

Metro considering fare hikes

By Christina Villacorte, Los Angeles Daily News
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Fares on Metropolitan Transportation Authority lines would be hiked substantially over the next eight years to close a multimillion dollar deficit under a proposal discussed Thursday by the agency's board.

The board decided to hold a public hearing on the issue in March.

The board is also considering whether to place a new countywide sales tax measure on the November ballot to hasten construction of transportation projects, but postponed its decision on that Thursday.

The board also voted Thursday to continue studying whether a rail line should reach LAX, and to consider installing gates at the Orange Line to prevent fare evasion.

In his report to the board, Metro Chief Executive Officer Art Leahy called for fare hikes to close a projected \$36.8-million deficit in two years that, left unchecked, would balloon to \$225 million in 10 years.

"Since 1995, the consumer price index has increased by 46 percent while Metro's average fares have only increased by 17 percent," he wrote. "Compared to Metro's peer agencies, Metro has the lowest base fare, fare per boarding, load factor and farebox recovery ratio of major US cities with comparable systems."

"This is an unsustainable structural deficit that must be addressed now," Leahy added. "Adjusting fares will help increase revenues to fund future projects and operational costs."

Under one proposed scenario, base fares would go up from the current \$1.50 to \$1.75 in 2015, \$2 in 2018 and \$2.25 in 2021.

An alternative scenario would push base fares up to \$3.25 during peak hours, and \$2 during off-peak hours, by 2021.

Both options would give riders free transfers during the first 90 minutes of their trip.

Members of the Bus Riders Union adamantly objected to any increases in fares. Its campaign organizer, Eric Romann, warned it would deal a blow to Metro's passengers, most of whom are poor and minorities.

He accused the board of having "a totally heartless and unconscionable contempt for bus riders that's reflected in the attitude of austerity towards buses, and an approach of complete profligacy and wastefulness when it comes to rail construction and highway construction."

"You can go through today's agenda, any agenda, of this board, any month and pick out projects that are equivalent to the amount of money you want to squeeze out of bus riders," he said.

Araceli Barbosa, a community college student, called the proposed hike an "attack on students" who consider public transit their "lifeline" for travel to and from school, home and work.

Metro spokesman Marc Littman, however, explained that fares currently account for only 26 percent of the cost to operate a transit line.

"We can't sustain that," he said, and explained Metro cannot receive all of its promised federal grants unless its farebox recovery ratio goes up to 33 percent.

The board did not discuss the proposal in-depth, but scheduled a public hearing for March 29.

It was not fare hikes, however, that caused tempers to flare Thursday. Members of the board bickered over whether Metro should spend hundreds of thousands of dollars evaluating whether to bring a rail line all the way to LAX, as part of the environmental review phase, or reject that idea outright.

Both Metro and LAX officials said such a plan would be prohibitively expensive at almost \$5 billion, and difficult to construct, given the complications of tunneling under runways and terminals.

They said it would cut only five minutes from the commute, when compared against riding a rail line to a station near LAX and then boarding an automated “people mover” into the airport.

LAX General Manager Gina Marie Lindsey said a rail line would also pose security concerns.

“I think the TSA (Transportation Security Agency) is going to think twice about having completely publicly accessible transportation going underneath critical infrastructure that, on the surface, is highly regulated for access,” she said.

Still, County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas insisted, “It seems to me that we owe it to ourselves and to our respective constituents to minimally study the matter more carefully.”

Supervisor Don Knabe agreed, saying, “As long as we’re trying to build a world-class facility, we should look at all the options available to us.”

But Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky called the proposed rail line to LAX “terribly unrealistic and not rational, from a customer point of view, and woefully unaffordable.”

In the end, however, the board voted unanimously to conduct the rail line study without delaying the environmental review, expected to begin in a few months.

Also Thursday, the board called for developing options to gate or partially gate all Orange Line stations, after fare check operations held on two days in December found 16-22 percent of passengers did not pay fares.

Littman said Metro loses considerable revenue from fare evasion.

“On an annual basis, it’s more than \$1 million, maybe close to \$2 million.”