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For MTA, the Bucks Start Here

Transportation: Consent decree overseer orders the agency to purchase 145 buses to relieve overcrowding.

By: KURT STREETER
Times Staff Writer

Finding that bus overcrowding remains a serious problem in Los Angeles County, a federal monitor ruled Monday that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority must press forward with the purchase of 145 buses by the end of next year.

In issuing his order, Donald Bliss, a Washington lawyer and court-appointed special master who is overseeing a 10-year federal consent decree established in 1996, rejected MTA claims that it could cut overcrowding without significantly increasing the size of its roughly 2,400-vehicle fleet. The MTA has argued that it could meet the goal primarily through better management of its bus lines.

Though it can be appealed, Bliss' order is meant to put into effect a tentative judgment he released in September. The order expands the number of buses Bliss wants the MTA to buy — from the 117 he asked for in September to 145 — and calls on the agency to add 370,185 operating hours of bus service per year.

It will cost the MTA nearly \$40 million to purchase the buses by the

end of 2005, and another \$40 million a year to operate them, said Marc Littman, a spokesman for the agency. Littman said it was too early for the MTA to draw up a timetable for the purchases.

Bliss wants the MTA to satisfy his order as fast as possible, even if it must lease buses while waiting for the new vehicles to come.

MTA Chief Executive Roger Snoble said in a statement Monday that the ruling was “not good news by any means.” He added that the agency needed time to digest the 89-page document.

An organizer for the Bus Riders Union, whose lawsuit alleging inadequate bus service in minority communities led to the consent decree, hailed the ruling as a huge win.

“It is a victory for the bus riders of L.A.,” said Cynthia Rojas. Bliss' finding that MTA buses remain overcrowded made it very clear that the MTA has not complied with the decree, she said.

Bliss said the MTA must make the new buses a priority even if money has to come from other sources, such as planned rail projects.

He wrote that he realized the order to buy more buses would cause hardship at the agency because state and federal transportation funding is drying up. But he said that improving transportation for the poor while the economy sputters was extremely important.

“It is during times like these,” he said, “that the preservation and improvement of bus service to the overwhelming majority of the MTA's

ridership who depend upon buses to get to jobs, schools and health-care facilities becomes especially critical.”

Bliss noted that the MTA bus system had improved greatly since the decree was signed in 1996. The agency is now more attuned to riders' needs, operates one of the newest fleets in the nation, uses environmentally sensitive natural gas and offers cutting-edge express buses, he said.

But he added that the agency continues to violate benchmarks that require heavily used routes to have no more than an average of eight people standing because they can't find a seat. He said that 15 MTA bus routes were found to have 28 standing passengers during periodic checks late last year.

Over the past two years, the MTA has argued that it could address the overcrowding almost exclusively through better management of its bus system. The agency is touting its recent launch of a computerized scheduling program, for example.

Bliss found that the computerized system helped, but not nearly as much as the MTA claimed.

Without additional buses and the hundreds of thousands of hours in extra service they would provide, Bliss said, the MTA's proposal to mitigate overcrowding through improved scheduling would be “a little like rearranging the chairs on a shrinking deck.”

The MTA and the Bus Riders Union are both legally allowed to ask Bliss for a review of the order or to file an appeal with U.S. District Court Judge Terry J. Hatter Jr., who oversaw the consent decree's creation.