

'World class transportation system' needs a fair transfer

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BY NATE GULLEY
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We hear it so often these days that we don't even stop and think about it: Portland is the most sustainable city in America, and the hallmark of our green city is our world-class transportation system, with modern MAX trains, shiny streetcars and lots of eco-friendly bicycles. But a closer look at the numbers reveals a different reality.

TriMet — the agency in charge of our regional public transit system — has reduced service to the lowest levels per capita since 1975, when it was just getting off the ground. A quick look at our transit infrastructure shows that much has changed since 1975, but when you consider our population growth, it is clear that transit service investments have not kept pace.

By cutting service while spending revenue to develop capital projects, TriMet negatively impacts those who rely on the system the most and can least afford alternative options: transit-dependent bus riders who are disproportionately low-income families, people of color, the elderly, youth and people with disabilities. And the bus remains the backbone of our system — two-thirds of all daily boardings occur on the bus, yet more and more bus riders are relying in single transfers, as monthly passes have simply become too costly.

But it doesn't have to be this way. For the past eight months, OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon and our Bus Riders Unite! leadership have developed a common sense, community-generated response aimed at restoring value to our system in the face of service cuts and continued fare increases — the Campaign for a Fair Transfer. The campaign has two goals: to extend transfer

times to 3 hours on the bus and MAX for all daily boardings and to extend transfers through the end of evening service for all boardings after 7 p.m.. This policy change is as simple as ABC:

A) It allows people to meet their basic needs on the bus. Under the current transfer policy, most riders cannot do simple errands like a trip to the grocery store or a medical appointment without paying twice.

B) It is a win-win for TriMet and the community. If the new transfer policy is adopted, it will increase farebox revenue in the short-term and the long-term.

C) There are tangible public health benefits that result in cost-savings for all taxpayers, from decreased carbon emissions to reduced levels of physical and mental stress that riders experience when they miss connections and can't meet their everyday needs. OPAL's proposed transfer policy is good for our economy, our environment and all of our residents.

A no-brainer, right? Well, here is the catch: TriMet has no accountability. Despite the fact that OPAL has spent months in good-faith negotiations, both formal and informal, on transit justice and health equity issues, with over 6,000 transit riders supporting the Campaign for a Fair Transfer and 30-plus community organizations endorsing, getting just 30 minutes at the upcoming Board of Directors meeting on Sept 28 to discuss our policy proposal has been a struggle. The TriMet Board, an appointed body, seems genuinely baffled by the concept of working with the community to address community needs, instead taking direction from TriMet General Manager Neil McFarlane and staff, who fully control regional transit decision-making. How can an agency as important and recognizable as

TriMet be so thoroughly out of touch with (and unaccountable to) the needs of the people it serves?

In a recent Portland Mercury article ('Sizing up the Streetcar' by Alex Zielinski), Portland State University professor and economist Eric Fruits had this to say about our transportation priorities: "Looking at the bigger picture, streetcars are expensive art.

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The streetcar cannibalized the bus system."

Where is the sustainability in that? Transit-dependent communities, who contribute the least to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, continue to bear the greatest burdens of our collective transportation policies that move opportunities for positive health outcomes farther out of reach. Where is the sustainability in that? If we're going to call ourselves a sustainable city, we need to focus on common sense, community-generated, win-win solutions. If TriMet wants to truly earn its moniker as a "world-class transportation system," it should adopt the Campaign for a Fair Transfer.

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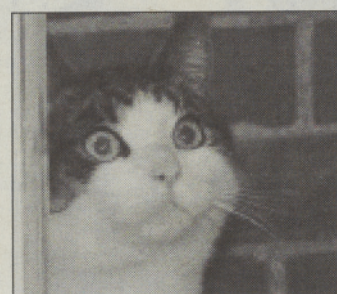
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