

Regional Metropolitan Transit Authority of Omaha

Board of Directors Meeting

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May 22: Metro Transit Board grapples with staffing struggles, safety concerns and ridership surge

At the May meeting of the Regional Metropolitan Transit Authority of Omaha Board of Directors, concerns from frontline workers spotlighted ongoing staffing shortages, retention issues and safety lapses amid growing ridership and service demands. Local Transport Workers Union President Chris Nanke warned that training pressures are pushing drivers to quit, resulting in vacation cuts and understaffed service hours as the busy season begins. A Metro mechanic described working solo on road calls for months, while custodial staff raised alarms over intruders gaining access to transit garages. These testimonies prompted board Chair Curt Simon to prioritize security improvements and revisit training protocols, acknowledging staffing challenges have worsened over the past decade.

Despite these internal hurdles, Metro Transit reported encouraging ridership data, with April marking the second-highest usage month since the pandemic. Free rides on Election Day spurred a 30% bump, and more than 63,000 students used the fare-free K–12 ride program. However, that initiative also came under scrutiny, with a longtime operator alleging misuse and potential links to truancy. CEO Lauren Cencic responded that while the program meets essential student needs, Metro will continue evaluating its impact. She also outlined upcoming improvements, including the long-awaited replacement of the bus wash system, infrastructure upgrades and the summer launch of a new microtransit service, MetroFlex.

The board also approved resolutions to enhance safety and infrastructure, including pavement upgrades at the South Omaha Transit Center and updates to Metro's Public Transportation Agency Safety Plan. A community member challenged the board's handling of security concerns, arguing prior warnings had been ignored. Board members maintained that security would be a top priority in committee discussions. Metro staff reported modest hiring gains, with 11 new hires in April, but acknowledged continued turnover during training and challenges filling part-time and maintenance roles.

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