

Trying to cut a fare deal with Trimet

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
STAFF WRITER

The environmental justice organization OPAL (Organizing People, Activating Leaders) began a campaign on Feb. 21 to get Trimet to extend the transfer times of bus tickets by one hour.

Currently, people using Trimet buy one ticket for \$2.05. That ticket has (or is supposed to have) a transfer time of two hours.

OPAL's executive director, the Rev. Joseph Santos-Lyons, says it's a matter of making sure that low-income people who depend upon public transportation to meet their daily, basic needs. "What we're hearing is that people can't do that," Santos-Lyons says.

Many of the people OPAL is organizing and working with are low-income and live in the suburbs or outer Portland. Dependent upon using public transportation to meet daily, basic needs are unable to do so with one ticket and end up paying another \$2.05 for an additional ticket — even if all that was needed was an additional half hour on their first ticket.

The OPAL campaign is collecting 3,500 signatures in support of longer transfer times to be delivered to Trimet by May. They intend to draft a model policy for Trimet, and are asking for a formal policy change recommendation by June.

OPAL is partnering with the day-laborer advocacy VOZ, Portland Jobs with Justice, Portland Youth and Elders Council, the Urban League of Portland, and half a dozen other organizations on the campaign, which held a kick off event at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Southeast Portland on February 21 that drew over 70 people.

OPAL has already begun a dialogue with Trimet authorities on

how this could happen. The campaign is also asking TriMet to give evening riders unlimited transfer time after 7 p.m. And, he says, any conversation about the fare structure system should include eliminating the fares altogether.

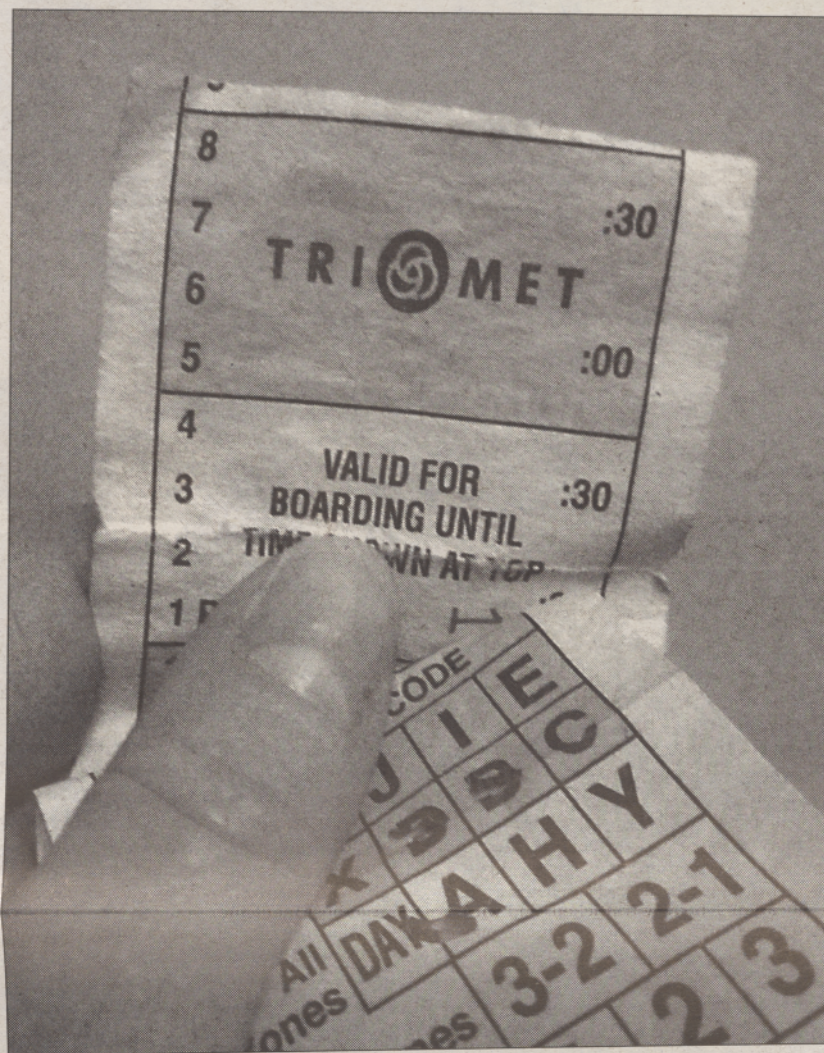
Trimet has raised its fares every year since 1982. But in the past decade, the fares have increased by 70 percent. Last September, it eliminated two bus lines and significantly reduced the times 10 bus lines ran.

Santos-Lyons lauds the work being done to increase ridership, especially with the MAX Green Line and the Orange Line to Milwaukie.

"(But) part of our question is, increased ridership for who?" Santos-Lyons says.

Amanda Waldroupe: The campaign thinks that the two-hour transfer is insufficient and inadequate to meet basic needs of workers and families who depend on transit. Why is that?

Joseph Santos-Lyons: The transfer on the bus isn't even always two hours. Two hours is not sufficient to be able to complete a reasonable trip that may include a quick round trip, like picking up groceries or dropping kids off at day care. Or say you pick up the bus just a few minutes from downtown to go out to Hillsboro. Your transfer may expire on your trip out to Hillsboro, and you have to buy another ticket, especially if you have to transfer again to another bus. Folks who use the bus to get to their basic needs like school, to work, medical appointments and so on, deserve to have a fare transfer. A fare transfer is not only a way to support the



lowest income bus riders who are transit dependent, we think it will also reduce the anxiety and the stress of using the system.

A.W.: What do you mean when you say that the public transportation system causes stress and anxiety to some people?

J.S.L.: The folks who have no access to any other transportation other than public transportation are dependent on the public transit system. As it becomes more expensive, it becomes less accessible. And as it reduces its services, its services become less reliable. Sometimes, a bus is overcrowded and passes them by, or there are missed connections, but when the next bus comes, the transfer time may have expired. People struggle to get to work because they can't afford to use a car, so they use Trimet. Sometimes, it's not reliable. They have to plan their day and that takes extra time. They plan to run an hour early to work so they can be sure to be on time, because their bus might be late. That creates a tension for that constituency in terms of the stress of not being able to afford a bus ticket. It's slowly squeezing and impacting these folks.

A.W.: What population of people in the Portland metropolitan area are most impacted by the cuts?

J.S.L.: Folks who live in east Portland from Cesar Chavez Blvd. (formerly SE 39th Ave.) out to the Multnomah County line. The mother who wants to drop off her children at school and wants to get home on one transfer; A senior citizen who wants to go to Rite Aid to get some medicine and then get back home. It's a worker heading home from their job and they want to stop to get some groceries on their way home. Those are the stories we're hearing. It's

really the folks who are the poorest, who are most vulnerable, folks of color, and folks with disabilities or who are too young or too old to drive.

A.W.: How will extending the transfer time by one hour in the daytime help?

J.S.L.: People will be able to take a short, reasonable round trip. Like, I want to go to the supermarket and I want to go back home. I want to go to a friend's and have dinner and head back home. Being able to do that on one transfer is reasonable and beneficial. People who we refer to as "choice riders," folks who don't need to use the transit system, because they might walk normally or bicycle, might choose to take the bus because of the flexibility and a lack of a financial barrier to use the system. The fare is a barrier for folks.

A.W.: What other transit systems did you look at?

J.S.L.: We looked at New York. You can ride until your done. We also looked at Seattle, LA, and Sacramento. One of our long term goals is to see the fares come down and the system to become more affordable in general. Areas in California are looking at a free bus system, such as Sacramento. And Wilsonville has gone free.

A.W.: Why do you think extending the transfer will increase Trimet's revenue? Why won't it lose money?

J.S.L.: We're working with Trimet to do a fiscal impact statement for this policy proposal. We don't think Trimet will lose much of any money at all. This will have a small fiscal impact, if any, because of offsetting increased ridership. Passenger fares generate less than 25 percent of Trimet's



Joseph Santos-Lyons

overall operating budget. The rest of their passenger revenue comes from bus passes or governmental or corporate bus pass programs. This is a small slice of people who use single-fare tickets. The economy is pushing people to use public transportation. The gas price increases are also driving people to use public transportation. And folks who may not normally take the bus or take the trips they may not normally take, particularly during off peak hours, will use the bus more if they know they have a longer transfer.

A.W.: Portland's City Council passed an ordinance last year making bus fares free for students in Portland Public Schools. Are there similar actions you think the Portland City Council should take?

J.S.L.: We'd love the council to look at ways to equally invest in the east Portland school districts. There is some concern that the dollars are really only flowing to Portland Public Schools. If dollars are being spent here in Portland, they need to be spread equitably among all the school districts, including David Douglas, Park Rose and Centennial. The Multnomah County Youth Commission has shown a lot of leadership around public transportation issues, and there is, I think, an ongoing need to educate the County Commissioners and Chair Cogen about the role they could take to advocate for the most vulnerable residents of Multnomah County when it comes to public transportation issues. There is more to be done.

A.W.: How does public transportation tie into livability and environmental justice?

J.S.L.: Public transportation is sort of invisible in our lives. Beside housing, transport is the second largest expense for most families. It is a system that we interact with every day. From a workforce perspective, public transportation jobs are green jobs. The service drives down vehicles, carbon emissions, and our impact on climate change. There is a significant environmental impact on air quality, toxins, asthma rates, particularly along the major thoroughfares where folks are clustered. It increases economic opportunity for all classes of folks. If you have a reliable public transit system, folks have an affordable and accessible way to get to work. They can put money in the economy in other ways.

A.W.: Why do you think a public transportation system should be free? We pay for other public services like roads, bridges, schools, etc.

J.S.L.: To see transit fares rise 70 percent in a decade, we think is wrong. That is taking public transportation in the wrong direction and making it more inaccessible. Given the values of our region, thinking about a free transit system is the right kind of conversation to be having.