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What is Fair About Raising Bus Fares While Subsidizing Downtown Parking?

Metro is proposing a significant fare hike to make up for cuts the Mayor is telling all agencies to make in their budgets, throwing in some service additions to try to make the hike palatable. We are not persuaded and would rather see fares lowered. We reflect on how the adult and senior/disabled 31-day bus passes are being proposed to increase by more than 43 percent since 2009, 16.4% since the last hike in 2013; on how inflation during those same periods increased 11% and 2.2%. Disability Social Security income did not increase at all in 2016

Although budget cuts result in reduced city services, they are supposed to demonstrate "fiscal responsibility" even as the budget includes giving away millions of dollars of public money to private developers for parking downtown, parking that the private sector balks at financing itself and that undermines the demand for more non-automobile infrastructure. Instead, the City could be requesting development fees. And far from being fiscally responsible, the give away is just one more example of what has been a decades-long disinvestment rather than investment in our central city and its people. For all the talk of cars subsidizing public transit, such actions motivate such questions as: "Who is really paying for that parking?"

Two of the additions Metro proposes to finance from bus fare hikes are the City's share in financing a new storage facility and increased service out to Owl Creek. The latter especially is supposed to demonstrate the City's commitment to transportation equity. But is it equitable that bus riders, rather than the City as a whole be asked to pay for that? And how "equitable" is it for bus riders to pay for extra bus storage capacity when extra bus storage has no relation to real equity concerns such as the relative inferiority of weekend and evening bus service?

Since equity concern is the supposed reason the proposed hikes would leave the cash fare unchanged while increasing some of the other fare types, it may come as some surprise that in 2014 Metro determined five types of fare to be disproportionately used by low income riders or people of color: 1) cash, 2) 31-day pass, 3) 31-day senior/disabled pass; 4) low income pass; and 5) EZ Rider pass. And it developed a policy, approved by the Transit and Parking Commission, that "... these particular fares are not increased by more than 5 percent compared to others." That prompted the following calculations for the proposed changes between early 2009 and September 1, 2016:

Fare Type	% increase from 3/1/2009 – Proposed increase 9/1/16
Adult and Senior/Disabled Cash	33.3
Adult 10-Ride Card	45.8
Youth 10-Ride Card	31.8
Senior 10-Ride Card	33.3
Adult and Senior/Disabled 31-Day Pass	43.6
EZ Rider Pass	20.0
Summer Youth Pass	16.7
Day Tripper	16.7

As the increase in cash fares occurred in only one step whereas the increase in cost of the 31-day passes would occur in three, the overall change is not immediately apparent. But for the entire span, the percentage increases would not only be inequitable among all fare categories, but they would be inequitable among the five special equity-related fare categories as well. And of the five equity-related categories, the proposed percentile raise to both the regular and senior/disabled 31-day passes would be considerably more than to the cash fares. So how much consideration is really being given to the notion of equity when proposing fare increases? The larger question also remains: "Is it more equitable to raise bus fares than to charge the market rate for parking downtown?"

Even leaving the parking issue aside however, there still are ways to finance outstanding costs other than through a fare hike. One way is to tap into Metro's contingency fund, a fund that some are calling quite bloated. The fund is benefitting from having locked in low fuel costs, a benefit that could be passed on to consumers and might actually result in *LOWERING* certain fares.

Some might argue that budgeting \$20 million over five years for affordable housing demonstrates the City's commitment to equity. Yes, housing is an equity concern. But the program depends in part on the availability of more than hourly weekend public transportation, something that is largely nonexistent now. Metro may need more storage space, but financing it through hiking bus fares, including special equity-related bus fares, **CANNOT** be made in the name of equity.