

A fare for 'dishonored' citizens

The first step to holding TriMet accountable is halting its effort to raise fares for seniors, disabled

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TriMet, yet again, is proposing a fare hike. This time, it is a "special" fare hike targeted toward a specific rider segment: seniors and disabled folks only. Kind of a "Dis-Honored Citizen" fare hike.

Transit Riders Union, along with our growing coalition against the fare hike (which includes Portland Jobs with Justice, Human Solutions and PSU Progressive Student Union), is organizing to stop it. The unelected TriMet board of directors is set to vote on the fare hike at its next meeting, at 9 a.m. May 27 in Meeting Room B on the second floor of the Portland Building, 1120 SW Fifth Ave., in downtown Portland.

We have a petition against this ill-advised and unacceptable fare hike. The petition also urges TriMet to lower its so-called Honored Citizen age requirement from 65 to 60. Jason Coulthurst, information and referral specialist with Northwest Pilot Project, has signed the petition and says Pilot Project's age criterion for senior housing services is 55. Many Northwest nonprofits use 60 as their age criterion. Social Security, at the federal level, uses 62. At 65, TriMet's age criterion is dead last.

Why is this proposed fare hike unacceptable? For one thing, TriMet doesn't need the money. TriMet says the fare hike against seniors and disabled folks will generate roughly \$600,000. That's a fraction of its \$500 million operating budget (closer to \$1 billion, if you count capital projects like light rail).

TriMet just spent \$80 million on 20-odd new MAX trains. What if our transit agency acquired just 19 new MAX trains, saving \$4 million, and nixed the proposed \$600,000 fare hike? TriMet would then still have \$3.4 million left over for senior management bonuses, hiring more transit cops, etc.

TriMet's arbitrary and anti-transit-rider practices have long been a problem at

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TriMet is proposing raising the fares for Honored Citizen passes from \$1 to \$1.25. Honored Citizen is how TriMet identifies riders who are 65 or older, are on Medicare, or have mental or physical disabilities.

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this regional government agency. Transit Riders Union has always been a supporter and promoter of public transit — and fewer cars — in our region.

As the elected treasurer of Transit Riders Union, I personally handed the unelected TriMet board of directors 1,400 petition signatures against gutting Fareless Square. The TriMet board voted 6 to 1 to gut Fareless Square. With the exception of Lynn Lehrbach (with the Teamsters), TriMet chose to ignore the wishes of their own riders.

According to a 2015 report by KGW TV8, TriMet recently came in \$20 million under budget when building the new MAX Orange line to Milwaukie. TriMet is spending \$30 million on its new e-fare system.

Will the wheels fall off the No. 14 bus if TriMet doesn't get its \$600,000 fare hike from seniors and disabled riders? No, they won't fall off. Will TriMet default on its electric bill to Portland General Electric, and will the MAX trains sit, deserted, at a standstill because TriMet failed to get its \$600,000 senior/disabled fare hike approved? No.

Likewise, TriMet will still have funds to gas up the No. 14 bus, along with other buses in the tri-county transit system.

What about adequate pay for senior TriMet staff members? Will senior managers flock to other states for higher pay if TriMet is denied its \$600,000 fare hike on seniors and disabled riders? No, TriMet managers are

more than adequately paid already. The Oregonian's transportation reporter, Joseph Rose, recently wrote a series of articles about exorbitant pay allocated to the senior management team at TriMet. Neil McFarlane, TriMet's general manager, makes \$200,000.

Of course, the real problem at TriMet is that it has failed, for many years, either to represent the community or to take actions in the interests of transit riders. TriMet has largely been focused on the Pearl, on light rail construction, and in continuing to preserve the anti-democratic, old boys network that has governed this transit agency in perpetuity. That needs to change, and change now. Stopping the proposed Honored Citizen fare hike is a first step to taking our transit back.

Lawsuits, boycotts, pickets and elections are viable tactics for transit accountability and democracy.

In addition to fighting the TriMet fare hike proposal, transit activists are considering conducting more pickets and demonstrations, boycotts and lawsuits and putting a ballot measure (much like the 15 Now campaign in Oregon to raise the minimum wage) on the 2016 ballot to require that the TriMet board of directors be elected by the people, not appointed by Oregon's governor. Right now, TriMet's practices amount to "taxation without representation."

Barbara Ehrenreich rightly used the term "nickel and dimed" in a book title when she

described the problems faced by low-income workers and seniors, poor folks and disabled folks, who are simply trying to make ends meet. Here in the Northwest, these are the folks who are not in the current "economic recovery," who struggle to put food on the table, and who have to choose between a bus ride to the doctor and dealing with exorbitant rent hikes in "gentrified" Portland. Is Portland the city that works for the people or the city that works for the well-heeled/affluent only?

Lawsuits are certainly one avenue to fight transit agency intransigence. In both Minneapolis and Los Angeles, transit activists successfully sued and got court injunctions to stop light rail construction of new lines that did not serve working-class folks and communities of color — that is, people who use the bus and need better, affordable transit.

The fundamental problem with TriMet is that the board is appointed by Oregon's governor, not elected by the people. Transit Riders Union is now drafting a bill that would allow voters, finally, to vote for the TriMet board in popular elections. We believe this will provide for accountability, transparency — and democracy!

Transit Riders Union meets at 4 p.m. Saturdays at PSU's Chit Chat Café on the Green MAX, 1907 SW Sixth Ave. Wheelchair access is via the Hot Lips Pizza entrance.

It is time to change TriMet, for social justice, for "the Commons," now.



Dignity



Poverty