

# AC, other costs top light rail's estimates

## Thermostats may be raised, and trains may run less often

by **Sean Holstege** - Sept. 3, 2009 12:00 AM  
The Arizona Republic

Metro light rail is learning the same hard lesson as many newcomers to the state: Keeping things cool is great, but it comes at a steeper-than-imagined price.

In its first six months of operation, Metro spent \$1.2 million on power, 40 percent more than projected.

Much of the cost went toward cooling trains and equipment as the air-conditioning bill soared.

Metro is so alarmed at the pace that power bills are climbing, and by other unforeseen costs, that it has begun a top-to-bottom review of operations. Raising the thermostat in the trains and running them less frequently are among some of the savings being discussed. Nothing will be decided until the end of this month.

Metro planners didn't anticipate the cost of labor, the amount of damage from rock-throwing vandals, the degree of cleaning needed at each station, and the continuing cost of educating the public on how to use the system.

Last month, the agency flew in operations managers from other Western light-rail systems to tap their advice.

"This wouldn't be nearly the intense effort it is, if not for the economy," said Rick Simonetta, Metro chief executive officer.

The bright spot is that despite the surprises and Metro's adjustments along the way, the agency's spending was less than 1 percent over its budget. That estimate of costs was made a full year before the first train rolled. Metro spent \$15.9 million to operate the system this year through June 30.

Metro officials say adjustments are a normal part of the learning curve for a new system. In December, after a full year in operation, the guesswork should end, they say.

Although Metro came close to spending within its means, the agency is trying to nip surprise costs in the bud early into a new fiscal year. The system depends on Phoenix, Tempe and Mesa for its operating money, and the economy is forcing cuts in city budgets, which could affect light-rail operations. The sooner Metro can understand and curb power, labor and maintenance costs, the better prepared it will be to endure any cutbacks.

"We are doing our due diligence by asking if we had to make cuts, where could we," Metro spokeswoman Hillary Foose said. "It's a sign of the times in transit everywhere."

## **POWER**

**Overview:** Metro has hushed many critics who predicted the trains would become sweatboxes as the doors repeatedly opened during the summer heat.

Instead, the trains are kept at an average 78 degrees and feel even cooler for passengers who've been sitting on a platform. Each car is cooled by a 12 1/2-ton AC unit, and the tinted glass windows are solar reflective.

**Problem:** Metro's power bill in May was \$299,000, nearly 50 percent higher than in March. July was the hottest month on record in Phoenix, and rail managers may be a little scared of opening the bill when it arrives.

Metro doesn't just cool trains. It also has to air-condition ticket machines, substations and other equipment to keep them from frying out.

**Reason:** When Metro tested trains last summer, engineers were focused on getting the vehicles from A to B safely. The agency did not measure the true cost of power because the priority was getting the system to work. Metro instead relied on older estimates based on costs at other light-rail systems.

**Response:** One way Metro has already saved money is by often running trains with one or two cars, instead of the maximum three, during summer, at nights and on weekends. The change is expected to save \$650,000 this fiscal year.

## **LABOR**

**Overview:** Metro contracted an outside firm, Boston-based Alternate Concepts Inc., to operate the system. That means Metro doesn't have a direct say in the labor costs negotiated between Alternate Concepts and its train operators and mechanics. Metro's contract requires the company to pay for enough train operators to be on call for special events and unforeseen absences.

**Problem:** The six-month labor bill was \$649,000, or 15 percent over estimates.

**Reason:** Alternate Concepts and Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1433 were supposed to have a contract in place before service started in December. Instead, they settled at the end of July. In that time, on-call costs grew.

**Response:** Metro is exploring if it can use fewer on-call drivers or reduce the number of trains off peak time and during special events. Sometimes it's more efficient to pay overtime. Simonetta also said Metro is reviewing whether supervision levels are right. Any changes would have to be worked out with Alternate Concepts and the union.

## MAINTENANCE

**Overview:** Metro designed trains and stations to weather the usual wear and tear of an urban train system. Surfaces were coated with material that makes it cheaper and easier to clean graffiti and etching. Trains were designed to take minor damage in a collision, and easy-to-replace parts were stockpiled.

**Problem:** Vandalism, collision repair, cleaning stations and keeping plants healthy in medians and stations is costing more than expected. Door windows cost \$8,000 apiece to repair. Stations are cleaned twice as frequently as expected. Metro swallowed almost \$50,000 in uncollected damages after collisions with uninsured and hit-and-run motorists.

**Reason:** Metro didn't anticipate how many vandals would throw rocks at trains. Executives assumed insurance would cover all the cost of accidents. Not all train surfaces are etch-resistant, which vandals have taken advantage of.

**Response:** Last week, Metro unveiled an Adopt-a-Station program to help with station cleaning and landscaping. Metro is working with police to prosecute bad drivers and vandals, using onboard digital camera footage.