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EDITORIAL

Raise fares, not a ruckus

The MTA board needs to find the happy medium between too extreme plans.

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DOES ANYONE AT the Metropolitan Transportation Authority or on its board know how to confront a difficult budget decision directly and honestly? Judging from the outlandish choices before the board today as it weighs possible fare hikes, apparently not.

On the one hand is a proposal from MTA chief Roger Snoble that is all brain and no heart. Snoble, asked to crunch the numbers and come up with a way to eliminate the agency's structural deficit, released a plan in March that within two years would raise L.A.'s transit fares by up to 400%, with especially punitive increases for vulnerable populations such as seniors and students. If enacted, it would cause ridership to plummet.

On the other hand is a blueprint from Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa that is all heart and no brain. On Monday, he released a plan to raise most fares 5% annually to keep pace with increases in labor and fuel costs, while cutting rail service and buying buses on credit rather than upfront. It would do little to fix the deficit, which comes to \$104 million for the next fiscal year; relies on state gas-tax money that may not be forthcoming; and, by increasing the debt load, could restrict the agency's ability to expand transit systems in the future.

There are few issues in Los Angeles more politically charged than public-transit fare hikes, which might explain the absurdity of these two plans. Both may be dead on arrival, but for Snoble and Villaraigosa, that doesn't really matter. By proposing such an outrageous increase, Snoble may have been providing political cover for board members to back more reasonable hikes. Villaraigosa, meanwhile, facing heavy pressure from the Bus Riders Union, has now positioned himself as a friend to low-income riders even if the rest of the board does the responsible thing and rejects his proposal.

Amid this posturing, the MTA confronts at least one unpleasant fact: It must raise fares. After settling a civil rights lawsuit by the Bus Riders Union in 1996, the agency agreed to a federal consent decree that forbade it from increasing fares while forcing it to spend \$1.3 billion on buses over the last decade. That improved local bus service, but in order to achieve the gains, the agency has been cannibalizing itself for years. Big transit systems in the U.S. get 38% of their operating revenues from fares, on average, while the MTA went from 32% before the decree to 24% today. If transit riders don't start paying their fair share, the agency will have no choice but to cut bus and rail service, which won't benefit anybody.

There's a happy medium between gouging riders and pandering to them. We're counting on more rational members of the MTA board to find it today.

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