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THE STATE

MTA at a crossroads with fare decision

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Times Staff Writers

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The Metropolitan Transportation Authority today will consider approving a series of large fare increases that would hit bus riders particularly hard at a time when officials are spending \$1.5 billion for a network of new rail lines.

The vote is seen as a pivotal moment for the MTA, which until last year was under a federal consent decree to improve bus service but kept fare increases at a minimum over the last decade.

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.

MTA Chief Executive Roger Snoble has recommended raising the cash fare for both rail and bus to \$2 per ride from \$1.25 and the monthly pass to \$120 from \$52 over the next 19 months.

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.

The MTA is also 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.

For the current fiscal year, the MTA is budgeted to spend \$360.6 million paying down its debts — more than its entire \$229-million budget for operating the rail system.

The MTA is pushing for the higher fares as officials construct new rail projects to East Los Angeles and Culver City at a combined cost of about \$1.5 billion. It is also planning new routes from Pasadena to Azusa and from Culver City to Santa Monica.

Today's hearing "is a big day for L.A.," said MTA spokesman Rick Jager. "We are at a point now where something has to give."

Some critics say the fare hike would essentially fund rail improvements on the backs of bus riders,

who tend to be significantly less affluent than rail riders, MTA statistics show. The median household income of a bus rider is \$12,000, according to the MTA, compared with \$22,000 for a rail rider.

Rosa Mazo, a worker at the Bonaventure Hotel who was waiting for a bus Wednesday, said the fare increase would be unfair to the working poor.

"I depend on the bus all the time," said Mazo, who commutes from Echo Park. "I know some people who make minimum wage, and for them, it's so hard.... We end up staying in the same hole, never getting out."

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa stepped into the divide this week, proposing a compromise. It would keep the cash fare the same over the next two years and boost other fares by only about 10%. It would also reduce rail service frequency in the short term and use loans, rather than cash, to buy buses and rail cars, which could slow down future projects.

But some transportation experts say Villaraigosa's proposal does not resolve a financial problem that could worsen as more rail comes on line.

"It's a classic political compromise: The fare hikes are unpopular, the budget crisis is real, so we'll raise the fares" by a smaller amount and try to find other funding sources for the rest, said Brian Taylor, director of UCLA's Institute of Transportation Studies. "Debt finance is putting it on the credit card — it's a short-term thing to avoid tough decisions.... It's a strategy. It's not really a solution."

The MTA says it has already laid off 500 administrative employees, blanketed rail stations with advertising, added TV monitors airing commercials in buses and performed other belt-tightening and revenue-generating measures. But Taylor and others said transportation leaders have avoided looking at bigger-picture items, such as renegotiating labor contracts, charging fares based on distance traveled or contracting out some services such as maintenance to nonunion firms.

There is also much debate about whether the MTA's commitment to rail makes sense given its limited funding and the sprawling geography of Los Angeles County.

James E. Moore, director of USC's transportation engineering program, said focusing on buses would be a smarter, less costly alternative. He and others point to busways on a dedicated road such as the Orange Line in the San Fernando Valley. The line has surpassed the MTA's ridership estimates.

"The bottom line is that the MTA's financial problems will never improve so long as we cling to rail as a priority," Moore said.

But others strongly disagree, saying the county's worsening congestion is going to make bus service on its busiest roads — such as Wilshire Boulevard — increasingly difficult. Rail backers argue that the MTA's rail ridership will grow rapidly as it expands to new neighborhoods.

Adding more rail lines, particularly to underserved areas such as the Westside and San Gabriel Valley, will ultimately boost ridership throughout the entire system, they say.

"Rail gives greater speed, it's more comfortable and it has higher capacity than buses," said Darrell Clarke, co-chairman of Friends 4 Expo Transit, which has been pushing for the line from

downtown to Culver City. "Buses are stuck in traffic."

Overall, rail is much more expensive to operate than buses — \$348 per hour of service compared with \$114. But rail backers say trains are ultimately more efficient than buses because they can carry more passengers.

The debate in Los Angeles over rail versus buses has been going on for decades. It intensified after voters approved a half-cent sales tax for transportation in 1980.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, L.A. transit officials began a rail building boom, starting with the Long Beach-to-downtown Blue Line and by the mid-1990s adding the Red Line subway and the Green Line rail between Norwalk and Redondo Beach.

But bus riders complained that the agency was neglecting bus service while raising fares. Several groups, including the Bus Riders Union and the NAACP, filed a federal lawsuit against the MTA in 1994. Two years later, the agency agreed to enter into a federal consent decree, in which a judge oversaw the way the MTA dealt with bus service.

The judge ordered the MTA to increase bus service significantly while keeping fares relatively flat. Over the last decade, the MTA purchased more than 2,000 new buses, expanded service hours and added the popular rapid bus system on some key routes.

But at the same, the agency continued building rail, adding the Gold Line and expanding Blue and Red line operations.

MTA spokesman Jager said the decree, which expired in 2006, represented a "double whammy" because the agency dramatically increased service without gaining more revenue.

Officials said that without a fare increase, the MTA would have to cut about 30% of its bus service. If the increase fails, the MTA said it would not have enough money to operate the Gold Line East L.A. extension and the Expo Line to Culver City, both under construction.

The predictions have bus riders, including Dawn Renderos, 33, shaking their heads.

"It's already expensive," Renderos said. "For them to raise it like that, that's extreme."

The MTA board of directors will hold a public hearing on the fare hike proposals today at 9 a.m. at its headquarters at East Cesar E. Chavez Avenue and North Vignes Street in downtown Los Angeles.

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Proposed fare increases

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority's board of directors will today consider increasing fares. L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has proposed a compromise with smaller fare hikes.

MTA fares

	Daily Monthly Monthly			
	Cash	pass	pass	sr. pass
Current	\$1.25	\$3.00	\$52.00	\$12.00
MTA's proposal				
As of July 1	1.25	5.00	75.00	37.50
January '09	2.00	8.00	120.00	60.00
Mayor's proposal				
July 2008	1.25	3.15	54.60	12.60
July 2009	1.25	3.31	57.33	13.23

Other cities, current fares

	Daily		Monthly	Monthly
	Cash	pass	pass	sr. pass
Chicago	2.00	5.00	75.00	35.00
New York	2.00	7.00	76.00=38.00	
San Francisco	1.50	11.00	45.00	10.00

Sources: Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, New York MTA, Chicago Transit Authority

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