

# Commuters call on Christie, Sweeney to prevent NJ Transit fare hike



Passengers get on an NJ Transit commuter bus at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. The NJ Transit board is one month away from voting on a fare increase proposal. (Larry Higgs | NJ Advance Media for NJ .com)



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Commuters and advocates called on Gov. Chris Christie and State Senate President Stephen Sweeney to take action to prevent a **proposed 9 percent fare and service cut package the NJ Transit introduced in April.**

Wednesday's board meeting was the last public opportunity for opponents to make their case. Commuter Sarah Klibanoff of Livingston said the agency doesn't deserve a fare increase because her train usually is late getting her to work and back home.

"I literally can't get to work on time. I have to call my office at least three times a week," she told the board about her commute between Brick Church station and New York. "I don't know where you get your 95 percent on time performance from."

Doug O'Malley, director of Environment New Jersey, called on state lawmakers to find the money to spare riders from the second fare hike in five years.

"The final decision won't be made here, it will be made in Trenton," he said. "We need Gov. Christie, Senate President Sweeney and Assembly Speaker (Vincent) Prieto to step in and save NJ Transit from these fare hikes and service cuts."

Echoing comments made by commuters at nine previous public hearings that the current service and delays aren't worth a fare increase, Janna Chernetz, senior New Jersey policy analyst for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign said transit riders are being forced to pick-up the pieces of the states transportation funding crisis.

"Perhaps the conversation would be different if the fare increase supported expanding the system and more reliable service," she said. "The buck literally stops with the Christie administration and its blatant disregard of the transportation funding crisis."

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### **.How much could NJ Transits proposed fare hike cost you?**

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Both Christie and the legislature punted on reauthorizing the state Transportation Trust Fund this year, which will run out of money before July 2017 to fund projects or pay off past debt.

Cyndi Steiner, executive director of the New Jersey Bike and Walk Coalition said a fare hike will put more cars on the road which will make traveling more dangerous for pedestrians and cyclists.

"It's backwards, 1950's era policy and is the beginning of a spiral down," she said, noting that the Millennial generation is adopted a less car centric lifestyle. "The country's most densely populated state should embrace a transit oriented policy."

Executive Director Veronique Hakim said officials are reviewing the hundreds of public comments made at nine public hearings conducted across the state last month and to e-mails and letters the agency received, before returning with a final proposal next month.

Hakim had assured riders that all options "were on the table" after the **original proposal was made to close a \$56 million gap** in the fiscal year 2016 budget. NJ Transit board members will also vote on the agencies budget next month.

The original proposal also included discontinuing three bus routes, the 655 Princeton-Plainsboro and two seasonal routes, the 307 Freehold-Great Adventure and 318 Philadelphia-Great Adventure. Reductions such as eliminating stops or late night service were proposed to the 872 Morristown-Livingston Mall, the 419 Camden-Pennsauken and the 463 Woodbury-Avandale Park-Ride routes.

Two late night trains on the Montclair-Boonton and Pascack Valley lines were also on the chopping block. Several speakers, including the head of a New York State commuter group said eliminating those trains would make it difficult for people to attend sporting events, Broadway plays or for commuters who have to work late to get home.

NJ Transit has knocked the \$120 million down to \$56 million by making internal cuts. Service reductions and route elimination would save \$2.5 million

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