

Activists assail proposed MTA fare hikes

By OLESHEYI BANJO, Staff Writer

African-American leaders say steep increases would place unfair burden on the transit-dependent.

LEIMERT PARK — Black community leaders were joined by members of the Bus Riders Union on Monday to urge the Metropolitan Transportation Authority board to reject proposed fare increases for MTA buses and trains.

The MTA board will hold a public hearing Thursday at 9 a.m. at the transit agency's downtown headquarters to receive public comment on the proposed fare increases.

The increases, which would take effect July 1, would leave the regular bus fare at \$1.25, but would raise the day pass fare from \$3 to \$5. Weekly bus passes would rise from \$14 to \$20 and monthly passes would increase from \$52 to \$75.

Under the proposal being considered by the MTA board, fares would be increased again on Jan. 1, 2009. At that time, the regular bus fare would increase to \$2, day passes would increase to \$8, weekly passes would increase to \$32 and monthly passes would rise to \$120.

Under the plan, semi-monthly bus passes would be eliminated all together.

At a press conference Monday, Bus Riders Union spokesman Damon Azali said the fare increases would affect more than 100,000 bus riders with a median income of less than \$12,000 a year.

"Twenty-nine percent of them make less than \$7,500," Azali said.

"We are here to urge MTA board members Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, City Council member Bernard Parks and Mayor Antonio Villagragosa to vote no against this unfair fare increase and say 'not one penny more,'" he added.

Erika Smith, the executive director of Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education, said the proposed fare hikes would impact people like her grandmother.

"My grandmother is 92 years old and she cannot drive anymore," Smith said. "Like so many members of our community, seniors are completely dependent on the promise of public transportation. The MTA proposes to increase the fares for seniors by 212 percent. This will force people on moderate incomes to make difficult or devastating choices.

Marqueece Hariss-Dawson, the director of the South Los Angeles Community Coalition, said: "While George Bush is lowering taxes for rich people, our elected officials are raising taxes on poor people and that is wrong. We join the bus riders union and say not one penny more."

The Rev. William Monroe Campbell, pastor of Mount Gilead Baptist Church, said "People who virtually have no choice are being victimized. That is unfair and we should not stand for it at all. I hear no one proposing to increase the incomes of the poor people to compliment the proposal of fare increases. There is something patently unfair about this proposal. I call on those who are making decisions to re-examine, to reassess the proposal with a sensitivity to those who are in need of this transit system."

Later Monday, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa called the proposed fare hikes "extreme." Villaraigosa,

who serves on the MTA board and appoints three of the other 12 board members, unveiled a plan to increase bus fares by 10.25 percent over two years. In a letter to his fellow board members, Villaraigosa proposed pursuing more state transportation funds, reducing rail service over the short-term, and providing 25-cent off-peak fares for seniors and disabled people.

"To be clear, I believe that the proposed increases are extreme and would have a fundamentally negative impact on ridership and our most vulnerable customers, many of whom are low-income and transit-dependent," Villaraigosa said in his letter.

MTA spokesman Marc Littman defended the proposed fare increases.

"The public needs to understand, this is not just about bus and rail riders. This is about the mobility needs of 10 million people," Littman said.

"Our customers are only paying 24 percent of what it costs to operate the buses and trains. It's far less than what other transit agencies are receiving."

Another MTA spokesman, Dave Soltero, said: "We are in this situation because we had a consent decree that [prevented us] from raising our fares for 10 years. Now that time period has been released [and] we have the ability to raise our fares to cover our operating costs. We have a budget problem to the tune of a \$1.8 billion deficit over the next 10 years."

Manuel Criollo, another Bus Riders Union spokesman, called the proposed increases "a violation of civil, economic and environmental rights."

"The MTA is attempting to balance [its] budget on the poorest people in this region," Criollo said.

He said the MTA needed to raise its fares because it had spent too much money on its light rail service that had failed to meet ridership expectations.

"It is ludicrous to expect people in and around Los Angeles to pay for a train system that is non-functional, that very few riders ride and ultimately it is a very punitive aspect that asks more and more bus riders to pay for these projects," Criollo added. "If this fare increase goes through, it will eventually kill the bus system, more people will use cars or other forms of transportation and that is not good for the environment."

Tameka Jones, a local bus rider who was not at Monday's press conference, said: "We've got to let them know [Thursday] that they cannot raise our bus fares. So many people depend on the transit system. It is just wrong that they decide to do this now. We've got to stand up and band together, somehow and show them that they can't just do to us what they feel like doing to us."

City News Service contributed to this story.