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NFTA weighs simplifying fares to lure passengers

More frequent service urged for some routes

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The NFTA soon may eliminate transfer fees and its traditional zone surcharges as part of a new strategy to increase the number of passengers by making Metro buses and trains easy and simple to ride.

It also will consider concentrating service on the transit system's urban core, strengthening express service to the suburbs and curtailing poorly performing routes — all part of a transportation consultant's recommendations to guide the transit agency a decade and beyond into the future.

The draft, presented Monday by Transportation Management and Design to the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority's board of commissioners, would preserve the current \$1.75 fare but increase day passes to \$5 from \$4. It would reduce the monthly charge from \$77 to \$64 in all zones.

Such changes would eliminate the need for transfer and zone charges that the consultants think make the system difficult to navigate.

"We have to make Metro simpler for the public," said Lawrence M. Meckler, NFTA executive director. "We have to reallocate our resources because of less financial support from the state, and that means reallocation to the city as opposed to the outlying areas."

While increasing the frequency of bus and rail service would cost money, the consultants suggest that such improved service — especially in Buffalo, where 80 percent of Metro passengers board — will attract significant numbers of new riders.

"Just by simplifying the fare structure, this could transform Metro," Meckler said. "If it's easy, it's more likely that people will ride the system."

The report also resurrects, for the first time in many years, the idea of extending the Metro Rail system. While such a step would not be undertaken for at least a decade and a final report is weeks away, Meckler said new federal guidelines could make extension more feasible than when last studied in 2001.

"Now, because of the UB/2020 program and increased traffic to the airport, we hope we can make a better case for rail extension," Meckler said. "We'll wait for a final report, but at the end of the day we think we could be in the game."

Highlights of the plan, which appeared to gain acceptance from NFTA commissioners but has not been adopted, include:

- Increasing bus and rail frequencies to at least 15 minutes — and in some areas to 10 minutes — in heavily traveled areas and during peak times to encourage spontaneous use.
- Providing speedier service through a variety of methods, while enhancing express service with more park-and-ride lots.
- Retaining weekday service and increasing Sunday routes.
- While some suburban routes would be downgraded, other services — such as developing employer shuttles and van pools — would be emphasized for specific destinations.
- Enhancing express routes to make them true "express" services.

Russell Chisholm, president of Transportation Management and Design, told commissioners that while the draft deals with service as far as 12 years in the future, eliminating the zone surcharge and transfer charges would have immediate effects.

"You really have complicated existing fare structures," he said. "By eliminating barriers to travel, you induce additional people to ride."

"As you come out of the city into the outlying areas where the jobs are," he added, "you have a barrier. We're talking about eliminating that barrier."

Chisholm said the authority is in a good position to capture new riders with its new fleet of buses and subway cars undergoing rehabilitation. While additional state aid of about \$7.5 million per year will be needed to pay for the program several years down the road, he said he believes the case can be made even in tough financial times.

"Frankly, we think the return on investment is quite high," he said.

The consultants also say the authority should recognize that some of its routes in suburban and rural areas — where personal vehicles reign supreme — are not working. As a result, Meckler said the NFTA will consider dropping some routes with extremely poor revenues, while curtailing some "segments" of other routes.

"An example might be a route that will not go as far as previously to the outer suburbs," he said.

The consultants now say that like other transit systems, the NFTA should concentrate on its strengths in Buffalo.

"The suburbs are designed for automobiles, and that's a huge challenge for transit to be effective," Chisholm said.

Metro's service in the suburbs, he said, should be more "tailored."

"It should be based out of major transit hubs where you collect people and help them complete their journey cost-effectively, using van programs," he said.

Authority officials say transfers account for only about 3 percent of annual revenues, while day passes represent only about 5 percent. But about 30 percent of monthly revenues stem from monthly passes, with the new plan constituting a "good deal" for many commuters.

Chisholm called his recommendations "fairly aggressive," but necessary for a community dealing with fewer dollars and a substantial population relying on public transportation.

"Part of what we heard early on in the project was a strong need to create a public mobility system for economic development and to position the region more strongly," he said.

Commissioner Howard A. Zemsky, Gov. David A. Paterson's nominee to head the NFTA, said the plan makes good sense because it concentrates on strengths and discourages urban sprawl.

"We're encouraging people to live and work in a denser environment and not in a sprawling environment," he said. "We should stand for something there."

Authority officials expect to hold a number of "stakeholder meetings" before holding public hearings in May. Plans call for the board to act on the plan in June and implement it by September.

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