

### **Free Rides Could Become More Costly with PAT Fare Changes**

At its April meeting, the Port Authority (PAT) board of directors voted to overhaul the fare policy for the mass transit system, effective January 1, 2017. Zone pricing will be gone and in its place will be a single flat fare. Riders will pay when they enter a vehicle, inbound or outbound, and paper transfers will no longer be in use. Other changes include a new all-day pass with unlimited usage for a day and riders using PAT's ConnectCard will pay less per trip than cash (akin to the Turnpike's EZ pass). After July 1, 2017, cash will not be accepted on light rail vehicles.

These changes are detailed on PAT's website, most notably in a document with "frequently asked questions" (FAQ document). The estimated price tag for the implementation of the fare change and the associated systemic changes (personnel, marketing, software, etc.) is \$7.5 million according to a May 30<sup>th</sup> news article.

Though PAT is doing away with "zone 1" (City of Pittsburgh and inner ring suburbs) and "zone 2" (remainder of Allegheny County) it is the existence of the "free fare zone" that will create most of the new collection and monitoring issues with the imposition of the new fare policy and the pay on enter system. Then there is this odd dichotomy: free Downtown rides on buses will be eliminated, but free rides will still be available on the light rail system between North Shore stations and Downtown stations.

PAT's website says the free fare zone "...was established to promote the use of transit within Downtown Pittsburgh, encourage intermodal transfer and reduce boarding delays". The 2015 single audit for PAT estimates that 2.9 million (4.4%) of the 65.2 million total rides on PAT vehicles that fiscal year were free rides. For the oldest audit year available on PAT's website, 2006, 1.8 million free rides were provided (2.6% of the 69.9 million rides), a far lower number and percentage of total than in 2015. No doubt much of the rise is attributable to the free North Shore Connector trips.

As noted above, free bus ridership, which is currently permitted in the Golden Triangle until 7 PM, will end this December 31<sup>st</sup>. The FAQ document states that the free bus rides must be eliminated "...in order to instate pay-on-enter. There's no other reliable way to make sure people who get on Downtown don't stay after the bus has left the free fare zone". Some additional wait time at boarding locations is anticipated due to the pay on enter change.

Free light rail rides, which cover trips between six stations will not be affected by the fare policy change. Free rides to the North Shore stations from a Downtown stop and free rides from the North Shore to Downtown stops are provided under sponsorship agreements in which two organizations pay (\$1.2 million over a five year period) to cover at least some of the additional

cost of extending service to the North Shore stations (see *Policy Briefs Volume 12, Number 10 and Volume 15, Number 15*). PAT has never provided to the public an estimate of the additional costs of extending light rail service through the Connector to the North Shore. There are several costs to take into account. Operator time and compensation, power consumption, maintenance of guideways, stations, along with wear and tear on vehicles traveling additional miles each trip, etc. It would be interesting to know whether the \$200,000 per year is even close to the added costs of operations. After all, taxpayers put up over a half a billion dollars to build the Connector. Offering further subsidies to passengers over and above the enormous amount per rider already represented by the half billion in construction outlays seems absurd on its face.

Unless PAT decides to suspend (or buy out) the sponsorship agreements the free rides will continue until at least 2020 when the current agreements expire. Sponsorships have never been used to cover free rides between stops in the Golden Triangle nor are they expected to be in the future; nonetheless rides within the Golden Triangle will remain free under the new policy.

Thus, someone boarding on the North Shore or in Downtown heading outbound on the light rail might be paying or might not. The FAQ document says that “all riders will pay as they get (on) light rail IF they are travelling farther than the free fare zone. For example, if you get on at Gateway Station and you’re going to the South Hills, you would tap your ConnectCard before you get on. If you get on at Gateway Station and know you’re only going to First Avenue (which is still in the free fare zone), you wouldn’t tap at all”.

How will they make sure that someone who really is going beyond the free fare zone has paid? The FAQ document says that “...Port Authority police officers may require riders in certain areas of the stations to show them their ConnectCard or ConnectTix to make sure they have paid their fare” and “Port Authority employees will have handheld validators and will go around in areas OUTSIDE the free fare zone to make sure everyone on board and in ‘paid zones’ (generally on platforms) has paid their fare”. But asking people at the free ride station to show their ConnectCard cannot deal with people who can claim they are merely taking a free ride—unless they are at the last stop before crossing the Mon. The only hope of catching free riders who abuse the system is to ask for proof of payment on the cars or while disembarking.

Whether the free ride zones will cause problems as some passengers come up with schemes to game the system and avoid tapping a ConnectCard remains to be seen but knowing the ingenuity shown by some folks it no doubt will happen. Or what happens if someone forgets to pay at a station in the free fare zone and then exits outside the zone: can they offer to pay at the location where they exit, and does the driver/station attendant have to accept the payment? According to PAT staff, that person may be given a citation.

Then too, how will passengers react if, after being able to disembark quickly from a vehicle, they are then forced to wait in a line on a platform to have their payments validated before completing their trips? Is the expectation that PAT personnel will have to validate everyone?

Another key point: since weekly and monthly passes offer unlimited rides they will be phased out in 2017 in favor of ConnectCards.

Based on the latest data submitted by PAT to the National Transit Database (NTD), the ratio of light rail trips to bus rides on the system is one to seven, so perhaps enforcement of riding past the free fare zone might be less of a hassle on the light rail system than it would be on buses, but that is yet to be seen. Both time spent by PAT personnel conducting random searches for payment

verification and cost to pay for that additional enforcement will come into play, thus increasing the \$7.5 million cost estimate.

Here's the real question. Why not eliminate all free rides Downtown on the light rail as will happen with the buses? It is not logical to do one and not the other. That would eliminate the necessity of checking for riders abusing the free ride privilege and save a lot of money and headaches.

As far as the North Shore is concerned the parking lot operators can use the sponsorship money to lower their parking rates, thereby providing an incentive for commuters to park and use the light rail rather than pay the extremely high cost of Downtown parking. PAT could come up with a special monthly pass that would permit 22 round trips per month for North Shore parkers who could show the card on entering the North Shore or on Downtown stations headed to the North Shore. The card would be priced to offer considerable savings compared to the \$2.50 per ride. It would only be valid at the stations now in the free fare zone and could not be used when boarding South Hills bound trips in the Downtown stations.

No more free rides should be PAT's policy. Figuring how to phase them out should be a priority.

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