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MTA to Appeal Order to Buy Buses

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The Metropolitan Transportation Authority's board voted Monday to appeal a federal monitor's order to purchase 145 new buses, the latest in a drawn-out battle over a 1996 federal consent decree demanding improved bus service in Los Angeles County.

The MTA was ordered last month to purchase the 145 buses by special master Donald T. Bliss, who was appointed to monitor the 10-year decree. Bliss also ordered the agency to add 370,000 hours of new bus service, saying the MTA has failed to meet standards on bus overcrowding laid out in the decree.

The MTA will appeal Bliss' decision to U.S. District Judge Terry J. Hatter, who executed the consent decree. Hatter had sided with the MTA in 1999 when the agency asked him to review a Bliss order to buy 481 buses. Hatter reduced the requirement to 248 buses.

MTA board members said the agency can't afford to buy 145 new buses, which could cost roughly \$400 million to purchase and operate over 10 years. They said they can reduce overcrowding by better managing the agency's fleet of roughly 2,400 buses.

Bliss has rejected that argument.

"We can provide service more efficiently while meeting the spirit of the ruling and getting more service out there with what we have," said MTA board member John Fasana, a Duarte city councilman.

Such sentiments do not sit well with the MTA's chief critic, the Bus Riders Union. The nonprofit group was the lead plaintiff in the lawsuit that triggered the consent decree on grounds that the MTA provided poor service for low-income riders.

Cynthia Rojas, a riders union organizer, said the MTA's appeal is a sign of desperation.

"The only way you can comply with reducing overcrowding and providing expanded service is buying more buses and putting more service on the streets," Rojas said.

Agreeing with Rojas was Los Angeles City Councilman Martin Ludlow, one of two MTA board members who voted against the decision to appeal.

"The strategy of the past, to get around the consent decree, has once again reared its ugly head," Ludlow said. "The bus-dependent of Los Angeles County need these buses."

Joining Ludlow in voting against the appeal was Los Angeles City Councilman Tom LaBonge.

Voting in favor were Los Angeles County Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky, Mike Antonovich and Don Knabe, Pico Rivera Mayor Beatrice Proo, Santa Monica Councilwoman Pam O'Connor, Lancaster Mayor Frank Roberts and Fasana. Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina abstained.

L.A. County Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, L.A. City Councilman Antonio Villaraigosa and L.A. Mayor James K. Hahn, the latter the most powerful member of the MTA board, did not vote.

Hahn was attending an event at a South Los Angeles Boys & Girls Club during the meeting, a spokesman for the mayor said.

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