



Metrolink proposing cutbacks

By Troy Anderson, Staff Writer

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Trying to close an \$11 million to \$20 million budget shortfall, Metrolink is considering a plan to raise fares by 3 to 6 percent and discontinue dozens of low-ridership weekend and weekday commuter train lines.

The cuts would come on most of the Southern California rail agency's lines, including those serving the San Fernando Valley, Antelope Valley and Ventura County.

The need for cuts is partly fueled by an 11 percent drop in average weekday ridership over the past year, which officials attribute to more commuters losing their jobs and the stabilized cost of gasoline.

"What we are trying to do, like everyone else, is avoid laying off people and cutting services, but we had an (11 percent) reduction in passengers," Metrolink board member Richard Katz said.

"We've lost revenue from the state and we are trying to figure out the best way to provide the best services so we can take care of our customers during the middle of a recession."

On the Ventura County Line, which runs through the San Fernando Valley with stops in Glendale,

Van Nuys and Chatsworth among others, Metrolink has proposed to discontinue eight weekday trains, and curtail service west of Moorpark station for six trains.

On the Antelope Valley line, which runs between Union Station downtown and Lancaster, with stops including Glendale, Sun Valley and Santa Clarita, the agency is considering cutting 11 trains on weekdays, four on Saturdays and two on Sundays.

Daniel Fresquez, 62, an environmental science worker from Green Valley who takes the train from Lancaster to downtown, said losing some of those trains will make it far more difficult to commute.

"It's going to be a real hardship on anyone who has to work late because if we don't take the 6:30 p.m., how do we get home?" Fresquez said. "And they are particularly targeting this line, when it's for the people who have to travel the longest distance."

Metrolink board chairman Ara Najarian, a Glendale city councilman, said he's concerned about the proposed cuts on the Antelope Valley line. He has proposed shifting about \$5 million in Measure R funds - the half-percent sales tax voters approved in 2008 for transportation improvements - to Metrolink.

"Essentially, what this means is the MTA would be increasing its funding to Metrolink with an earmark on those funds to keep certain Antelope

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Valley lines running and to try and ease the fare increases that would hit the lines," Najarian said.

Metropolitan Transportation Authority spokesman Marc Littman said he wasn't aware of Najarian's proposal, but he said Metrolink is entitled to 3 percent of the Measure R funds.

"They may not get everything they need to forestall a fare increase, but it sounds like they will take what they can to temper their shortfall," Littman said.

Kymberleigh Richards, the public and legislative affairs director at Southern California Transit Advocates, is also concerned about the proposed revisions on the Antelope Valley Line.

"That line has had expansion over the years because there is ridership on it," Richards said. "I get concerned when weekday service gets cut on a line that I know to be productive."

Metrolink has scheduled a hearing on the proposed cuts for April 2. Katz said Metrolink board members at the hearing, will consider data on ridership, whether the lines pay for themselves and if the lines provide the only access to public transit.

"In some areas of the Antelope Valley, it's Metrolink or nothing," Katz said. "I'd be reluctant to cut lines that deny people their only mass transit in and out, especially if there is no alternative bus service or Amtrak.

Although the majority of the proposed fare increases would be between 3 to 6 percent, a small number of stations could see increases of up to 10 percent.

Metrolink has also proposed a variety of changes in fares, including 10-trip tickets, round trip tickets, senior and student discounts, military tickets, weekend fare discounts and off-peak fares.

Metrolink has already saved tens of millions of dollars by reducing overhead, freezing hiring and through administrative efficiencies, Katz said. He said some layoffs may be necessary too.

"It will probably wind up being some combination of service reductions and fare increases," Katz said. "The level of service reductions will depend on what the appetite is for increasing fares."

So far, hundreds of people have posted comments about the proposed service reductions and fare increases at www.metrolinktrains.com/about/agenda . Najarian said many riders don't care if Metrolink raises its fares as long as it continues its reliable service, but others oppose fare increases and don't mind waiting longer for the next train to come.

"If we increase fares, we are going to end up with less ridership and that's not what we want," Najarian said. "We want to build ridership as best we can. The problem is we have to balance our books the best we can at the end of the day."

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