

UTA spent nearly \$500,000 on food in a year, calling into question use of public money



(Trent Nelson | Tribune file photo) A TRAX train approaches the Sandy Civic Center in Sandy on June 24, 2019. UTA, the governing agency, is being criticized for spending nearly a half-million dollars on food in one year.



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The Utah Transit Authority runs not only on diesel, compressed natural gas and electricity for its buses and trains. It also buys a lot of food to fuel its bosses and employees.

UTA spent at least \$456,905 last year — just under a half-million dollars — for catered meals and snacks from ice cream to pizza at such things as board meetings, manager huddles, holiday parties, meetings with outside partners and regulators and a variety of other gatherings.

That averages out to \$175 for each of UTA's 2,600 employees. The food bill amounted to 0.11% of the agency's \$403 million operations budget.

That doesn't count the \$282,750 spent on gift cards for employees (\$120 each) at Harmons grocery stores given as Thanksgiving gifts. (Some other gifts last year included \$8,835 for pocket watches to FrontRunner workers to mark that line's 10th anniversary, and \$4,625 in Megaplex theater gift cards for all FrontRunner employees.)

That is according to data obtained by The Salt Lake Tribune through an open records request, online public finance data and extra disclosures volunteered by the agency.

UTA officials defend the food expenses, saying they boost morale, help retain workers in a tight labor market and reward workers who give up meal breaks for working lunches or who travel long distances for meetings.

But critics question the spending, especially after years of [controversy over high executive salaries](#), [extensive international travel and other spending](#) that led the [Legislature to restructure the agency](#). The food spending came in the first year after lawmakers took such action.

One who questions the expenditures is Salt Lake County Councilwoman Aimee Winder Newton, who recently criticized the agency online, arguing that [spending up to \\$15,000 this month to give away \\$5 lunch vouchers to thank the public for its patience during recent construction](#) “is not how public money should be spent.”

About the half-million spent on food last year, she now says, “UTA needs to focus on core services. On the heels of the restructure, using taxpayer dollars on anything that won’t help core services does not rebuild public trust.”



(Photo courtesy of Aimee Winder Newton) Salt Lake County Councilwoman Aimee Winder Newton.

Rep. Mike Schultz, R-Hooper, the House sponsor of the UTA reform law, said some spending on food is normal and useful for businesses and governments — but UTA’s totals sound a bit high. So he is asking the agency for more information.