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Metro drivers and mechanics reject contract offer

Posted by Mike Lindblom

Transit workers in King County overwhelmingly turned down a contract offer — a rebuff to County Executive Dow Constantine and a union president, who hoped labor harmony would help them persuade the Legislature to boost transit funding in 2014.

A total of 505 voted yes, and 2,122 voted no, according to an online update posted by Amalgamated Transit Union Local 587.

Transit operators are not allowed to strike. “We return to the bargaining table in hopes of reaching a new tentative agreement. Failing that, remaining issues will be settled through interest arbitration,” ATU 587 President Paul Bachtel said this morning. Arbitration is similar to a court hearing, in which each side produces evidence and arguments.

The spurned proposal would have boosted raises over the next three years by 0 percent, 2 percent, then 2 percent. If new tax sources were approved, the skipped raise in 2014 would be tacked on as a 1.67 percent raise the third year, putting the 2016 raise at 3.67 percent. Veteran bus drivers make around \$30 per hour currently, though many are part-timers. Mechanics and electricians tend to be paid more.

Linda Averill, a longtime bus driver who campaigned against the deal, says members disliked a Metro proposal to create a category of 200 part-time drivers who would move to full-time status, but assured only 25 hours a week — “fake full timers” that would have created a slippery slope toward unstable hours for everybody, Averill contends. “There is a lot of distrust in the management and the county,” she said. Averill also said a proposal to spend \$500,000 on improved rest periods for drivers on stressful or congestion-plagued routes, “is peanuts compared to what’s needed.”

Bachtel said he doesn’t consider the huge loss an embarrassment, as workers turned down tentative agreements in 1998 and 2007. “I think this is the first time in many, many years we brought back a concessionary agreement,” Bachtel said, adding times are hard for unions everywhere. “I think our members looked at it as a loss.” He said Local 587 continues to have a good relationship with county leaders and will resume talks soon.

Frank Abe, spokesman for Constantine, said of the negative vote, “This is part of the process. This is one step, in the middle of the labor negotiations.”

Meanwhile, Constantine is planning to start working with the County Council in early January on details of a county-only transit-and-roads plan, in which voters can decide on sales taxes or car-tab fees without any actions by the Legislature. Metro says it may cut service hours by up to 17 percent, without new money to replace expiring tax sources, and to keep up with rising demand.

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