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Met Council to use strike savings to help riders

by [Brandt Williams](#), Minnesota Public Radio
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The Metropolitan Council has created an emergency fund to help transport people hardest hit by the Metro Transit bus strike. The money will come from savings the Council gets from not paying salaries and other operational costs during the strike. Some social service providers say the assistance will be a big help to people most dependent on public transportation. However, officials representing the strikers say the program is an attempt to break the union.

St. Paul, Minn. — The Transit Grant Assistance Program will make up to \$100,000 a week available to metro area non-profit social service agencies. Metropolitan Council Chair Peter Bell says the funds can be used to provide van pool services or taxi cabs to their clients who depend on public transit to get to work, medical appointments and other so-called 'life sustaining purposes.'

"The governor and I have been quite concerned of the impact this strike is having on the 75,000 to 100,000 customers we have that don't own a car and we thought this would be an initial thing we could do to alleviate some of the pressure on them," says Bell.

**“
They should be using this money to settle the strike. They should get us all back out there and get us out there for the public; get us back out there for our jobs; get us back there for the quality of life in the state and Twin Cities area.
”**

- Michelle Sommers

The Met Council is saving more than \$200,000 per weekday on operational costs during the strike. Bell says the Met Council is prepared to expand the program if the strike continues for an extended period of time. And for now, he says, there will be no dollar limitation on the grants.

Staff at People Serving People in downtown Minneapolis are interested in applying for the grant money. People Serving People provides transitional housing and emergency shelter for about 170 people.

"This would be a real benefit to the residents staying here," says Steve Griffiths, development coordinator at the agency.

He says the majority of their clients don't own cars and need help getting to important appointments. Many of their clients are in the process of moving from welfare to work and need to keep their jobs in

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order to maintain their assistance benefits. Griffiths says People Serving People can't afford to give those people rides. He says they could use extra money to help their clients pay for cab rides.

"The people who stay here, that's one of the things that we really stress is self-sufficiency," says Griffiths. "So if they were able to set up the taxi we would be more than willing, if we had the funds to do it, to help them out getting to where they need to go. Absolutely. That would be great."

But not everybody thinks the program is such a great idea.

"This is 100-percent union-busting techniques," says Michelle Sommers vice president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005. "It's not fair. It's not negotiating in good faith."

She says the move by the Met Council is an attempt to weaken the union by paying someone else to do the same job transit union members do.

"They should be using this money to settle the strike," says Sommers. "They should get us all back out there and get us out there for the public; get us back out there for our jobs; get us back there for the quality of life in the state and Twin Cities area."

Met Council Chair Peter Bell says state is not out to break up the union. He says the Council's focus is on serving Metro Transit customers.

Critics of public transportation have said that the absence of widespread strike-related chaos proves that public transit is not an integral part of life in the metro area. However, some say it's premature to say that the initial impact of the strike or the use of transit grants for van and cab travel will make the current public bus system obsolete.

"The ultimate question is that in the end will this be more efficient?" says Frank Doma, a fellow at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute and a researcher at the Center for Transportation Studies. He says large buses are the most efficient means to transport groups of people in and out of small geographical areas, like downtown Minneapolis or St. Paul. Doma says increased use of smaller transit vehicles and taxi cabs would lead to more congestion. He says there has to be a lot more research into the cost effectiveness of altering the bus system.

"I think in the end you might find that providing, by replacing the bus system with a number of smaller, specialized providers that the cost per trip could end up being higher than what the cost per trip is on the current bus system," says Doma.

Met Council officials say the Transit Grant Assistance Program will begin awarding money early next week.

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