



TriMet policies shifts burden to low income, nonprofits

Before I start this column, I would like to say that I'm a huge fan of public transit. I haven't owned or driven a car since I was 21. I'm now almost 40. Without public transportation, my experience in Portland and in many other cities would have been dull and bland. Saying that, there are some unsettling trends developing in Portland.

TriMet is proposing raising the fares for Honored Citizen passes from \$1 to \$1.25.

Honored Citizens are anyone 65 or older, people on Medicaid along with people experiencing mental or physical disabilities.

The agency hasn't increased Honored Citizen fares since 2010, and told Street Roots, "It's never easy to raise fares, but fares play a role in helping to pay for the cost of service. The Honored Citizen fares remain deeply discounted. At the

same time, we're expanding our mitigation efforts to minimize the impact to low-income riders."

Fair enough, right? Everyone needs to pay to support a world-class transportation system.

That is until you understand that the overall additional revenue that's going to be raised with the fare increases is a mere \$650,000 annually.

That's not to say \$650,000 isn't a lot of money. I'm just not sure it justifies increasing fares to our region's elderly population and people with disabilities – 63 percent of whom are experiencing poverty.

TriMet's budget is \$504.8 million. There are a lot of ways to think about trying to capture \$650,000 without having to raise fares on senior citizens, the disabled and the poor.

For decades, Portlanders enjoyed traveling on public transportation free of charge in Portland's downtown core. It was revolutionary – until it wasn't. In 2012, TriMet decided to no longer offer Fareless Square, one of our city's prized treasures, due to budget shortfalls. Things haven't been the same since, especially for people experiencing poverty and the disabled in the downtown core.

In fact, I believe that by taking away Fareless Square we have sparked an increase in law enforcement on TriMet resulting in exclusions that ultimately have ended up costing our system an enormous amount of money. There's no question it's a windfall for law enforcement, but at the end of the day, let's not kid ourselves, it's taxpayers and the poor who are ultimately paying the price.

Street Roots' recent coverage (TriMet Exclusions: One wrong step, Emily Green, March 10,) revealed that many people are charged with "interfering with public transit,"

or IPT after being caught on TriMet after being excluded. The charge is a Class A misdemeanor, which carries the same weight as a drunken driving or misdemeanor assault charge. The definition of IPT allows transit officers to issue this serious criminal charge in circumstances that – were they to take place anywhere other than on transit property – usually would result in a ticket or Class C misdemeanor. Class A misdemeanors are punishable by up to one year in prison. A Class C misdemeanor is punishable by up to 30 days in jail. That's no joke.

One public defender told Street Roots that these charges make up to 25 percent of their caseload right now. That's ridiculous.

"TriMet doesn't have to pay for the jail, the public defender, the court systems cost or anything like that," Chris O'Connor, a public defender, told Street Roots. "I think the rest of the taxpayers in the rest of Oregon do not realize the cost in money, court time, jail time and other expenses that the current statute allows."

We can't think about issues of displacement and equity, access to jobs and services, child care and socialization, education and housing, to name a few, without thinking about how TriMet is regulating and charging people for services offered on public transportation.

When Fareless Square ended in 2012, TriMet created the Fare Assistance Program and the Fare Relief Program. One program offers discounted tickets to nonprofits, while the other offers grants of up to \$25,000 in the form of fares to support poor and disabled folks.

While these programs are great, in many ways they create more bureaucracy and paperwork for already underfunded nonprofits, while pushing the burden of transportation accessibility onto the nonprofit sector as a whole.

Now, with the proposal to increase Honored Citizen fares TriMet is saying it will boost its support of these programs by 5 to 20 percent. Again, a noble effort, but TriMet assumes that the nonprofit sector can help alleviate the needs of people needing to access public transportation. It can't even come close.

In my humble opinion, TriMet and local and state government, non-profits, the business sector and the general public need to be working more closely when thinking about its equity outcomes that affect our entire region – especially when you think about a new digital system that will be unveiled in the near future.

We need to create a more humane and cost-effective way to deal with exclusions on TriMet. Nobody should ever go to jail for trying to ride public transportation. It's ridiculous. And finally, the TriMet that I love shouldn't raise fares for our most vulnerable Honored Citizens.



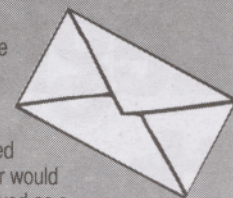
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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