

Kitsap Sun

Transit considering alcohol ads on buses

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Picture by LARRY STEAGALL

BREMERTON — The more ads Kitsap Transit can place on its buses, the longer it can stay in the black. And it can sell more ads if alcoholic beverages are on the table, says its advertising agency.

Early next month, transit staff will ask the board to lift a ban on marketing beer, wine and spirits. The resolution was held over from the May 5 meeting because of time constraints.

Advertising comprises a small fraction of the agency's budget. In March 2014, it hired Titan Outdoor to boost sales. The nation's largest transit advertising company, with a late start, netted Kitsap Transit \$47,000. That's half of the proceeds; Titan keeps the other half, according to the five-year contract.

Titan now is asking whether it can keep sales rising by courting booze companies. For this first full year of advertising, the agency budgeted ad revenues at \$100,000.

"Under the old contract, a local guy, our average was \$60,000, so we're making progress, but there's still opportunity for more," finance director Paul Shinners said.

Service and capital development director Steffani Lillie presented the scenario to the board during an April 7 study session and subcommittee meetings. Many agencies don't allow alcohol advertising, but some are starting to see the revenue potential, she said. She couldn't predict what that would be for Kitsap Transit. At a previous employer, a full bus wrap could run \$7,000 a month, she said.

The ads would be tasteful and each would include a disclaimer stating the legal drinking age and to drink responsibly. Lillie would review them before they were posted. It would be a good opportunity for the many local breweries, she said.

Many Americans are sensitive to the alcohol issue, however, and it's reflected in transit agency policies. A study last year of 26 major U.S. agencies conducted by watchdog group Alcohol Justice found that half of them allow alcohol advertising. King County Metro, which also contracts with Titan, bans it.

Anti-ad folks claim studies have shown exposure to alcohol ads influences youth to start drinking earlier and to drink more. Public health and safety costs wind up far exceeding revenue generated from alcohol advertising, though transit agencies don't have to pay them. And despite claims that agencies need the money from alcohol ads, it generally makes up less than 1 percent of their annual operating revenue. Bremerton Mayor Patty Lent, the transit board chairwoman, is involved with Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Bremerton High School's program to prevent substance abuse. She's OK with the ad proposal because the ads won't show anyone drinking and the opportunity for the local breweries and distillers.

"We have to make it so it's not encouraging underage people and not sending the wrong message on a public vehicle," she said.

Transit Executive Director John Clauson said the ads should be fine because they'll be tasteful and include precautions.

"We're looking for every opportunity to maximize the revenue for the transit system," he said. "If the community is willing to participate, let's move forward. That's the discussion we need to have."

Kitsap Transit's costs for personnel and fuel rise more each year than its sales tax revenues, which make up 75 percent of the budget. Expenses are projected to overtake revenues in three or four years. Increased ad revenues wouldn't postpone that date for long, but they'd help.

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