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*From the Los Angeles Times*

**STEVE LOPEZ POINTS WEST**

## **Everyone loses with MTA's rate decision**

Steve Lopez  
Points West

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The bright young Westchester High School students I was talking to at Thursday's Metropolitan Transportation Authority meeting were being cheated.

The elderly riders I met with were being cheated too.

Everyone knew the ridiculously high rate hike proposal by the MTA would never happen, just as they knew Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa was trying to win cheap political points with an equally improbable counter that involved more borrowing.

So the MTA board compromised in the end. Big surprise.

Crisis averted.

Long-term problem ignored.

In Southern California and nationally, transit systems are hurting because of flat federal and state funding while operating costs go up. But honest fixes are seldom debated.

MTA chose the standard course: Wait until the crisis could no longer be ignored, pander and posture, patch things over with a compromise that fixes nothing but allows the agency to muddle through.

In the crowd of 1,500 transit riders who want a smarter approach and better service, Sierra Girtley, 18, and Unique Harston, 17, said a bus gets them to Westchester High. They told me how hard it would have been on their parents if the fees had been doubled.

"My dad says he just can't pay that," said Girtley, one of three siblings who each pays \$20 monthly for a pass.

The MTA's compromise — a convoluted and constantly changing rate hike of roughly 50% over the next several years — wasn't a win for anyone.

But I shouldn't pin all the blame on the MTA, even though it's tempting after the defeat of Villaraigosa's proposal had him sniping with fellow board member Zev Yaroslavsky to the benefit of no one. State and federal officials are culprits in the collective failure to support transit, despite the growing social and economic cost of congestion and pollution-related illness. Where's bold, creative leadership when you need it?

Would the option of a few high-speed toll lanes for Los Angeles motorists raise enough money to buy the buses the MTA needs?

Is it time to mandate that large companies offer transit vouchers to employees and eliminate free parking?

Does the efficiency of smaller transit systems in Santa Monica, Culver City and the foothill cities suggest that the MTA should be broken into smaller regional agencies?

Is it time to increase the 18-cent federal gas tax or use more of it to fund transit?

Should developers get bigger incentives for building near transit centers?

"There's no question that in a metro area like L.A., a transit system cannot be sustained" by current formulas, said Martin Wachs of the Rand Corp. "You need some form of tolls or parking or gas increases, with a transfer of funds from auto users to transit users."

He and Brian Taylor of UCLA's Institute of Transportation Studies support a variable fare system, saying it's illogical to charge a flat \$1.25 for a bus ticket regardless of whether the rider goes 30 miles or three blocks. "It would be like United Airlines saying it's \$349 for all flights, whether you go to Fresno or Hong Kong," Taylor said. On buses and trains, longer commuters tend to be more affluent than those who travel short distances, so a variable rate would be more equitable.

It's time for the MTA board and the Southern California Assn. of Governments to lead a discussion on these kinds of solutions and fight for their support here, in Sacramento and Washington. As it is, they're on a slow bus to nowhere.

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