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MTA fare hike may not be the ticket

Experts warn an increase could hurt ridership and low-income riders.

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After a decade of being largely restricted from raising bus fares by a federal judge, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is proposing a sweeping series of fare hikes that some experts worry will discourage commuters from using mass transit.

The hikes would establish some of the highest bus fares in the country. The basic fare would rise to \$2 from \$1.25. About 87% of all MTA passengers use some form of bus or rail pass, which would see larger price increases of up to 400% over the next 20 months.



	Cash	Daily pass	Weekly pass
	\$1.25	\$3.00	\$14.00
	1.25	5.00	20.00
Fare hikes planned	2.00	8.00	32.00

MTA officials say that the hike is needed to help cover rising operating costs and that they have already cut 500 jobs. Without the higher fares, they say the agency would have to slash service.

But there are growing questions among transportation experts about whether steep fare increases make sense at a time when L.A.'s roads are more clogged than ever.

"The dream of every bus rider is to have a car," said **James E. Moore**, director of USC's transportation engineering program, who expressed concern that big fare hikes might push more people into buying cheap cars.

Moore said several economic studies of transit fare hikes have shown that for

every 10% increase in a fare, ridership drops 3%. The MTA wants to raise the cost of a monthly transit pass to \$75 from \$52 by July and to \$120 by 2009 — increases that **Moore** said he believes will prompt some riders to abandon the bus and rail.

The proposed MTA fare hike comes as San Francisco examines a radical reduction in fares to encourage more use of mass transit.

San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom last month ordered a study of eliminating bus and streetcar fares to determine whether free

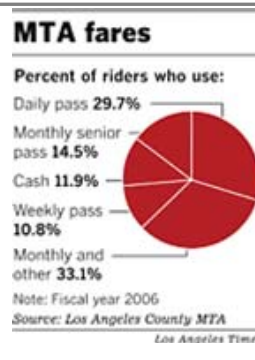
fares would get more commuters out of their cars.

Some urban planners as well as the L.A. Bus Riders Union have proposed that the MTA sharply reduce fares — to 50 cents — or make them even free.

They argue that lower fares would encourage more people to use mass transit, reducing traffic and pollution.

There is some evidence that reduced fares might draw more riders. In early 1980s, county voters approved a transit sales tax measure that reduced bus fares to 50 cents.

The discount drew so many new passengers to L.A. buses that ridership surpassed Chicago's.



There were complaints about overcrowded buses and increased pick pocketing.

Transit officials raised fares in 1985 — and ridership dropped. Two other hikes since then were followed by declines in ridership, according to MTA data.

The MTA records about 1.6 million bus and rail boardings each weekday, many of them low-income riders who do not own cars. According to an MTA survey in 2001, the average family income of a bus rider was \$12,000, and \$22,000 for rail users.

"It really puts all the burden on the poorest, who are really relying on the bus," Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, chairwoman of the UCLA Department of Urban Planning, said of the fare hike.

But others worry the higher fares are most likely to drive away more affluent riders who take the Gold Line, Orange Line and Red Line into downtown from the suburbs.

A rider who has a car may react to a fare hike by saying, "Oh, forget it. I got the car. I've paid the insurance," said Brian Taylor, director of UCLA's Institute of Transportation Studies.

MTA officials acknowledge they expect ridership to fall initially.

Still, they said the agency needs to close an operating deficit brought about largely by the \$1.3 billion spent in the last decade on buying buses and adding service while keeping fares low to comply with a federal consent decree.

Standing room only

Transit officials agreed to the decree in 1996 to settle a civil rights lawsuit with bus riders. A federal judge permitted the

decree to expire last year, ruling that "quality of life has improved for Los Angeles' public transit dependent poor population."

The only fare increase the judge allowed during the decade-long decree was a modest increase in weekly, monthly and semi-monthly passes. Ridership dropped, from 430 million riders in 2003 to 394 million in 2004.

The MTA has also tried other ways to balance its budgets, officials said. More than 500 administrative jobs were eliminated in the last five years, and the agency has begun blanketing Metro stations with product advertisements and selling commercial time on buses equipped with TV monitors.

But without a fare increase, bus service would need to be cut by one-third, said Marc Littman, an MTA spokesman.

"It's simple economics. We have to ask our customers to pay a little bit more of what it costs to run the service," Littman said. "The alternative is to cut service, and no one wants to retrench."

The MTA — whose board could vote on the hike as early as May 24 — also rejects the argument that reducing fares would help. They say extra riders would only further drain resources and not significantly increase revenues.

The prospect of increased fares are leaving some bus riders steaming.

"It seems like the hikes are hurting the most vulnerable," said Rosa Calles, a 62-year-old part-time housekeeper who commutes by bus from Highland Park to West Los Angeles. Her annual household income is \$16,000, and she could see her \$12 monthly senior pass rise to \$37.50 by July and \$60 by 2009.

Melissa Zacharias, a biology student at Santa Monica College, worried about how she would manage the 25-mile commute from her home in South Gate. Her family has no car and would see her \$30 college monthly pass rise to \$52.50 by July and \$84 in 2009.

"I mean, I barely have enough money now to pay for the bus," said Zacharias, waiting for a Red Line train at Union Station on a recent afternoon. "I think I would have to carpool with more people. It's tough trying to pay for college alone."

But John King, who uses bus and rail to commute from Hollywood to his sales job in North Hollywood, said he is willing to pay more if the MTA can improve service.

"The transit system has made a lot of headway and gotten better, but it's going to have to get better if they are raising fares," said King, 43. "Hopefully they will use the extra money to fix up the buses."

Other bus and rail systems in California have raised fares in recent years, but in at least three counties, the hikes have been less dramatic.

In San Bernardino County, bus fares are scheduled to rise in July — but by a much smaller percentage than what the MTA is proposing. In 2005, Riverside Transit Agency approved a modest increase in fares.

Ridership declined by 11% after the fare hike but recovered after about a year.

In Orange County, officials raised bus fares in 2005 — the first hike in 14 years — but still less than what the MTA is proposing.

The fare hike proposal caused some transit experts to question the wisdom of the MTA's huge investment in rail. The agency is building two rail projects — the Expo Line to Culver City and the Gold Line extension to East L.A. at a total cost of about \$1.5 billion.

"You see how crowded the buses are, and yet ... the Gold Line at 4 in the afternoon is practically empty," said Joel Kotkin, a Los Angeles resident and author of "The City: A Global History."

"Obviously the buses are in demand much more than the more expensive stuff, so why aren't we putting more money into the buses?" Kotkin said. "It seems to be unconscionable we could be raising fares so a few yuppies from Santa Monica can go downtown on the subway."

MTA officials respond that while rail accounts for about 17% of ridership, it is growing and is a key to moving people in the future as the rail network expands.

Taylor, of the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies, said the MTA could charge long-distance riders more and short-distance passengers less if customers used pre-paid "smart cards," embedded with computer chips, to deduct fares. Long-distance riders tend to be wealthier and tend to ride during rush hour, Taylor said, while short-distance riders are more likely to be lower income and tend to ride during off-peak times.

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