Bus system on South Shore limping along

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – While the word “bankruptcy” has not been floated publicly among the Tahoe Transportation District staff and board, the bus system it runs on the South Shore is sputtering to stay solvent.

Interestingly, Carl Hasty, who manages the bi-state transit agency, mentioned at the July 13 meeting that it was eight years ago this month that TTD took over for the now defunct South Tahoe Area Transit Authority, or STATA. That nonprofit ended up in bankruptcy court and collectively costing local member agencies hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Many of the same complaints that were heard eight years ago and longer are still being voiced today – from all sides. Money still is at the crux of most of what ails the bus system, which then impacts routes and frequency.

How funding works it is not just a free handout from the states or feds, so to speak. George Fink, who manages the buses, said $687,000 more in fare box revenue is needed to meet the requirements.

TTD realizes it needs to figure out a better revenue stream. That is why the board has agreed to hire a consultant, maybe more than one, to provide a suite of options.

While the ski shuttles are a huge draw, with about 358,000 rides in a good winter, no fare box is collected from them. There were people at the meeting wondering why the tourists are not charged.

Heavenly Mountain Resort has been subsidizing this amenity for

years.

Andrew Strain who works for the ski resort in government affairs is also on the TTD board. He did not participate in the board discussion, but instead spoke during public comment. He said given the planned cutbacks to the winter buses, Heavenly is looking at how it can provide service to its customers and to coordinate with TTD. He admitted the resort doesn’t have firm plans right now.

Heavenly doesn’t have enough parking if everyone were to drive themselves. There is also the fact many people would not be comfortable driving up Kingsbury Grade to Boulder or Stagecoach lodges. Plus, many who travel on ski vacations are used to excellent bus service in other locales, which is also often free.

Tahoe’s problems are confounded by not being able to hire enough drivers for the routes. They either can’t pass a drug test or can’t afford to live here. Housing, though, is an issue for nearly every employer in the basin.

At last week’s meeting the board put off final decisions on revamping the system for another month, with comments being taken into August as well. As of July 8 the district has received 95 comments since May 11, with them divided into those supporting specific services or making general comments about TTD or transit.

Early last week the district was surprised with good news. It received $1.6 million from the Nevada Department of Transportation for the 19X route, which goes between the lake and the valley. This is huge for commuters to the lake as well as those who take transit to the valley for medical appointments.

The plan is for staff to come back to the board at the August meeting with a modified action plan for routes 23 and 20 that include 19, continue to work with the Ridge and Heavenly, and

to relook at how it is dealing with CEQA based on comments from the League to Save Lake Tahoe and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

Exactly how the changes will impact door-to-door bus service still remain to be seen. As it stands now about 16 riders in the North Upper Truckee and Christmas Valley areas could be out cut off.

“I’m here to be the voice for the disabled and the elderly who live in North Upper Truckee. I have a son with disabilities,” a mom said. “This transportation is critical to his life.”