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City Times Voices

■ Commentary on local issues, viewpoints of residents and community leaders, and letters.

MTA's Proposal to Increase Bus Fares

Members of the Los Angeles City Council have heavily criticized the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (MTA) proposal to increase bus fares from \$1.10 to \$1.55 on the grounds that the increase will hurt the Los Angeles residents least able to afford them. The council is correct. Most bus travelers use the bus because their resources do not permit them access to personal vehicles. Many bus users are members of the working poor, and these patrons are at genuine risk of being priced off the system by the proposed fare increase.

Annual ridership on MTA buses has already dropped by 121 million annual boardings as fares have risen from 50 cents during the peak ridership year of 1985 to the current fare. This is almost one third of current system patronage. The message is clear. Price matters.

The council's position is too little too late. The city is just as responsible as the MTA for

distracting the electorate and the media from the fact that Los Angeles' rail renaissance means spending much more to move many fewer people. Most of the North American transit systems that have rail lines have found it necessary to divert resources from buses to pay the large subsidies rail requires. Los Angeles is no exception.

The MTA's forecast 1995 budget pegs the Metrolink commuter rail subsidy at \$21.02 per passenger trip in 1992 dollars. This is more than 60 times greater than the subsidy of 34 cents per passenger trip required by the MTA's most cost-effective bus line (Vermont Avenue's Line 204), and almost 18 times the subsidy for an average MTA bus line. In 1992, the annualized cost of the Blue Line train would have been sufficient to operate 17 of the MTA's 22 busiest bus lines. Collectively, these 17 bus lines carried 16 times the Blue Line's current ridership.

Widely perceived to be the incubator of freeway culture, Los Angeles is actually a very transit-intensive city. Buses play a larger role in the Los Angeles transportation system than in any other urban system in the country. According to U.S. Department of Transportation data, the Los Angeles bus system leads the nation in total passenger-miles of service, passenger-miles per vehicle and, most tellingly, passenger load per vehicle.

MTA buses lead the nation in number of standees. Such crowding suggests that Los Angeles has a very high unmet demand for bus transit. New rail systems are too inflexible to satisfy this demand, and much more expensive than buses.

If the MTA continues to pursue its rail agenda, the net effect on transit use in Los Angeles will be devastating. Proposals to reduce bus service and increase fares will become routine, and the public transportation lifelines of Los Angeles' neediest residents will be permanently severed. Access to transport will be reduced for everyone, but the poor will feel it most.

If the MTA is serious about wanting to reduce its role in the nation's largest market for bus services, then the agency should move to legalize private transit operators. Owner-operators tend to be much more effective at controlling costs than are public entities. Even more important, the revenues earned by private operators depend on how well these operators match their services to what travelers want. Most of the MTA's transit revenues are tax dollars that have nothing to do with the quality of the service the agency delivers.

By opening the franchise to competition, the MTA would pave the way for the introduction of demand-responsive transit services at low fares.

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