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New day ahead for Westmoreland transit

By Colin McNickle

The new year will bring a major change in how the Westmoreland County Transit Authority (WCTA) operates. Instead of contracting out the operation of buses it owns, as it has for the past four decades, the authority will operate the mass transit agency itself, a la the Port Authority of Allegheny County.

But the transition will not be without challenges.

“Given the fact that WCTA has contracted for so long it will take a major effort to transform it into an operating authority,” says Eric Montarti, research director at the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 19, No. 42*).

It was in 2018 that the WCTA and the contractor providing bus and paratransit service reached a new five-year contract (subject to annual rate renegotiations). But vehicle, route and driver problems soon arose, which resulted in fines against the contractor. The contractor said it was losing money.

This past June, the WCTA board and the Westmoreland County commissioners approved a resolution amending the authority’s 1978 articles of incorporation to allow for the transition. Final board approval came in October. The existing contract is set to expire, by mutual consent, at the end of December.

The authority then solicited new bids for service. Two were received – one for bus and paratransit and one for paratransit. But the price tags were such that directly operating the services became “a very serious option,” according to WCTA’s executive director.

“Based on a comparison between the contractors’ bids and what the authority estimates it can directly operate the service for, the estimated savings in the next three years are to total \$2.3 million,” Montarti says.

But challenges, cost and operational, loom large.

To wit, there now are 15 WCTA employees. Up to 120 additional staff (drivers, maintenance staff and supervisors) will be hired over the next two months.

Many fixed-route bus employees could come from the ranks of the union that has a labor contract. Some of those jobs are federally protected, meaning those employees could become WCTA employees if they so choose.

Employees of the contractor have a two-year labor agreement that was set to expire at the end of the year. But the authority board approved extending that agreement until March 2020, when a successor collective-bargaining agreement will have to be negotiated.

“If there is a labor impasse sometime in the future (the extended agreement includes a no-strike, no-lockout clause) the pressure will be on board members and possibly county officials for a resolution so that service is not interrupted,” Montarti notes.

Compounding that matter is that the WCTA’s operating cost per revenue hour – at last required measurement in 2015, based on 2013 numbers – was out of whack (or “at risk” in the parlance of its measurers) with its contemporaries.

That is, WCTA had an operating cost per revenue hour in 2013 of \$114.41. Compared to its peer group of 12 other agencies, it ranked 13th – last -- and was above the group average of \$82.24.

Per 2017 data from the National Transit Database, the WCTA’s cost per revenue hour rose to \$119.77, second highest of the regional authorities operating at least 40,000 bus vehicle service hours in 2013.

“As of 2017, WCTA’s cost was \$5.36 higher than it was in 2013,” Montarti says.

But, come the new year, the Westmoreland County Transit Authority will be transformed – re-born, if you will – into a different mass-transit agency. And only time, performance and union contract negotiations will tell if it truly is a cost-effective transformation.

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