

Low-income fare equality a must for Portland's public transit

BY ORLANDO LOPEZ
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

A new report released Wednesday details how TriMet can reduce fares for low-income transit riders without cutting service, raising fares or slashing employee wages and benefits. It includes analysis of similar programs across the country, estimates of costs for the program and potential methods of funding.

The report is the work of Bus Riders Unite (BRU), Portland's transit riders' union. BRU exists to lift up the voices of transit-dependent people who decision-makers often overlook. BRU is a project of OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon, a nonprofit that builds community power through grassroots organizing.

For years, BRU members have been winning victories for transit justice. Through organizing low-income people and people of color who depend on TriMet, BRU won changes in TriMet public

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testimony procedures (2011), secured bus stop safety improvements (2013), filed a successful complaint with the Federal Transportation Administration to prevent TriMet service cuts (2014), preserved the YouthPass program year after year (2013-2016) and extended transfer times to 2.5 hours without a fare increase (2015).

Since forming in 2011, BRU members have been talking about how inaccessible TriMet is for low-income people. Riders' stories are included in the new report, to demonstrate the high cost of transit:

"Diana" doesn't have access to a vehicle, so transit is a lifeline. She uses transit to go to doctor's appointments, schools, shopping and everything in between. Recently she collected cans in order to afford a monthly bus pass.

"Jake" makes \$20,000 a year, owns a car, and although the related expenses consume almost a third of his paycheck, the



PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

convenience of the car makes him reluctant to give it up in favor of a \$100 monthly bus pass. He says that if the price were reduced, the low cost would win over convenience and he would stop driving to work.

In March 2016, BRU members launched a campaign aimed at transit affordability, and began studying how a fare reduction would work. In May, TriMet responded to BRU organizing by agreeing to officially study the issue. BRU's report, Low Income Fare Equity (LIFE), details exactly how a low-income fare works in other cities, and how it should work here (see sidebar). On Wednesday, Bus Riders Unite rallied outside the TriMet building to demonstrate the urgent need and present the report to decision-makers.

Here are the facts: transportation is a critical lifeline, the second-largest household

expense for everyone, and even more expensive for people with low incomes. People who depend on TriMet are being priced out of the service area by rising housing costs, stagnant wages, and record-high eviction rates. We must keep our region economically diverse and inclusive, or we risk making gentrification worse.

Mass transit has always been a battleground for civil rights, from Rosa Parks to Plessy vs. Ferguson. OPAL and Bus Riders Unite recognize transportation as a human right, and are fighting to ensure low-income people and people of color can afford access to this system. We depend on transit to get us to the places where we live, work, learn, pray and play.

As detailed in the report, TriMet has the money, and the authority, to bring such a program to our region. Low Income Fare

Key points of the Bus Riders Unite Low-Income Fare Equity (LIFE) Proposal

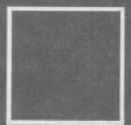
- TriMet should roll out a reduced-price fare as part of the new electronic fare system.
- The fare should be available to anyone who earns below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (currently \$23,760 for individuals, \$48,600 for a family of four). This is the same standard used in Seattle and San Francisco.
- TriMet should expand the definition of "Honored Citizen" to include eligible individuals, with a price equal to the Honored Citizen cost of \$28 / month.
- Eligibility should be determined using W-2s, tax returns, pay stubs, or having an Oregon Trail card. Social services agencies and community organizations in Seattle enroll clients in a reduced fare program using the same criteria provided for other programs.
- The fare reduction should remain valid for two years from the rider's date of enrollment.
- The reduced fare should supplement, not replace, the existing subsidized tickets available at some Portland-area social services agencies.

Equity – LIFE – is within reach.

TriMet's Board of Directors must act quickly and decisively to make the system accessible to low-income people. Increased, equitable transit access is good for the economy, improves educational attainment and public health outcomes, reduces traffic and air pollution, and will help Portland live up to its progressive, sustainable image. The alternative is declining ridership, worsening gentrification, and a transit system that doesn't serve those who need it most. Bus Riders Unite invites the community to the Sept. 28 TriMet Board Meeting as we present the report.



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