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LETTERS

Bus fares: Which way do we go?

Re "A (higher) ticket to ride," editorial, Jan. 26

For too long, bus fares have been kept artificially low in the belief that it would attract more passengers. Instead, ridership has remained relatively flat. This has forced the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to starve itself just to preserve these fares, a tactic it can no longer depend on. Meanwhile, other cities have raised their fares to increase bus service, knowing that abundant and reliable services, and not cheap fares, are what truly attract more patrons to public transit.

Let us hope that the MTA acknowledges this and increases the bus fares. To do this, it must show backbone by standing against those who blindly think our fares are somehow too high.

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There is a simple way to reduce bus fares and increase service: Quit building rail lines. It costs many times more to provide a passenger-mile on a train than it does on a bus, even accounting for road costs. L.A.'s transit ridership peaked in 1985. About \$7 billion in rail expenditures has overcome 20 years of population growth and actually decreased ridership.

If we are serious about transit, the first step is to legalize private transit. Eliminate the MTA's legal monopoly and let others enter the market. If we want to ensure that low-income groups are served, subsidize them directly with transit vouchers and eliminate the subsidy to the MTA.

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The writer, a professor of industrial and systems engineering, is the director of the transportation engineering program at USC.

Rather than raising fares, we should reduce or even eliminate them. Sure, it would be nice if the MTA were able to support itself without subsidies. But the fact is that we heavily subsidize our entire automobile-centric transportation system in myriad and insidious ways. The Times offered a representative example in a front-page story on the same day about the long-term health effects of living within 500 yards of a freeway. How much of a subsidy does a 3% to 7% reduction in the lung capacity of tens of thousands of children represent?

Rather than tinkering with the percentage of the overall MTA budget contributed by riders, we should be focusing on how to make the entire transportation system work better. That means moving more people around more efficiently. The simplest way to do that is to increase the ratio of commuters to vehicles. And the simplest way to do that is by increasing the incentives for public transportation (reducing fares and improving service) while reducing the incentives for solo driving.

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