

Los Angeles Times
latimes.com



<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-mta25may25,0,1725679.story?coll=la-home-center>
From the Los Angeles Times

1,500 protest as MTA considers fare hikes

By Rong-Gong Lin II and Jeffrey L. Rabin
Times Staff Writers

1:29 PM PDT, May 24, 2007

Amid protests by some 1,500 people, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's board of directors held a day-long hearing today on whether to hike fares, a proposal that pits rail riders against those who use a bus in a mass-transit system that serves a region plagued by clogged highways and roads.

"We are at a crossroads," MTA chief executive Roger Snoble said this morning, defending the substantial proposed increase. "We have a great system. We just can't pay for it."

"In the final analysis, the choice comes to raising fares or decreasing service," he said.

The morning began with more than 200 chanting protesters crowded into the marble lobby of the MTA building, two floors below the board room, where the 13 directors listened to speakers condemn the increase. The protesters' chants, in English and Spanish, could be heard upstairs.

The number of demonstrators steadily grew throughout the day to more than 1,500, police said. The MTA boardroom can hold about 300, so officials were forced to open four overflow rooms, including the cafeteria, to accommodate the crowd. Security was tight.

By midday, only about a third of the 300 people registered to speak had testified. Most were low-income bus riders, union organizers, students, seniors and disabled people.

Lucy Duran, 62, of Mount Washington, told the panel that her family "can't even get a gallon of milk on our table," much less afford to pay more to ride the bus.

"The fare increase means less food for us, even fewer tortillas on the table," she said.

Most opposed the increase which would raise the cash fare for both rail and bus to \$2 per ride from \$1.25. The monthly pass would increase to \$120 from \$52 over the next 19 months.

But Roger Christensen, chairman of the MTA's Citizen Advisory Council and an appointee of MTA board member Richard Katz, spoke in favor of the increases and agreed that they should be spread out over several years.

"We do feel this is necessary and very long overdue," he said. "We have to face the structural deficit."

Officials say the increases are needed to close a projected deficit created, in part, by the court-ordered expansion of bus service, as well as by the expansion of the rail network.

Rising fuel prices and employee benefits have also hit the agency hard, officials complain.

The MTA is struggling with \$4.7 billion in debt accrued over the years to build rail lines and other capital projects, including its \$300-million, 26-story downtown headquarters.

The proposal hits bus riders particularly hard at a time when officials are spending \$1.5 billion for a network of new rail lines.

Although 82% of all MTA boardings are on buses, the agency is increasingly bullish on rail projects, which officials see as a long-term solution for moving large numbers of people across the region as street congestion increases. At 73 total miles of rail, the MTA's system is still much smaller than those of other major cities and leaves many parts of the county without service.

The MTA is pushing for the higher fares as officials construct new rail projects to East Los Angeles and Culver City. It is also planning new routes from Pasadena to Azusa and from Culver City to Santa Monica.

Some critics charge that the fare hike essentially funds rail improvements at the expense of bus riders, who tend to be significantly less affluent than rail riders, according to MTA statistics. The median household income of a bus rider is \$12,000, according to the MTA, compared with \$22,000 for a rail rider.

Manuel Criollo of the L.A. Bus Riders Union said the MTA risks a federal lawsuit with the fare increase.

"From out point of view, most if not all the proposals will cause excruciating harm to our people," Criollo said today.

He said that the vast majority of riders are Latino and African American, and that dramatically raising fares could amount to a civil rights violation.

Damien Goodman, of the Transit Coalition, an advocacy group, said he doesn't believe that the MTA's proposed rate hikes are racist, as some have charged.

"This is not a discussion about race," said Goodman, who is African American. "It is a discussion about the cost of labor and commodities and the ability of this agency to deliver a public service. In the absence of significant statewide and federal investments for bus operation costs, I don't see how existing service can be maintained or expanded without an unfortunate fare increase."

At an earlier news conference in a bus yard a block away from MTA headquarters, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa pushed for his proposal, which seeks a smaller fare increase. The mayor, who sits on the board, is calling for a 5% fare increase during each of the next five years.

Villaraigosa was flanked by representatives from the Los Angeles Federation of Labor, AARP, the Coalition for Clean Air and others.

"Rome wasn't built in a day, and this deficit wasn't created overnight," the mayor said. "It's wrong

to balance the MTA budget on the backs of seniors, the disabled, students and low-income families."

The mayor suggested that the MTA reduce the frequency of rail service and borrow to buy new buses rather than pay for them immediately.

He acknowledged that the county transportation agency may have to slow down construction of new light rail lines as part of his proposal, including phase two of the Expo and Gold lines.

ron.lin@latimes.com

jeff.rabin@latimes.com

Times staff writer Michael Muskal contributed to this report.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2007 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

PARTNERS:

