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## MCT driver shortage crisis leads to proposed rider service reductions

Proposed extensions of route frequencies needed to prevent daily service interruptions

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Madison County Transit is experiencing a workforce crisis, as are public transit agencies across the country.

In fact, access to a willing workforce is a critical issue for employers across all industries and around the country. The supply chain has been fractured, and the logistics of moving things and people remains a challenge as we emerge into this post-pandemic era.

And while travels down recovery's path continue, MCT finds itself now in a difficult position: reduce service or face daily service interruptions.

After 18 months of mandated overtime for its existing workforce, MCT has proposed weekday frequency reductions for three of its routes and the elimination of one low-performing route. The proposed changes are being discussed with the public now with the intent of taking effect in January 2023.

"Reducing or eliminating service is a last resort," said MCT Managing Director SJ Morrison. "But we can't continue to force our drivers to work this much overtime, we're burning out our workforce."

MCT's mission is to provide safe, affordable, and reliable public transporta-

tion service, but with the current driver shortage, reliability is compromised. Currently, the agency is nearly 30 drivers down for its bus service line.

MCT recognizes the impact these changes could have on passengers who rely on this service to reach work and school, run vital errands, access medical appointments, and visit family and friends. The agency also recognizes the potential impact on employers, businesses, and other establishments along these affected routes.

Four in-person and one virtual open house session were hosted by MCT from Oct. 18 to 20, 2022, to share proposed changes with the public, gather feedback, answer questions and address concerns. Madison County Transit continues to welcome any added comments, questions, and other feedback prior to any board action on the proposals.

Director of Marketing, IT and Planning Amanda Viliocco-Smith shared, "Those that have attended the public meetings have been very understanding as to why reductions are being proposed on the 4, 7, and 18. Passengers are concerned about limiting their options and want to ensure service is not eliminated."

In fact, during the Oct. 18 open house session held at the Edwardsville bus terminal, one monthly pass commuter shared his thoughts with MCT's Chloe Schmidt, saying, "If you're short drivers, it's not your fault."



Madison County Transit's Joe Domer and Chloe Schmidt talk with commuters at the Edwardsville bus terminal on Oct. 18 about the proposed schedule changes for 2023 resulting from the agency's driver shortage crisis as well as other concerns from transit customers. Photo by Melissa Crockett Meske/IBJ

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## Coast Guard partnership leads to safer operations for tow, tugboat, barge industry

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The American Waterways Operators welcomed a historic milestone for transportation safety this past summer. After two decades of industry work and effort to make this happen, all tugboats and towboats in the United States now must carry a Coast Guard-issued Certificate of Inspection (COI) to operate.

This 100 percent COI compliance means that full implementation of the Subchapter M towing vessel safety regulations is now mandatory. These regulations resulted from a nearly 20-year partnership between the tugboat, towboat and barge industry and the U.S. Coast Guard who had all worked together to raise industry-wide standards and promote safer waterways for mariners, the public and the marine environment.

"AWO member companies have been preparing for the full certification of the towing vessel fleet since the Coast Guard's publication of the new regulations in 2016, investing millions of dollars and spending countless hours on purchasing new equipment, revising safety policies and procedures, and training crews," said AWO Vice President for Regulatory Affairs Caitlyn Stewart.

"With the achievement of this mile-



All tugboats and towboats in the United States now must carry a Coast Guard-issued Certificate of Inspection (COI) to operate. Courtesy SCF

stone, there is greater Coast Guard oversight of every towing vessel that operates on the waterways, and companies can have confidence that the playing field is level because the Coast Guard is taking enforcement action against companies that don't follow the rules," Stewart added.

The American Waterways Operators is the tugboat, towboat and barge industry's advocate, resource and united voice for safe, sustainable and efficient transportation on America's waterways, oceans and coasts. AWO notes further indicate that industry vessels move more than 665

million tons of America's commerce each year on inland and Intracoastal waterways, supporting over 270,000 jobs and contributing over \$30 billion to GDP annually.

And the impact of all of this to Southwestern Illinois and the St. Louis metro region is incredible.

On behalf of the American Waterway Operators, Steve Doty noted, "This is a first for the industry, and a huge step for one of the few regulated industries to take formally.

"Here in Illinois, the economic impact of the industry is staggering. Over 12,000

jobs are supported by the tugboat, towboat and barge industry. \$927 million in labor income here in Illinois, \$1.5 billion of the GDP annually, is supported by the industry. Each year, 77 million tons of cargo move across Illinois waterways. To say the industry is an economic driver here in Illinois would be an understatement," Doty further pointed out.

AWO Vice President of Public Affairs & Communications Ben Lerner confirmed those Illinois statistics and shared the numbers for Missouri. "In Missouri, the U.S. tugboat, towboat and barge industry supports a total of 4,400 jobs. It contributes a total of \$427 million to Missouri's GDP and supports a total of \$274 million in labor income in Missouri annually. And each year, 37.7 million tons of freight move on Missouri waterways."

"Every U.S.-flag towing vessel is now required, through federal regulations developed and enforced by the Coast Guard, to carry a Certificate of Inspection in order to operate," Stewart said. "To obtain a Certificate of Inspection, a towing vessel must undergo an inspection by a Coast Guard inspector to verify that it is in satisfactory condition, fit for its intended service, and in compliance with all applicable requirements.

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