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Whoa! A Sea Change in Metro's TAP System

Details Written by Matthew Hetz
26 Nov 2013



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LA TRANSIT-In an earlier *CityWatch* article, I wrote at length on my frustrations in dealing with the TAP card, required by Metro for riders of Metro Rail-their subway and light rail lines. TAP can also be used on Metro buses and other bus lines in Southern California.

The TAP card is similar to a gift card: money is put onto the card, but the purchases are instead transit fares deducted with each use. Money can be added to the card to allow continuous use. The card is swiped by the rider at kiosks at Metro Rail stations and bus fare boxes. If the kiosks are practicably and conveniently located at the stations, the swiping of the TAP card to pay fare is a good system. The TAP cards are read by Sheriffs who patrol Metro Rail to validate riders paid their fare.

The frustrations started from many attempts to add money to the TAP card mostly through their website, and from the vending machines. It reached the boiling point when I could not purchase a new TAP card after my card expired.

I wrote that the current TAP webpage looks and interfaces like a project from a high school computer class, and that is being unkind to high school students. After the article, I would get comments from others expressing sentiments near to mine in trying to navigate the TAP web site.

There are also frustrations and confusion in trying to purchase a card or add money to an existing card at Metro Rail Stations TAP vending machines. Here too, I heard from a chorus of people with similar frustrations. The TAP system was systemically dysfunctional, and seemed endemic to Metro's disregard to the experiences of transit riders.

Before the article was written, on a back burner was a large, simmering pot of years of frustration from using mass transit in the Los Angeles region, and Metro's operations which were more concerned with the building and engineering of running buses and trains than showing concern for the travails of us riding mass transit in Los Angeles County. The Metro transit system could be, and in instances remains, user unfriendly with too many deaf ears.

The frustrations of the inability to purchase a new TAP card through the website brought the simmer to a full boil resulting in the previous article in *CityWatch*.

I thought my article would be read by a small group, mostly the transit advocates of Southern California, and then slowly leak into the cyberspace ether and be forgotten. I truly thought Metro would again ignore one more complaint on their operations.

After that article was published I was very surprised that the article remained in transit cyberspace *terra firma*, and was read by an expanding readership. I was even more surprised when David Sutton, Deputy Executive Officer, TAP, Metro, contacted me with a list of changes he implemented on the TAP system, and he invited me, and other transit writers and bloggers, for a meeting at Metro Headquarters to discuss TAP. This was a sea change in Metro's relationship to its riders. However, until the meetings, I was very skeptical Metro would listen or accomplish any meaningful changes.

Since then I have attended three meetings with David Sutton, and other Metro executives and managers who have been gracious and understanding in the frustrations I and others face with the current TAP system. These frustrations are shared by Metro itself. The current management, from what I understand, did not implement the

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TAP system, but are left is the collateral damage. Their frustrations seem evident and true. They want a system which assists transit riders, and makes their jobs less stressful in dealing with the frustrations of transit riders.

One meeting was with Metro management and officials of the private third party contracted by Metro for the website and customer service. Sutton and Metro, from my understanding, are leaning on the third party to try to clean up the website, as much as is possible within the framework and limits of the contract.

Sutton and the managers in the meetings at Metro headquarters presented their prototypes for changes to the TAP vending machines and their ideas for a modern, functioning website. As is the case with governmental agencies, things move slowly. Metro must wait for the contract to expire before moving forward with a new website, and they must follow governmental rules and regulations in calling for bids, the submitting bids, the reviews, and then awarding the new contract. This is time consuming.

Tweaks are being done to the website, and to the vending machines at the stations. The prototypes I saw for the new vending machine's interface are much more user friendly, and Sutton and Metro took serious the suggestions at the meetings from myself and others.

This new attitude at Metro of paying more attention to the personal aspects of a transit system is very refreshing and encouraging. It remains to be seen on the follow-through of the intentions of Metro, but from my meetings, their intentions seem sincere, with the intent to make it better. I am now optimistic that changes to TAP will be forthcoming. The changes will not come soon enough, but that is because of the regulations and rules of a very large public agency.

TAP may live up to its expectations, I certainly hope so.

This does not mean that Metro is now free and clear, there are other areas of the rider's experience where Metro is lacking in execution, and I hope to address those someday.

(Matthew Hetz is a member of Los Angeles Council District 11 Transportation Advisory Committee, a bicycle rider since 1965, a driver since 1975 and a dedicated transit rider since 1992.)

-cw

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**Kenny Easwaran** · Top commenter · Assistant Professor at University of Southern California

This is a major problem when government agencies contract out these operation functions to private corporations - we're stuck with whatever the private company feels like doing for the duration of the contract. Now maybe it's reasonable that running a website isn't a core function that a transportation agency should have an entire department dedicated to, but perhaps there would be a way to set up some sort of governmental website agency that runs the websites for all the government agencies in the county, and is able to be more directly responsible to voters, rather than having a hodgepodge of different companies running websites for different government entities, with different lengths of contract.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · about a minute ago**Ed Mpc** · Inglewood, California

To be sure, the TAP card system was always a problem, and Metro—under CEO Art Leahy—has gone through a few versions of PR message not unlike the one described above.

Below are just a few links that divulged how TAP was implemented back in 2008-2009. (Please note: TheBusBench.com is no more; all links in the posts must be re-typed as "www.TheBusBench.org" to fin the citations, etc.)

More TAP Crap: Is Metro Fabricating Answers About TAP Card Failure?: <http://www.thebusbench.org/2009/07/more-tap-crap-is-metro-fabricating-answers-about-last-weeks-tap-card-failure.html>

Metro's TAP Card Embezzlement Scam: <http://www.thebusbench.org/2010/01/metros-tap-card-embezzlement-scam.html>

TAP Puts Senior Citizens Out To Pasture: <http://www.thebusbench.org/2009/04/taps-untold-problems.html>

Punch on Duty: New TAP Card Policy Places Onus on C... [See more](#)

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 26 November at 16:53**Brady Westwater** · Top commenter · Works at Writer/Reporter · 482 subscribers

I wish I could say anything good about the TAP system changes, but my experience has been the exact opposite of yours.

After weeks of being unable to get my card filled at at any of the stations machines - and being forced to buy day passes - which resulted with by being swindled (and there is no other other which is as applicable) by Metro of twice the amount I would have paid if I had been able to refill my card, I finally found someone at Metro to talk to me and they admitted that what was happening to me was an inherent flaw in the system.

I was also told that Metro knew of the problem I was encountering but that they had no intention of fixing it since they were making too much money by not fixing it as opposed to the amount of money they would have to spend to fix the problem.

So I finally gave up and went down to U... [See more](#)

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 26 November at 06:47**Ron Senger** · Top commenter · Los Angeles, California

I especially like how they make you pay to transfer trains through downtown. I wonder how many people realize it was never like that before. Well, even it was, who would know, with no gates for 20 years. Bet that boosted their ridership numbers.

[Reply](#) · [2](#) · [Like](#) · 26 November at 08:25**Alec Mitchell** · Software Developer at Freelance

I believe the TAP changes Mr. Hetz is describing are ones which have yet to take effect and which apparently look promising. I think we can all agree that the current system is pretty broken, and the various bandaid fixes so far have not been entirely positive. It sounds like Metro is finally acknowledging those problems and putting real effort into fixing them.

Regarding downtown train transfers, like Red Line to Blue Line, I believe those have actually always required a new fare, though that was even less obvious before TAP. Back then you'd get cited if a fare checker caught you on the Blue Line with a paper ticket originating from e.g. Union Station. It appears the Metro Board is looking into fare restructuring which could address that issue as well. I don't have high hopes for that process resulting in an ideal outcome though.

[Reply](#) · [1](#) · [Like](#) · 2 hours ago**Coffee Bean** · UCLA

TAP website is indeed too confusing. The article says that it's like a HS project, but HSers today can build a better website.

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