management positions, one each in human resources and advertising. Two other management positions were consolidated, and yet another became part time. The moves will save about \$225,000 annually in salaries and benefits, Mr. Fiume said.
■ PennDOT will let COLTS use capital funds, instead of operating funds, to pay certain expenses related to construction of the new intermodal transit center on Lackawanna Avenue. That will result in the savings of about \$1 million in operating funds.
■ COLTS will maximize its use of federal capital funds for allowable expenses, including asset maintenance, that it previously supplemented with operating funds. That will free up more money for operations, Mr. Fiume said.
■ The state agreed to a fare increase for the COLTS shared ride program. Because the fares are reimbursed by the state, the increase will not affect riders who use the program.
■ The county commissioners agreed to provide the full local match for state operating funds, guaranteeing COLTS will receive the maximum amount of state money for which it qualifies, Mr. Fiume said. The county match is almost \$564,000 this year and will go to \$624,000 next year.
■ COLTS' audit showed its finances were stronger than predicted, and the agency received better than expected rates on its health care insurance contract.

After Mr. Fiume outlined the factors for the COLTS board Wednesday, chairman Carmen Libassi said preserving Saturday service entailed a lot of work and thanked those who helped.

"It wasn't easy. It just seemed like every time we turned around it was going to not happen. ... I'm thankful the service we provide can continue, and I'm sure the people who need it the most are going to be extremely happy about it," he said.

PennDOT ordered COLTS to repay the \$5.7 million and forfeit another \$771,000 in capital improvement funds after determining the agency inflated the number of senior citizens who rode its buses by hundred of thousands of passengers annually from 2006 to 2011.

COLTS hired a Harrisburg-based accounting firm, Maher Duessel, to conduct a forensic audit to determine how the figures were overstated. COLTS officials said Wednesday they expect the company to report its findings soon.

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