Fare Hikes! No Good for Anyone

By Katie Wilson

Seattle wants better public transit, and more of it. Most voters are willing to pay for it, too. This was proved last November, when over 60% voted yes for new car tab-licences and a sales tax increase that will go toward expanding Metro bus service in Seattle.

Starting this March, riders will be paying more for public transit in a more direct manner. King County Metro will raise all fares – peak and off-peak, senior, disabled and youth – by $0.25. This fare hike was planned way back in 2011, and it completes the doubling of the standard fare from $1.25 to $2.50 in a span of just eight years.

More regressive taxes and higher fares: the same trends are being repeated in cities across the country. If this just the price we must pay to get around our fair city, in this era of budget cuts and austerity? Not everyone can pay this price – and of course it’s the very riders who need public transit the most who can least afford fare hikes, or even any fare at all. As fares have gone up and up, we’re squeezed more and more. So, like the citizens we are in the democracy we’re Continued as NO FAIRES: page 3

National and King County Metro Bus Fare Increases During the Great Recession 2008-2011

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Abolish Fares

By David McDonald

Every time Metro needs money the issue of who will pay arises. The burden falls on the poor and the poorest. A yearly pass for seniors was $99 when I started driving in 2007; it is now about $560. The youth fare was $3.25. It is now $7.75.

These are stupendous increases. Only a small portion of transit funding now comes directly from riders. Most comes from federal, state and local taxes. I believe all transit should be completely funded by stable local taxes and that fares should be abolished.

Since transit is already mostly tax-funded, surely there can be no principled argument against fare tax funding. If everyone pays for roads, highways, and tunnels through taxes, whether they use them or not, why shouldn’t the minimum means to use the roads also be socially funded? Everyone already pays taxes so no one will get a free ride were fares abolished. Not only do the poorest pay a larger percentage of their income in taxes than the well-off, they also pay a larger absolute dollar amount through “sin” taxes on tobacco, alcohol, and lottery tickets than Busing (for instance), which pays nothing.

Costs of the Fare System

The fare system is both inefficient and loaded with huge overhead costs, all of which would go away if fares were abolished.

Paying fares slows down loading significantly. Every cash fare transaction slows the bus down by an average of 5 to 6 seconds. No matter what, there is always someone (usually more than one) not ready to pay the fare. ORCA cards have a high fail-to-read rate. It is always slower to load even everyone has an ORCA card. Only one door is used.

In the case of the RapidRide buses all doors are opened, but the cost of this efficiency in boarding is the huge overhead of the Fare Enforcement system, which includes recruiting, training, uniforming and supervising a flurry of Fare Enforcement agents, giving them room to meet in, radios to communicate with, technology to check the ORCA cards, paperwork and computers to keep track of fare-evaders and so on. Then there is the impossibility of collecting $124.00 fines from people who do not have $2.25 for bus fare and burdening them with civil offenses and debt. Fare Enforcement is an entirely bureaucratic ets that contribute nothing to getting buses on the road. Plus it is inherently unenforceable. My bottom line: opening all doors on all buses to load would have the same effect as adding another 10% (130 buses) to The Fleet at no capital cost whatsoever.

In addition to inefficiencies, there are fare-related overhead costs that add nothing to service.

• Fare boxes cost many thousands of dollars each. They break during service, must be repaired and meanwhile generate no fare.

• Repair people have to be trained and spend time maintaining the...
No Hikes: Fare hikes should be last resort

Continued from page 1

All, forget about a one-bedroom apartment—at around $1,400 per month, you’d be left with just $600 for food, health care, transportation and everything else. So let’s say you’re willing to try and exam yourself and your worldly possessions into a studio apartment, all for the perks of urban living. You’re still likely to pay half your income in rent. With just $1,000 per month for everything else, and no food stamps (you’ve not low income, remember!), $52.50 or $72.50 per bus ride is going to be rather steep. In this economy, a fare increase hurts middle-income Seattleites too.

Thanks for the low income fare, but... let’s keep things in perspective. Until 2008 the standard fare was $1.25. Life for low income Americans hasn’t exactly been a joy ride of prosperity since then, so while bringing our fares back down to $1.50 or $1.00, we’re not quite swooning with gratitude. Also consider that for low income seniors and people with disabilities who rely on public transit, a $0.25 fare increase represents a 33% increase in transportation costs.

Ultimately, all this boils down to the same thing—Public transit is a public good, not a business. It should be treated as basic infrastructure and be paid for and publicly funded. Yes, those who can easily afford to pay should pay for public transit, but not through regressive taxes, not user fees like fares. And most important, the tax base should include not only high-income individuals but also the many multi-million and billion-dollar corporations that reside in Seattle and King County, all of which profit immensely from having a great transit system (well, as great as is, which isn’t nearly as great as it could be) and other public amenities.

We’re back to the good old progresive or socialist (take your pick) tax on income and capital and in rich? And it’s true, that’s what we need to do.

If you will all this to most political politicians, they’ll at least pretend to agree with you, in principle. But then they’ll object that it’s not as easy as it sounds. In one way they’re right: our state’s legislature in Olympia pampered its political and city governments, severely limiting local taxing options. Big chang

Down with Fares: Fare collection too costly

Continued from page 1

while at the state level are needed to fund public transit, and that’s going to take some serious organizing to generate some serious people-power. But in a hand in another, since we can’t even recover King County, the City of Seattle, and Sound Transit’s multi-county transpor-

gation costs.

Fare Evasion Inherently Unenforceable

No method exists or has been suggested to collect 100% of the fare that does not cost more than the recovered moni-
tally inexpensive since a ver-
table army of judges, prosecutors, defenders, etc., etc., etc., are mobilized to prosecute even the most trivial offense, as anyone who has sat on a jury knows. It’s just not worth it. Metro estimated after a survey that fare evasion losses were in the range of $2M per year. That’s about 0.2% of Metro’s $118 million budget. Any other business would con-

Fareless Champs: Fare free can work

Continued from page 1

country and culture, we do have a short history of what happens in the United States. In the 1970s and 1990s, two larger urban transit systems in Denver and Dallas and Austin, Texas did go go fare-free for a while. Many smaller resort and college towns have also adopted fare-free transit, including Corvallis, Oregon and Idaho River Country, Florida. As expected, ridership increased dramatically, by 20-40%, as riders flocked to use the service. Expenses in the form of new drivers and buses to keep up with, if increased more, but the subsidy per rider always drops dramatically and the overall effects of public transit is enhanced. A study reported in Denver and Austin ended the results, coupled with the fare-free systems in college and resort towns shows if done correctly, fare-

free transit could be an incredibly popular and useful public service. But it is BART in San Francisco, not that’s Talian. It could never hap-

en here, but how did it happen there? Talian’s transit system, like Seattle’s may be heavily subsidized by taxes, and at a similar rate, around 75-80%. Eliminating the fare was roughly a

spending power enabled by rid-

ers’ reduction in daily commuting costs made up for the loss in fare revenue. So, while some new fund-
ing would be needed to make the transition in Seattle, ultimately it wouldn’t break the bank.

What changes and benefits has the switch to a fare-free system brought to Talian? Increased riders-

champ” to “fare free can work”?

Continued from page 1

there was a reason for the Transit Riders Union, a independ-ent democratic all-volun-
teer member-run union. If you are interested in contributing to future issues, contact us.

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Transit Riders Union Wants YOU!

Do you ride the bus? Then you’re a transit rider, and you belong in the Transit Riders Union. TRU is a democratic member-run union that YOU can join: we are fighting to get better public transit for all. We have power in numbers. Join us today at www.transitriders.org or leave a message at 206-651-4282 and we’ll get back to you.

David I. Freedman is a Full-Time Transit Operator and member of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local No. 587
Ask a Bus Driver
By Sam Smith

Hello Metro riders! My name is Sam Smith, and I’ve been a Metro driver since early 2015. I hear all sorts of questions from passengers, friends, and fellow TRU members on a range of topics related to the job. This column is dedicated to answering some of those questions. Anything you want to know—Why do the poles come off the bus so often? Where do you pick up the bus?—just ask! Send questions to sam@transitriders.org.

Dear Bus Driver Sam,
I’ve heard rumors that Metro drivers go to the bathroom in laps and bottles. Is that true?
-Randy, Central District

Thanks for submitting the very first question to this column, Randy! I’m so glad you asked, because I love talking about bathroom breaks for bus drivers. It’s perhaps the most challenging logistical aspect of the job. I could go on for days rambling about the difficult commute needs and the completely reliable buses in Metro being fed by Labor & Industries, but before I jump into the bad and the ugly, allow me to brag about some of the things I love about bus driver bathrooms.

The Good

When I was first hired, I was surprised by the usual items you may suspect: a collection of uniforms, employee handbook, county ID badge, etc. What stood out most to me was a fairly standard-looking metal house key. At this point, having been through a month of training, I already knew that this key served no purpose in starting a bus engine or entering the Metro base, so what was it for?

“It’s your T-key. As in Tolls.”

Ahah Metro had just handed me access to secret bathrooms all over the county. These bathrooms, or “Comfort Stations” as they’re known, are generally located at Transit Centers or in small, stand-alone structures at the ends of routes. In our route books, which display maps and driving directions for each route in the system, there is a list of comfort stations accessible along the route. Ideally, there would be one of these at the end of each route. Where there’s not a Metro facility, Metro instead may have arranged with a local business or church to allow us to access their employee or customer bathroom. For example, at the end of Route 2 in Madison Park, there is a Metro comfort station built right alongside the lake, but at the end of the 14 in Mt. Baker where there is no Metro structure, my T-key unlocks the front door of a church about one block away.

When the system works, it works great. I love my secret bathroom key. I have definitely taken advantage of it on my off time as well. During a long bike trip last summer through rural east King County, nature called as I was near the Woodinville Park & Ride, so I strode over to the comfort stations, and, after first determining an on-duty operator wasn’t in need, I took care of business and was on my way!

The Bad

So in a fantasy world, there’s always a comfort station at the end of every line, accessible 24/7. But as you may have guessed, we’re far from this fairly reasonable scenario. Oftentimes our schedules are so tight and unrealistic that we don’t have time to pee. For instance, the schedule timing between ending one trip and turning around to start the next, referred to as “recovery time”, in my experience has been as little as five minutes. (To be fair, I once had a schedule with recovery time of 40 minutes, but in my experience, less than ten minutes is the norm.) So if I am running more than five minutes behind schedule, that means I’m already late before I even start my next trip! And guess what, our schedules are so Pollyanna that they don’t really take into account things like traffic, loading and unloading passengers, stop signs, speed limits, etc. So if I’m really running late and I have to pee, what should I do? Run out and use the comfort station, further stranding all my future passengers (and further compounding my lateness), or do I hold it and try to catch up on my schedule? Neither one is a good option.

This can be worse depending on the length of our next trip. As you’re probably well aware, Metro loves its through-routing, that is, in-bound routes that travel through Downtown Seattle and come out the other end as another out-bound route. Road C & D are linked in this way, as are the 5 & 21, the 24 & 124 and several others. There are many ways in which this makes sense: Metro doesn’t need to find as many layover parking spots Downtown and it allows easier transfers for some passengers. However, buses traveling a farther distance are more likely to run behind schedule, so one passenger’s easier transfer is several other riders’ very late transfer. For drivers, this means driving essentially twice as far without an opportunity for a pee break. This past summer, when I drove the 24 & 124, that meant driving off of a jar of mayonnaise and a leaf of white bread after being in a hurricane. I probably will never know what she has been through because traffic is so short and most of the people I see escape deep into the part quickly. I am glad for her “Good for you!”

-G. Virgil Snappertifritzen

Metro Fare
By Peter Orr

Metro Fare is a weekly comic based on local bus stories. Get a funny Metro experience you’d like to share? Visit metromofirecomic.com to send it in for a ‘rown up.’

Tukwila Bus Poem

The east African lady, climbs aboard, all gold and scarves, and says, “It is a good day. I am finally an American citizen.” she is glowing, and I feel 20 different things, mostly cynicism. I have rarely missed a meal, except when i invested all my money on beer. and that time i lived off of a jar of mayonnaise and a leaf of white bread after being in a hurricane. i probably will never know what she has been through because time is short and most of the people i see escape deep into the part quickly. I am glad for her “Good for you!”

-G. Virgil Snappertifritzen

The Ugly

I’ll conclude with a couple of personal anecdotes, which while ugly at the time, are pretty funny in retrospect. Randy, if you’ve made it this far, I’ll finally answer your question. My first week on the job, I had a layover Downtown and needed to pee. I found another Metro operator laying over down the block and asked him where the official comfort station was. After looking suspiciously over his shoulders to make sure no one else was listening, he coyly faked me to, in a whisper, that I should just pee in a bottle in the backseat, assuring me that as long as I’m not visible to the street, I won’t get in trouble. “And what if I don’t want to pee in a bottle?” He pointed to a coffee shop a couple of blocks away. Yikes, I thought to myself. Remind me to not turn into that dude.

Well... One early morning, after finishing service outside a school near Shoreline, and after a 15 minute wait at a bus stop which at the time, I considered uneventful, I continued my way to the bus stop. As I went down the steps of the bus, I realized my shorts were wet! I had forgotten my Bra, the bathroom wasn’t there a particularly convenient place for me to park the coach without significantly inconveniencing other buses and cars. So I decided I could hold it for the 20 minute drive on the freeway back to the Metro base in 5-Do, where I could dry off the bus, use the base restroom, and go home. That particular day, traffic was completely stopped, and I was stranded for over an hour on the freeway. I grew increasingly desperate, and after rejecting several weird ideas that popped in my head, I ultimately grabbed the now-empty Diet cup from my trash bin, set the emergency break, ran to the articulated (assorted) middle section, kneaded down very low so as to be out of sight of my neighbors, stuck in adjacent lanes, and had one of the most relieving urinations of my life. This is when I learned that drinking 16 ounces of coffee can somehow generate more than 16 ounces of urine. I had to halt midstream, awkwardly run to the front of the bus with a full cup, open the door, empty, and repeat.

Fortunately, the bus was empty. Several months later, another day of terrible rush hour freeway traffic, but this time with a bus full of commuters! As traffic worsened, it slowly dawned on me that I wasn’t going to make it to the end of the line. Then, even worse, I realized I wouldn’t be able to make it to my first shift of the freeway. We’ve all experienced the discomfort of having to go really badly. It hadn’t been since my childhood that my situation had worsened to the level beyond that. My mental faculties were slowly fading away. I was sweating profusely, my palms clamming up, and twisting my legs as much as possible in a futile attempt to distract from the pain— in other words, qualities you don’t want in someone operating a 15-ton machine responsible for the safety of dozens of people. Again, I went through a series of bad options, including wringing my pants. I would have if I thought my clothes and the driver’s seat would have absorbed everything, but out of fear that a noticeable puddle would have emerged on the floor, I opted out. Just then, this all started to move, we’re essentially not moving on the freeway. Finally, I set the emergency break and opened the front door. I told the riders that I needed to check something under the front of the bus — nothing alarming but since we stopped I might as well check. I got into pushup position beneath a couple bikes on the front rack and let loose. I got back on the bus, no one batted an eye, and I went about my business as if I hadn’t just peed underneath a bus on the freeway.

So Randy, in answer to your question, yes, we sometimes pee in cups and bottles. I carry an empty plastic bottle in my work bag, just in case. But I would happily never use it again.
Stop Veolia!

By Susan Koppelman

Did you know that our public access bus service for folks with disabilities is actually provided by a private-for-profit company from France? It may be amazing to believe, but our French multinational corporation is the largest privatizer of water services in the world and the largest privatizer of transportation services in North America. In King County, they have been operating transportation contracts since 1996, and yet few Seattle or US residents even know their name. The company is called Veolia, though this past summer it merged its transportation subsidiary with another company to form a new transportation company called Transdev. It operates 75% of transportation services for people with disabilities in King County. In 2008 Veolia caused a huge uproar in the local labor community when it was revealed that the contract that MV Transport had with King County, putting Metro Access drivers in service under Veolia, was a union-represented subcontractor. Veolia has a horrendous track record of union-busting around the world, and reports that many of its employees have lost their jobs or took pay cuts. Amalgamated Transit Union Local 587 had just negotiated a new contract with MV Transport to increase the wage cap from $19.90 to $25 over the course of 4 years. Under Veolia, Metro Access drivers’ wages have been capped at $18 since 2008.

The disability justice community has been very disappointed with Metro Access services under Veolia. Users of this service report being able to distinguish between Veolia drivers and other drivers in terms of the quality of service they receive.

Veolia’s public relations activities are drawing connections between the corporate occupation of our public services at home and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Veolia is involved in enterprises that further entrench settler colonialism, including the operation of the Jerusalem Light Rail which connects illegal Israeli settlements to Jerusalem, and the Tovlan Lavender Farm in the occupied Jordan Valley where Veolia dumps the trash it collects from inside Israel into occupied Palestine against international law. Given their violations around the world, their history of corruption and track record of reducing services while increasing costs, how can we allow Veolia or Transdev to operate in King County, turning our public investment into their private profit while our workers and services suffer?

Local residents from disability justice, labor, anti-privatization, transit justice, environmental justice and Palestine solidarity communities are organizing under the banner Stop Veolia Seattle (SVS) “to connect global solidarity to local activism in ways that renew our energy, support our work, and nourish our activist communities.”

SVS would like to see all subcontracted work brought in-house at King County Metro. The group aims to end the Veolia contract with King County and to prevent Veolia from obtaining new contracts in the future. They will screen candidates for Metro Access and track how they influence neighboring cities and groups around the world have succeeded in doing just this. Veolia has lost $24 billion in contracts to date, because of its privatization projects, profiteering from Palestinian human rights abuses. The Quaker and the Methodists have vowed to divest from Veolia because of their involvement in the occupation of Palestine. In 2013, activists in St. Louis organized to get Veolia Water North America to withdraw its self from consideration of a contract with the city. In Boston school bus drivers are gaining support in resisting Veolia’s dirty union-busting tactics. Last January Boston was victorious in denying a new contract to Veolia to run the Massachusetts commuter rail. We are in contact across England, Ireland, and Wales have paused discussions preventing Veolia from bidding on contracts or have excluded them from consideration of city contracts.

Our local campaign has already had some big successes. In September, the MLK County Labor Council – representing 350 organizational members, and more than 75,000 working men and women who belong to Council-affiliated organizations – voted unanimously to pass a resolution urging King County to end all contracts with French multinational corporation Veolia, 23 being all bus services in house, and 30 preclude Veolia from bidding on any future contracts. The resolution was introduced by the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 587, which passed a similar resolution among their membership last April. Now it is time to get King County Council and Metro General Manager Kevin Desmond to act. Find out more about how you can be involved with the local Stop Veolia Seattle coalition and track our success at www.stopveoliaseattle.wordpress.com or contact us at StopVeoliaSeattle@gmail.com

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The members of the Transit Riders Union, the Union. We discuss and make decisions democratically at our monthly meetings, we do the work, and together we fund and run our own independent union. We have a slate of elected officials. Members pay $20, $30, $50, or $75 per month, and everyone has a voice and a vote. We are a not-for-profit and we do not rely on any money from corporations, foundations, or government agencies: we are transit riders organizing for public transit. Join online at www.trustriders.org/join-us, or phone us at 206-651-4282, to request a paper application.

Matter of Public Health

By Corey Slaton

Seattle is currently experiencing exponential growth. It's no wonder — this city is fantastic. Public art, interesting people, many high-income employment opportunities, and a strong sense of social and economic justice appeal to a lot of people and make Seattle one of the most comfortable places to live. While growth is not necessarily bad, Seattle is passing at a rate that prohibits growth that is equitable across all economic and social groups — and worse of all — isn’t smart. Smart Growth creates efficient transit options and a range of mixed-use, low-rise buildings that diversify a community of incomes and needs. Seattle is falling at Smart Growth. This is clearly demonstrated by the rate at which rent is increasing in the city. This trend is continually threatened by cuts — we now have the fastest rising rent and among the most expensive cost per transit ride in the country. Our housing policies allow new luxury apartments and condos to take the place of housing that has historically been more affordable to low-income workers, the elderly, and the disabled, very often people of color — forcing them to move farther and farther away from the city in the pursuit of affordable, decent housing. Paired with cuts to public transit they find themselves isolated from their friends and family, far from their livelihood, and stuck with increases in travel time and inconvenience.

Public health practitioners who focus on the built environment are concerned with all aspects of that environment — including housing, neighborhoods, and transportation — as they contribute to the health of the people who live in them. This includes ways in which elements of the built environment may create acute illness, depression, or lead to unhealthy behaviors that may result in chronic illness or disease. Housing, and its location, quality, and proximity to areas of cultural significance, healthcare establishments, and other necessities of life is largely dependent upon a highly efficient transportation system. Without both a transportation system AND affordable healthy housing, disease and illness result. This has been demonstrated time and again through various studies throughout the US and Europe, yet lessons learned in other places are not being heeded here.

Over the past several years, we've seen cuts to Metro transit and increases in fares that have isolated those that need access the most at the same time that they are being forced to move to more difficult locations because of decreasing housing affordability. These changes have been justified by citing long-standing rules that benefit wealthy developers on the backs of the poor. The city is losing affordable housing at an alarming rate and our transit system is drastically underfunded. Unless something changes, and soon, the bond-and-salts solutions the city has so far implemented will not be able to support the influx of new residents. If the city continues to allow unchecked growth that doesn't replace affordable decent housing, the city, county, and entire region MUST allocate more funding to expand public transportation. For a city that is very proud of its cultural diversity, the time has come to see that we allocate funds to benefit the common good of ALL residents, not just the wealthiest. Public health demands it, and so do the people.

Corey Slaton is Board Chair of the Transit Union of Washington State and a Public Health Student at University of Washington.