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RTD Layoffs Come on Heels of Prolonged Shortage of Bus and Rail Operators

DENVER—A new performance audit by the Office of the State Auditor (OSA) of the Regional Transportation District (RTD) has found that from January 2015 through May 2020, RTD experienced a prolonged shortage of bus and rail operators, with a significant number of them leaving RTD each year. Although fewer operators have been leaving RTD since the start of the pandemic, the pandemic has also had significant effects on RTD's ridership, services, and revenue. Facing an uncertain future, RTD has made budget cuts, laid off operators, and eliminated vacant positions. However, the audit found that there are improvements RTD needs to make to retain qualified operators both during the pandemic and once budgets and staffing levels can be restored to pre-pandemic levels.

The audit found that from 2016 to 2019, average annual turnover rates were 26 percent for RTD bus operators and 43 percent for its rail operators. About two-thirds of all operators who left RTD were newer hires who left within 2 years of their start date.

Operator shortages resulted in cuts in services. In 2018 and 2019, RTD was not able to provide over 14,000 planned hours of weekday bus service, so it required operators to work overtime to help cover the routes. Customers rely

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on regularly scheduled buses and rail trains and lost service hours reduces ridership and fare revenue, and can erode public confidence in RTD.

Auditors interviewed and surveyed a sample of bus and rail operators about their experiences working for RTD. “Many operators told us about problems with low morale and discontentment that can lead to turnover” said Jenny Page, Legislative Audit Manager. Operators cited issues with supervisory practices at RTD, including not receiving meaningful performance feedback, supervisory communication that is mainly punitive, and inconsistent and/or untimely recognition of operator achievements.

Operators also raised concerns about work schedules, overtime, and a lack of rest breaks. The audit found that newer operators have more challenging work schedules than senior operators, with frequent 6- or 7-day work weeks and inconsistent work hours, which contributes to fatigue and accidents, and ultimately, them leaving RTD. For example, during 4-weeks in early 2020, 36 percent of newer operators worked at least one 7-day week compared to 13 percent of senior operators, and 76 percent of newer operators had their shift hours change by 4 to 7 hours each day, compared to 27 percent of senior operators.

The audit also found that for a sample of 20 of RTD’s 100 bus routes driven from August 2019 to February 2020, bus operators often did not receive rest breaks to help prevent fatigue, and as required by their Union collective bargaining agreement.

The audit makes five recommendations to help mitigate the risk of operator turnover and improve RTD’s operations, both during and after the pandemic.

RTD was created in 1969 by the Colorado General Assembly to develop, maintain, and operate a mass transportation system in the Denver metropolitan area that includes bus and rail service, and special transportation, such as for seniors and people with disabilities. In Calendar Year 2019, RTD had about 95 million annual passenger boardings across all of its services. RTD’s annual budget is about \$1 billion. Its largest revenue sources are passenger fares, federal grants, and a sales and use tax on purchases within its boundaries.

The full report is available online at www.colorado.gov/auditor.

About the Office of the State Auditor (OSA)

Under the direction of the State Auditor, the OSA is the State's nonpartisan, independent external auditor with broad authority to audit state agencies, departments, institutions of higher education, and the Judicial and Legislative Branches. The OSA also conducts evaluations of the State's tax expenditures (e.g., credits, exemptions, deductions) established in statute, administers a fraud reporting hotline, and tracks about 4,000 Colorado local governments for compliance with the Local Government Audit Law. The OSA's professional staff serve the people of Colorado by addressing relevant public issues through high-quality, objective audits, evaluations, and other work products that promote accountability and positive change in government.

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