

Behind those fare hikes

First, the bad news: In three months, bus and rail fares in New Jersey are going up 50 percent. Now, the worse news: In a year, those fares could very well double. Finally, the worst news: "If current trends continue," warns state Transportation Commissioner Louis Gambaccini, "fare increases of this magnitude could become an annual event."

And that's not all. Along with the fare increases come reductions in service — elimination of one rush-hour train every hour on every major rail line in New Jersey, a shutdown of ticket windows at selected railroad stations throughout the state, an end to the telephone information service for commuters, cutbacks in off-peak bus schedules. For New Jersey's 326,000 daily bus and rail-commuters, the outlook is bleak ... and getting bleaker.

Come June 27, when the 50 percent fare hike is scheduled to take effect, we won't be at all surprised if there are a lot of empty seats where those commuters used to be. Neither will NJ Transit, the agency that operates virtually all of the state's bus and rail lines. It is expecting a 12 percent drop in bus ridership and a 15 percent drop in rail ridership — with an attendant \$20-million drop in revenues — as a result of the fare increase.

So why is NJ Transit raising fares? Because if it doesn't, it's going to lose \$80 million next year. Even with the proposed reductions in service, the agency expects to spend \$416 million in 1981-82. The state will continue to kick in \$88 million, the same as this year, but the federal government will contribute only \$53 million — \$11 million less than it's contributing now.

That leaves \$275 million to be collected out of the fare box. At current fares, however, the box is expected to yield no more than \$195 million. The only way NJ Transit can make up the \$80-million difference (and offset the \$20 million it expects to lose when ridership drops) is to raise its fares — by 50 percent this June, and another 20 to 40 percent next January.

Even then, New Jersey's mass-transit problems will be far from solved. The Reagan administration is proposing deep cuts in federal mass-transit subsidies, and the outright elimination of other transportation programs. The Northeast Corridor Improvement Project, a major federal effort to upgrade the rail bed and improve service between Boston and Washington, is in deep trouble. Amtrak's budget has been slashed to the

point where it will no longer subsidize the Newark-Trenton line. A new distribution formula being used by the Urban Mass Transportation Administration will cost New Jersey between \$4 million and \$6 million a year in federal transportation aid.

Meanwhile, back in the state, the governor and the legislature plan to freeze mass-transit subsidies at \$88 million — the same level as last year, and \$38 million less than NJ Transit says it needs. Taking inflation into account, this means a 10 percent reduction in state mass-transit assistance. And coupled with the loss in federal aid, it puts NJ Transit between a rock and a hard place. If it raises fares, it loses riders; if it doesn't raise fares, it loses money. Either way, it loses its battle to provide an easy, convenient, and inexpensive alternative to the automobile.

This is, after all, what mass transit is all about. In a densely populated state like New Jersey, buses and trains aren't luxuries; they're necessities. They give poor people who can't afford a car a way of getting to work. They give students a chance to go to college. They give commuters a means of getting into New York or Philadelphia without having to battle rush-hour traffic. They save energy, time, and money — promoting a whole host of public policies in the process.

It is manifestly unfair to place our mass-transit burdens entirely on the shoulders of those who ride our buses and trains. Yet that's exactly what we're doing. Slowly but surely, we are taking public money away from mass transit and forcing riders to pick up the tab. Riders are already paying 55 percent of New Jersey's mass-transit costs — well above the national average. Once the 50 percent fare hike takes effect, they'll be paying closer to 67 percent — the highest rate in the country.

NJ Transit will hold 15 public hearings next month to solicit comment on its proposed fare-increase and service-reduction plans. Our fear is that most of these hearings will turn into confrontations between citizens fed up with the high cost of commuting and transit officials powerless to do very much about it. Our hope is that these citizens and officials will instead join forces and turn their attention to Trenton and Washington, where shortsighted policies and tightfisted policy-makers have made a shambles of the mass-transit system.

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