

Fuel costs may send transit fares up

Bus, train routes also could be cut

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Faced with climbing fuel prices and other costs, North County Transit District officials are proposing to raise bus and train fares by 25 cents to make ends meet.

The agency is also considering dropping some bus routes and increasing service on others, eliminating bus shuttles to the Del Mar track from Solana Beach train station and Escondido during the racing season, and wiping out the Friday night Coaster train during the winter.

The transit district board and San Diego Association of Governments Transportation Committee will hold a hearing next week to discuss the changes.

If adopted, the fare increases would take effect July 1, and the changes in bus routes would occur Aug. 13.

The proposed 25-cent increase would affect one-way bus and train fares, day passes and senior/disabled passes. LIFT, an on-call service for disabled customers, would jump 50 cents, from \$3.50 to \$4, and one-way special-event fares would cost a dollar more, \$6 for adults and \$2 for children.

Multiple-trip passes also would increase in price.

The district estimates that the price increases would add \$840,000 for the fiscal year that begins July 1.

Transit district spokesman Tom Kelleher said that rising fuel costs were forcing the district to raise fares and eliminate or curtail service on little-used bus routes in favor of ones that attract more customers.

"In fiscal year 2003, we were spending less than \$3 million a year on fuel," Kelleher said. "In this proposed budget . . . we'll be spending \$6 million. It's doubled."

Robert Joines, who rides the Coaster every day from Carlsbad to Old Town, said he understood the reason for the fare increase. His monthly pass could cost \$10 more. The cost of a monthly pass varies, although the fare from Carlsbad to Old Town is about \$144 per month.

"I don't mind it a bit," said Joines as he stepped off the Coaster in Carlsbad Village yesterday afternoon. "I'm saving close to \$100 (a month) taking the bus and train. If they have to raise (fares) 5 to 10 percent because of the rising cost of fuel, more power to them."

The district's proposed budget for fiscal year 2007, which begins July 1, is \$77.6 million, \$9.3 million higher than the previous year.

Eliminating Friday night Coaster service from October to March is projected to save \$84,400. The transit district board rejected a similar proposal last year.

Although some bus routes are facing the chopping block, others might grow.

Kelleher said the district endeavored to provide service where there was demand, and might cut routes that had fewer than eight riders an hour.

Route reductions would save \$147,000, while the increase in service on other lines would cost \$146,000.

Customer fares cover only about one-fifth the cost of operating a bus, and about three-eighths the cost of operating the Coaster trains. The remainder of the operating costs is covered by state and federal subsidies.

The 316 and 394 routes to Pendleton, which attract about three riders per hour, are slated for elimination and would be absorbed by the 395.

The 419, which serves Carlsbad, also is scheduled for elimination and would be consolidated with the 309.

Routes that may see some reductions in service are the 325 in Oceanside, the 344 in Carlsbad, and the 354 in Escondido. The 349 in Escondido also would be modified. Bus routes where service may increase are the 302 between Oceanside and Escondido, the 303 between Oceanside and Vista, the 332 in Vista and the 350 in Escondido.

The transit district's Web site, www.gonctd.com, lists the route changes.

The public hearing to discuss the proposed rate increases and service changes is scheduled to take place May 18 at 2 p.m. in the transit district's boardroom, 810 Mission Ave., Oceanside.

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