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# Madison Transportation Board Shelves Cashless Bus Fare Proposal

AUGUST 17, 2021 BY JONAH CHESTER

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Yesterday, the Madison Transportation Policy Board dropped a proposal to eliminate cash fares.

For the foreseeable future, Madison's Metro Transit will continue accepting cash payments for single ride fares — while also implementing a system to accommodate tap cards and smartphone verification in the near future.

Metro Transit General Manager Justin Stuehrenberg says that may be revisited in the future.

"At some point in the future, if cash use drops to something that is extremely small, we may revisit that question," he says. "But for now, we'll move forward assuming that we'll continue collecting cash for all services."

An overhaul to the bus fare system is set to roll out in the next two years.

Included in the approved overhaul is a reduced fare program for certain riders, ticket kiosks at some bus stations and an initiative to allow riders to reload bus passes at local retailers. The proposals are part of a system-wide (<https://madison.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=9712332&GUID=AA36391E-30B9-4B1D-98C9-6A383107BD1F>) fare collection redesign that seeks to complement the city's forthcoming Bus Rapid Transit (<https://www.cityofmadison.com/metro/routes-schedules/bus-rapid-transit>) program (BRT).

BRT will connect the city's east and west sides using high frequency, minimal stop bus lines. The project is tentatively set to launch by the summer of 2024.

The now-defunct measure to transition away from cash fare was in service to BRT's overall goal — speed. Metro Transit authorities hoped that moving to a cashless system would expedite the passenger boarding process.

But, the proposal faced some pushback.

Susan De Vos is the President of Madison Area Bus Advocates. Speaking at a public hearing earlier this month, she expressed concerns that discontinuing cash fare could disenfranchise some riders.

"Slowing the bus was a popular argument against having bike racks on the front of buses or mainstreaming wheelchairs on regular buses — arguments that fortunately did not prevail," De Vos said.

The city has also considered wholesale eliminating bus fares. According to an analysis by Metro Transit (<https://madison.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=9714943&GUID=7DB83C02-3721-40BA-B30C-33E4345B1525>), that route could cost the city anywhere from \$7.5 to \$18.4 million annually.

That estimate does not include additional costs from supporting the Bus Rapid Transit system.

Also at yesterday's meeting, Metro Transit staff briefed board members on predicted cost increases for BRT. The project's anticipated cost now stands at \$166 million — six million more than original estimates predicted.

Stuehrenberg says that the increased price tag is due to the rising cost of materials and labor — a trend that's been playing out across the country. (<https://www.constructionnews.co.uk/supply-chain/labour-costs-break-records-as-vacancies-soar-17-08-2021/>).

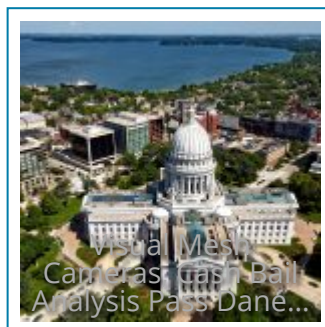
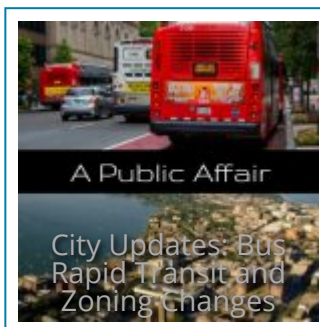
But Stuehrenberg says the city won't have to appropriate more money to cover the increase — as the value of city land holdings and additional funds from the federal government offset the cost.

"We were able to accommodate that without any change into what we're currently planning from a local appropriations perspective," he says.

Madison's Bus Rapid Transit initiative has attracted controversy in recent weeks (<https://www.wortfm.org/madisons-debate-over-bus-rapid-transit-heats-up/>). A three block portion of the route through State Street has drawn the ire of downtown business owners — who argue the buses will disrupt their business.

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