

NJ Transit fares increased 9 percent



Mike Davis, @byMikeDavis 3:04 p.m. EDT July 15, 2015



(Photo: TOM SPADER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

NEWARK – NJ Transit fares will increase an average of 9 percent beginning in October.

The board approved the agency's \$2.1 billion 2015-16 budget at a standing room only Wednesday morning meeting, with more than two dozen commuters, travelers, activists and employees criticizing the board for even considering the proposal.

"In my 34 years working for NJ Transit and watching this company grow, this is a shameful day," said John Costa, an international vice president with the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 880. "This has to be one of the worst boards I've ever seen to make a decision today to do this without any other alternatives even looked at."

The budget, which includes more than \$390 million in state funding, includes \$913 million in capital projects for storm resiliency, technology upgrades and infrastructure improvements.

Rob Duffey, a policy director for the New Jersey Working Families Alliance was the first of the day to equate the fare hike to a tax increase: "This is a tax hike by another name and it falls on the backs of those who can least afford it," he said.

For Monmouth and Ocean county commuters, an unlimited monthly pass on the North Jersey Coast Line to New York will increase between \$35 and \$40. Single one-way tickets will increase between \$1 to \$2 for riders.

Wednesday marked NJ Transit's fifth fare hike since 2000 and the first since a 22 percent increase in 2010, which also eliminated discount off-peak rail tickets. As of Oct. 1, a New York-bound commuter from the Aberdeen-Matawan station will be paying about \$100 more for a monthly pass than they were five years ago.

"It takes a big chunk out of your pocket, out of your savings. For someone who's raising a family and trying to live in Monmouth County, it's tough," said Marlboro resident Mizi Mehaj, minutes before catching the 7:17 a.m. train from Aberdeen-Matawan to New York. "But there's actually no other way. You could drive yourself, which I wouldn't do because of traffic."

"If they raise it 9 percent, the service should be perfect and it's nowhere near that right now," said Joe Porretta, recalling the numerous times he has been stuck at Newark Penn Station for hours after train delays and cancellations.

But like Mehaj, Porretta said there was no other option for him even after the fare hikes.

"I've absolutely thought about changing my commute, but it's tough. What do you do, drive?" Porretta said. "It's probably just as expensive."

The agency has attributed the fare increase to a \$56 million budget gap caused by rising contract costs for the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail and AccessLink along with increases in health care, benefits and pensions. About \$1 billion of revenue is expected from passengers, a \$76 million increase from last year after the new fare hikes.

"We did hear alternatives during the public hearing process and we did look at the alternatives," NJ Transit Executive Director Veronique Hakim said at the meeting. "But at the end of the day we need to raise enough revenue as to close this \$56 million gap."

The board only had limited options, vice chairman Bruce Meisel said. Hakim said the only alternative to a fare increase were "dramatic" service cuts with thousands of layoffs.

"It's the right thing to do. It's not the pleasant thing to do," Meisel said. "We aren't raising fares to make more money to distribute to our shareholders. We're a public entity. We're only reviewing the budget for the sole purpose of continuing our operations."

Only board member Raymond Greaves voted against the budget and "go back to the drawing board.

"Our motto is, 'NJ Transit: The way to go,'" Greaves said before the vote. "By accepting and approving this proposal, our motto will be changed to, 'NJ Transit: The most expensive way to go.'"

Cyndi Steiner, executive director of the New Jersey Bike and Walk Coalition, said the fare hikes would force commuters to rely on automobiles, creating congestion and future tax increases to offset road construction costs.

"We're not staring several points of failure square in the face," she said.

Doug O'Malley, director of advocacy group Environment New Jersey, said the fare hikes were only the next example of Gov. Chris Christie's administration "failing" commuters.

"This is a crisis of our own making. Please listen to the public and defy the governor by stopping these fare hikes," O'Malley said, pleading with the board before the vote.

In a news release, Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto was "stunned at the lack of regard" for commuters.

"This is a tax increase laid squarely upon the backs of working class residents who have been slammed time and time again by this administration," Prieto said.

This is a developing story. Check back with APP.com for updates throughout the day.

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