

Is COTA planning to cut more routes?

Transit

Reliability doesn't just mean the bus comes when COTA says it's going to. It also means the bus schedule remains the same-day

after day, year after year—so riders know when they can walk to the corner and catch it.

But COTA's announced service cutbacks at the end of 2005 are unlikely to be the last. To stay in the black, COTA must alter its service annually in response to unexpected balance-sheet changes, says COTA spokesman John Palmer.

Since COTA's main funding is from the sales tax, its revenue fluctuates based on consumer spending. Its primary costs—diesel fuel and payroll—also vary. In 2005,

diesel costs spiked and a new union contract in December resulted in an immediate \$1,600 bonus for drivers and mechanics. Even if all goes well in 2006, COTA riders still will have to adjust because COTA is changing bus routes to try to become more efficient. (Ridership in the Columbus area declined 18.9 percent from 2000 to 2003, according to the National Transit Database.)

Bill Habig, executive director of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, says although frequent changes cost riders, the system overhaul and evaluation is necessary. "In order to grow ridership," he says, "the service has to be improved in ways that are attractive to what we call 'choice riders.' Those are people who don't have to ride the bus, but do because it's reasonably competitive



with driving." COTA cuts entire routes as a last resort, and it prefers to save money by running buses less frequently, says Palmer.

COTA also plans to complete in 2006 an environmental impact study for a light-rail project on the north side of Columbus. And Palmer says COTA needs to replace about 100 aging buses at \$300,000 apiece. "For COTA to expand and serve the Central Ohio community, we'll have to have a new revenue source," Palmer says.

Does that mean there will be a tax levy on the ballot in November? Palmer said in early December he had no news about that possibility.

—Alice Hohl