

Save fareless square and elect the TriMet board

BY LEW CHURCH
GUEST COLUMNIST

Portland State University Progressive Student Union and a coalition of activist groups are organizing a direct action (outside) and lobbying (inside) campaign, in November and December, to prevent TriMet from implementing what appears to be a first assault on Fareless Square in downtown Portland (along with ongoing service cuts throughout the system). So far, TriMet is set to start charging for buses in Fareless Square starting in January, 2010.

As treasurer of the newly-formed Transit Riders Union, and organizer for the Progressive Student Union, at a recent TriMet board meeting I handed George Passadore, TriMet board president, 1,400 signatures from riders who oppose the cuts to Fareless Square. The board voted 6-1 to proceed with their plan for more cuts — so far.

First, they tried sit-lie, and they failed. Now, they want to cut and gut Fareless Square. Let's make sure they fail again! Where sit-lie sought to marginalize the poor and homeless, cutting back on Fareless Square negatively impacts the poor, homeless, seniors, disabled — as well as downtown businesses. Moreover, by only having MAX and the streetcar be free, under TriMet's current proposal, while charging for buses in Fareless Square, TriMet is attacking "the commons," or privatizing more and more of what is both public space and a community resource.

Our activist coalition is planning a series of direct action protests in downtown Portland against those who have been pushing to cut Fareless Square. First target is the Portland Business Alliance, located at 200 SW Market (the "Black Box" Building).

We'll meet at 9 a.m. at the foot of the escalators there, outside, on Wednesday, Nov. 18. We hope to see hundreds of protesters there, with chants and more.

TriMet has floated the idea of cutting back Fareless Square for many years, and up to this point, has always retreated. In 2008, unanimous testimony at two public hearings turned back TriMet's plan then to cut back on Fareless Square. What's driving the current service cutback push by TriMet?

The first rationale floated by TriMet, the Oregonian Editorial Board, Portland Business Alliance, and the Milton Friedman-influenced Cascade Policy Institute (an odd coalition, to start with) was the economy. However, TriMet is a \$900,000,000 government agency, and one estimate states that charging for buses in Fareless Square will only raise \$800,000 per year. TriMet's CEO, Fred Hansen, alone, makes \$250,000 per year — plus a part time consulting job in Australia. Cutting back on senior TriMet staff salaries would address this "strawman" argument.

Another rationale for the proposed cuts is to fight crime. This argument goes along the lines that the numbers of drug dealers, homeless, and other alleged "unsavory" types that might be disrupting the pleasant use of transit downtown in the Pearl District

will be cut back simply by starting to charge for buses in downtown Portland. Instead, possibly in violation of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act), this will make it economically more difficult for seniors, the disabled, students, and low-income workers to access transit. Since Oregon has one of the worst unemployment rates in the country, this is the time to preserve and protect our public resource, public transit — not cut and gut it!

One problem transit organizers have encountered this year with the current power structure at TriMet is: the board of directors is unelected, and therefore, unaccountable. The TriMet board is currently appointed by Oregon's governor, thus making the board (so far, with the exception of Teamsters official Lynn Lehrbach, who keeps voting with us to preserve

Fareless Square) impervious and imperial in their decision-making.

For example, George Passadore, the 13-year board president of TriMet, tells transit activists that he doesn't have a business card so he's hard to get ahold of, per se. However, Passadore did confirm to organizers, following a profile of him in the Portland Tribune, that he has seven cars in his "classic car collection" and, according to

the article, keeps them "next to his party room" at his residential villa. Passadore is the former regional board president of Wells Fargo Bank, which made \$6 billion dollars in profits in the first six months of 2009 — in the midst of the worst recession since the 1930s. Passadore and the unelected TriMet board represent private interests and profiteering, not transit riders, the community or the public interest.

Originally, Fareless Square was created to fight air pollution. That is still a worthy goal. Promoting and protecting public transit also fights global warming, for every car that is kept off the streets.

Banning cars in downtown Portland, of course, would go even further toward that particular end. However, keeping Fareless Square as is, and finding alternative funding for what TriMet claims are needed service cuts, is also a way to lessen U.S. dependence on foreign oil and the almost decade-long wars of imperial occupation, from Kabul to Baghdad, in the mid-east.

Probably the most specious argument for cutting Fareless Square, in 2009, has come from John Charles of the Cascade Policy Institute, who argues that "nothing should be free," ipso facto. Well, then we should charge parents for having their kids attend public schools. Like education, however, we believe that public transit is a right. To keep Portland green, Fareless Square is central to our community, both as a symbol and substantively. It is time to save Fareless Square, and to have the TriMet board elected.

Take our transit back!

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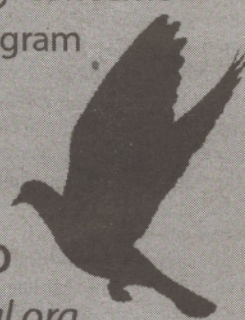


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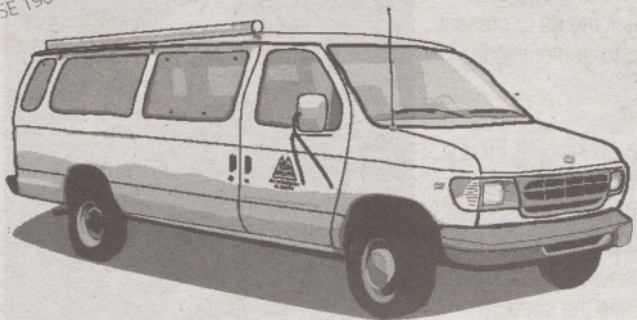
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