

## Editorial: Trouble ahead on the rails

Staff Reports

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Facing a multimillion-dollar budget shortfall, the agency that runs Metrolink commuter trains is considering ways to cut costs, increase revenue or both.

For passengers in Ventura County and four other Southern California counties served by Metrolink, the changes could raise ticket prices and eliminate some trains.

The Southern California Regional Rail Authority is asking the public to comment on the proposed measures, intended to address a budget gap estimated at \$17 million in the fiscal year that begins July 1.

The bleak situation facing Metrolink's board of directors is hardly unexpected. For months, the board has been taking steps to control costs while weighing other options for dealing with its ongoing financial crunch. The plight of the regional rail agency is blamed partly on higher costs and partly on job losses in the depressed economy. With fewer commuters, revenue is down.

But with signs pointing to the economy bottoming out and beginning what is expected to be a difficult recovery, an essential component of this region's vitality is reliable transportation, including Metrolink. For this reason, it is encouraging to hear Metrolink's leaders say the trains on the chopping block are not the all-important morning and evening commuter lines, but instead are less-used midday and weekend routes — though the elimination of these, too, should be a last resort.

More likely to gain public acceptance are some of the proposed adjustments in ticket prices that reflect the economics of keeping trains operating as a reliable alternative to crowded freeways.

Under the proposed changes, passengers could see an average increase in fares of between 3 percent and 6 percent, though in some instances they could be higher. For example, ending Metrolink's price cap on trips longer than 80 miles (such as the 92 miles from Moorpark to Irvine) could lead to increases of as much as 13 percent.

Difficult as it is to swallow higher prices, it is refreshing that Metrolink has just introduced an easier way for the public to comment on these proposals.

Rather than having to go to the board's public hearing at 10 a.m. April 2 in downtown Los Angeles, a new online tool allows anyone to send comments about any item on any Metrolink board agenda by going to <http://www.metrolinktrains.com/about/agenda> and clicking on the "eComments" link.

We urge members of the public to weigh in on these belt-tightening proposals as well as the need for uninterrupted Metrolink service.



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