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# Rethinking bus fares and routes

## Recommendations open discussion of some transportation system changes

Updated: February 03, 2010, 7:01 am /  
Published: February 03, 2010, 12:30 am

During these difficult financial times, the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority deserves credit for taking a moment to consider ways to simplify life for bus and train commuters.

The NFTA may eliminate transfer fees and its traditional zone surcharges, smoothing the ride for both operator and travelers.

There is cause for relief in the possibility that confusion could end over who should pay \$1.75 for one zone or \$2.05 for two zones on the bus, and when and where each passenger embarked and disembarked.

Changes for the better also may include preserving the current \$1.75 fare but increasing day passes to \$5 from \$4 while reducing the monthly charge from \$77 to \$64 in all zones. The latter move, especially, possibly provides the incentive needed for those pondering whether to continue gassing up the family car or leaving it in the driveway for the daily commute.

In this case, simpler is definitely better.

Creating a seamless system by allowing passengers to board a bus and pay one fare makes it easier for both customer and driver and reduces delays. Considering the recession, a price break for those buying the monthly pass also is consumer-friendly while encouraging more public transit use.

A draft report from the agency's consultant, Transportation Management and Design, outlined such possibilities, including clearing up practices that previously caused frustration among both passengers and operators trying to maneuver across a total of four zones.

Figuring out where you are in relation to which zone you're traveling to, or from, can be a science. As the consultant indicated, the current system is about as complicated as it can get.

The recommendations, which the 11-member NFTA board may act on in June and implement by September, should allow for speedier service. More problematic, especially for low-income city residents trying to reach jobs in the suburbs, is proposed consideration of downgrading some outlying bus routes. That would require a coordinated effort to ameliorate impacts on both workers and the businesses they work for.

For the NFTA, focusing on its core in Buffalo, where 80 percent of Metro passengers board, is critical. On those segments where there are few people, a strategy has to exist to get them to where they want to go and that means working with employers. To the agency's credit, NFTA officials, including Executive Director Lawrence M. Meckler, have talked about working with employers to develop shuttles, van

pools or park-and-rides. Concern that some segments of suburban routes would be eliminated should be eased somewhat by that willingness to work toward a viable solution.

The report also discusses extending the Metro Rail system, considering the increasing airport traffic and the UB 2020 plan's expectations of significant growth in the number of students and faculty moving between campuses. Although such a project wouldn't be undertaken for at least a decade, that possibility should remain open.

In the meantime, the fare simplification system is easy to like and the possible reallocation of resources deserves consideration. Public hearings would have to be undertaken and stakeholders would have to be involved, on those issues and on the possibility of diminishing some outlying suburban routes and adding to the core. But for now, the discussion is well begun.

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