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Bus companies ask SJTA to withdraw new route plans

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HAMILTON TOWNSHIP - Bus operators asked the South Jersey Transportation Authority again Wednesday to withdraw a revised bus management plan that would likely cost them customers and money.

And an attorney representing several Atlantic City casinos said the resort's gaming halls want to "start a dialogue" with the SJTA about the plan, even if the request for talks comes a little late in the process.

SJTA Deputy Executive Director Wade Lawson ended the second of two public hearings on the proposal by saying the SJTA would consider all the comments made during the sessions before making a final recommendation, which could be before the SJTA's commissioners during their October meeting.

The SJTA sets bus routes and stops in Atlantic City as a way to ease traffic congestion by controlling where the buses can travel. It also licenses buses to operate in the gaming resort.

The authority is proposing to make the White Horse Pike and the Black Horse Pike feeder routes for the Atlantic City Expressway. It admits that would require buses to pay expressway tolls.

The SJTA is also proposing to change the way it charges for "medallions," which are essentially licenses it gives to bus companies. The cost of the medallions would be based on a \$2.80 permit fee "multiplied by the number of bus trips for the previous year or estimated for the upcoming year, whichever is greater." The authority admits this would likely result in an "increase for high-volume users."

Bus company officials said the changes would cost them thousands of extra dollars annually for things such as tolls, gas and per-mile bus operations. The increase in the cost of a medallion also would rise significantly, they said.

The SJTA's proposal comes at a time when Atlantic City's casinos are almost certain to suffer their first annual revenue decline in history. Much of that business is lost to gaming operations in nearby states, where bus operators say they'll go if SJTA's proposal is approved.

"Because of competition, there are other places people can go if they want the gaming experience," said Clyde Hart, of the **American Bus Association**. "You should do your best to help people come to Atlantic City, and the proposal will hinder that."

Hart said most bus operators are small business operations.

"When you talk about cost, every penny looks like a dollar bill," he said. "Forcing people onto the toll road is just one more cut our members can't afford."

Steve Glasberg, of Air Brook Limousine, said companies will have to pass extra costs on to customers, who are already cost-conscious. Even small price hikes can result in a loss of business, which will force companies to change marketing strategies, he said.

"We will market other venues as aggressively as we now do Atlantic City," he said.

Harrah's Entertainment attorney Steve Lawry also said the Casino Association of New Jersey wants to meet with the SJTA to talk about the proposal.

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