

Rail riders oppose fare hike plan

Commuter council wants to see cut in Metro-North debt

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The Journal News

NEW YORK — A group that represents Metro-North Railroad riders yesterday decided to oppose next year's proposed fare hikes until the railroad's parent agency, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, secures from the state and federal government a long-term solution to its skyrocketing debt and deficits.

"I hope our government sees fit to straighten this mess out and find a good source of funding," said Steve Lofthouse, a Congers resident and member of the Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council.

Although the MTA has proposed raising fares on the railroad by up to 12 percent, most increases would fall in the 6.2 to 10.2 percent range, Genevieve Firnhaber, Metro-North's executive vice president for finance and administration, told the council yesterday. The higher fares would be accompanied by less frequent cleaning of Metro-North

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stations, off-peak train and bus service reductions and the closing of 49 full-time and 115 part-time token booths.

The MTA also has proposed reducing discounts for subway and bus riders who buy multifare MetroCards. The cost of a 30-day MetroCard, for example, could rise from \$70 to between \$76 and \$84.

The proposed fare hikes, which could take effect March 1, would come less than two years after the MTA imposed its largest-ever fare increase. In May 2003, the transit agency raised the cost of commuting by train, bus and subway by an average of 25 percent and increased the base bus and subway fare by 50 cents to \$2. Even so, the fare increases proposed for next year would not forestall more fare hikes and steeper service cuts in 2006, 2007 and beyond.

Riders will have a chance to comment on the proposed fare hikes and service cuts at five public hearings next month. One will be held Nov. 10 at 4 p.m. at the Westchester County Center in White Plains.

The mood on the council was grim as Firnhaber spelled out the pain to come. Besides an unspecified fare hike, cost-cutting measures proposed for 2006 include reducing peak train service by 10 percent, which would lead to longer waits for trains with fewer cars, meaning more riders would stand. The MTA also proposes to clean each station every three days, instead of daily, and close 23 ticket offices in New York, leaving agents only at Fordham, Harlem-125th Street, Poughkeepsie, White Plains and New Rochelle, besides Grand Central Terminal. Station buildings also could be shuttered in Hastings-on-Hudson, Ossining, Tuckahoe, Bronxville, Larchmont, Mamaroneck, Harrison and Rye.

"Depending on where the

Proposed hikes

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has proposed the following fare hikes for the Metro-North Railroad in 2005:

- One-way, 10-trips: Up to 13 percent
- Monthly, weekly pass: Up to 12 percent
- On-board ticket purchase: Extra \$5, up \$3
- MetroCard discount: Reduced up to 4 percent

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MTA's financial situation goes, we may have to actually make these cuts," Firnhaber said. "It gets incredibly dire in 2006."

Beverly Dolinsky, executive director of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee, which oversees riders' councils for both transit and rail, said the overriding problem is the MTA's reliance on borrowing to finance capital improvements.

"They have to resolve the core problem of the debt service," she said. "The reason it got so high is you had your funding partners not giving you money for needed repairs. Operating expenses are increasing because capital costs are being shifted to the operating budget through debt repayment. The state should be subsidizing capital expenses."

A spokeswoman for Gov. George Pataki has said he is reviewing the MTA's needs and considering ways to support transit.

According to MTA documents, of the agency's \$8.2 billion budget for 2005, 15 percent goes toward debt repayment. "If there are no concrete sources of funding to take care of the larger problem," said Jim Blair, an Ossining resident and council member, "we would not support this fare increase."

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