

L.A. Metro to raise fares 72% in 4 years

Board cites deficit but bus riders consider suit, saying the plan hurts minorities, poor.

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The Los Angeles Metro Transportation Authority board 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 the 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, rising 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 will 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 increases apply to the Blue Line. They do not affect Long Beach Transit, but some MTA buses travel to and from the Long Beach area.

The fare hikes are designed to level the transit agency's stubborn structural deficit in up to eight years. The MTA faces a \$1.8 billion deficit over the next 10 years.

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 the riders union.

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.

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

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

Immediately following the 9-4 vote, members of the Bus Riders Union - which launched a now-expired federal consent decree against MTA based on civil rights violations - rose from their seats in unison and chanted "Fight transit racism. See you in court."

Throughout the 6<MD+,%30,%55,%70>1/<MD-,%0,%55,%70>2 hours of public testimony, Bus Riders 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 public transportation riders.

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

Molina's plan is less drastic than one proposed earlier by Metro CEO Roger Snoble that could have hiked some prices between 66 to 400 percent during the next two years but strove to quickly knock down the troublesome deficit in three years. Snoble said the agency has prepared for a lawsuit.

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 Los Angeles County is counting on and stands to lose in Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed budget.

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. In fact, 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."

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 all day on weekends. The rate increases to 35 cents by 2011.

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