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Politicians Turn Out To Protest Changes Proposed by NJ Transit

Discontinuing the 655 bus line that ferries passengers between Princeton and the University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro on Route 1 would be a disservice to local residents, Mayor Liz Lempert, other politicians, and local residents told NJ Transit officials at a public hearing last week.

Thursday was the last day the public could comment on service cuts and fare hikes that NJ Transit has proposed to make up for a \$60 million funding shortfall. At the Trenton Transit Center, a long line of people voiced opposition to both aspects of the plan. "Residents of Princeton who do not own a car currently rely on public transportation," Ms. Lempert said during her turn at the microphone. Getting rid of the 655 bus "will disproportionately hurt our low income residents."

In his opening statement, Alan Maiman, NJ Transit's deputy general manager of bus service planning, said there are alternative routes that residents could use, involving a connection at Quakerbridge Mall. But more than one speaker said that alternative would involve paying more money and extending the trip from 20 to 90 minutes.

Officials urged NJ Transit to give the line, which has been in place since the hospital moved from the Witherspoon/Jackson neighborhood to Route 1, a chance to increase ridership. Lester Varga, planning director of Plainsboro Township, said more development planned for the area around the hospital will mean more riders when those projects C an assisted living facility and child development center C are completed.

Officials at the hospital have said they will keep subsidizing the service if NJ Transit keeps it going. And at its most recent meeting, Princeton Council passed a resolution to keep a form of transportation between the town and the hospital.

"The 655 is more than a bus route," commented Aaron Hyndman, communications coordinator at the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition. "It's a vital link between people in Princeton and their closest hospital. And for those who depend on biking and walking, it's their only option."

NJ Transit has said that the fare hikes and service cuts, if approved, would go into effect October 1. The agency has mentioned more than \$42 million in internal savings from a reduction of overtime and other expenses, but still faces a \$60 million budget gap. The proposed fare adjustment is for

approximately nine percent, which would make a trip between Princeton Junction and Penn Station New York rise from \$16.50 to \$17.75. The last fare hike, made five years ago, was 22 percent.

Assemblyman Reed Gusciora (D-Mercer) was among the first to speak at the hearing, commenting that raising bus and train fares will mean that riders will defect and choose to drive their cars instead. "All of us benefit from low fares because the less cars that are on the road really helps out the environment and congestion," he said. "If we chase more people into their cars on the roads, it's not going to benefit us."

Senator Linda Greenstein (D-Middlesex) said, "There couldn't be a worse time to raise train and bus fares on our working poor." The changes could cause commuters to move out of New Jersey to live closer to their jobs, she added.

Senator Shirley Turner (D-Mercer) urged the agency to find other methods of filling the budget gap. "In effect, you are adding insult to injury when you ask riders to pay more and receive less," she said. Taking the bus route 655 out of service would be "very, very disturbing," she added.

Several speakers took the opportunity to blast Governor Chris Christie for the proposed changes and other actions he has taken on public transportation. "Listen up, Governor Christie. We will not sit down and shut up," shouted Martin Heraghty, president of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 824. He called Mr. Christie "Robin Hood in reverse" and called the proposal "a disgrace."

Many of the speakers were members of New Jersey For Transit, a coalition put together to express opposition to the transit agency's proposal. "Transit riders can no longer afford to pay the price for New Jersey's inaction," said Jon Whiten, deputy director of New Jersey Policy Perspective. "If the governor and the legislature won't step in to fix a crisis that's been coming for decades, the least they can do is find a short-term solution in the 2016 budget to fill NJ Transit's operating hole. Passing the buck to transit riders just won't cut it."

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