

Metro raises bus, train fares

Riders union protests jump of 72 percent over four years

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The Metro board on Thursday voted to raise bus and train fares by an average 72 percent over the next four years - a move decried by critics as a blow to poor and ethnic communities that depend on public transportation the most.

The plan gradually increases fares every two years beginning July 1, when day passes rise to \$5 from \$3, weekly passes jump to \$17 from \$14 and monthly passes spike to \$62 from \$52.

One-way fare hikes won't come until July 1, 2009, when they increase from the current \$1.25 to \$1.50.

"No one wanted to see a fare increase, and it's probably true that we'll probably lose some riders," said county Supervisor Gloria Molina, who co-authored the plan with Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky. "But I think in the long run, we owe to this community a stable organization."

The fare hikes are designed to level the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's stubborn structural deficit in up to eight years. Metro faces a \$1.8 billion deficit over the next 10 years.

But the Bus Riders Union, representing poor and minority passengers, called the hikes "racist" and threatened lawsuits to revoke the increases.

"We have the moral responsibility to stand up against racism," said Lisa Adler, an organizer for riders-rights group.

The plan was tougher than one put forward by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who called for an annual 5 percent increase on fares over the next five years. His plan would collect additional money from the state and borrow to keep the transit agency afloat.

Villaraigosa and his three appointees on the board voted against the plan, which won by a 9-4 vote.

"I voted against this proposal because it puts too much of a burden on public transit riders and not enough in reducing other operational capital projects and securing money from the state," Villaraigosa said.

The plan also puts up to 25 bus lines at risk of being cut for low ridership.

The riders' union pushed for the now-expired federal consent decree against Metro that forced the agency to spend \$1.3 billion on bus service.

Throughout the 6 1/2 hours of public testimony Thursday, union members lambasted the board with claims of racial inequality and said the transit agency's deficit was being balanced on the backs of minorities, a significant portion of the public transportation agency's riders.

"You have yet to look at options that do not harm bus riders," said organizer Manuel Criollo.

Ready for court

Molina's plan is less drastic than one proposed earlier by Metro CEO Roger Snoble, which could have steeply hiked some prices by between 66 and 400 percent over the next two years. His plan would have knocked down the troublesome deficit in three years.

He said the agency has prepared for a lawsuit.

"We are likely destined for court," Snoble said. "We do feel that with any court challenge, we can be successful."

Iffy Capitol promises

After meeting with Sacramento officials on Wednesday, Villaraigosa said he got a commitment for some of the \$230 million in spillover money - a portion of money that comes from sales tax on gasoline - that would go to Los Angeles County. But Metro stands to lose in Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed state budget.

Villaraigosa said there was also growing opposition among lawmakers to Schwarzenegger's call to divert \$1.3 billion in spillover funds from public transportation to other projects.

But some other board members said it was not wise to count on promises when they come from Sacramento, which county Supervisor Michael Antonovich said "could evaporate in smoke."

Earlier, about 375 people - grandmothers, bicyclists, high school students, college students - pleaded their cases before the board. So many filled the building that at one point Fire Department officials shut it down until people left.

"I'm black. I'm disabled. I'm old, and I'm poor," said Cissie Gusheloff, 53, of Hollywood. "Please don't raise the bus fares. We can't afford it."

Car culture

Under the approved plan, seniors 65 and older and disabled can ride buses and rails for 25 cents during off-peak hours. The reduced rate applies from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. and then after 7 p.m. during the week, and on all day on weekends. The rate eventually increases to 35 cents by 2011.

Downtown resident Mary Hendra testified out of concern that fare hikes could prevent motorists from using public transportation, something she uses three times a week.

"We have a car culture and a structure built around automobiles," said the 37-year-old Hendra.

Roger Christensen of Sherman Oaks stood in opposition to the boisterous crowd and said fare increases were necessary.

"We feel it's necessary, reasonable and long overdue," said the 61-year-old chairman of the Metro Citizen Advisory Council. "We have to face the structural deficit. I don't want the agency to go broke."

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