Chicago commuter rail agency approves a decade of fare hikes

Jeff Lusanne
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The Board of Directors of Metra, Chicago's regional commuter rail service, has unanimously approved a 10-year plan of fare increases. As justification for the sharp rise in ticket prices, the agency points to a dire lack of funding for upkeep of the railroad's equipment and infrastructure. However, the increase will do little to address the huge backlog of needed upgrades.

In 2015, fares will rise an average of 10.8 percent, with some one-way, full-fare ticket prices increasing by up to 18.2 percent, depending on the zone. Over 10 years, fares will rise by 68 percent, with varying increases year to year.

The current 10-year plan of fare increases comes after an unprecedented fare hike in 2011, when ticket prices rose by an average of 25 percent. Altogether, the increases are a significant burden to many riders that do not own a car, or choose the service to avoid the higher cost of driving and parking in the Chicago region. On average, 305,000 riders use the service every weekday.

Morgan, who uses Metra to get to work in the suburbs, said, "I find these fare increases to be upsetting—not only because of the almost 11 percent spike but also because of the proposed yearly increases for the next decade. They don't care about the Metra being affordable for the average Chicagoan. To make it more upsetting, they haven't said much about what benefits these fare increases will give to its ridership. Eventually I think people will try to find other ways to commute to and from the suburbs."

Moki, a regular commuter, said, "With this intense price increase, people who live in the suburbs to save on rent are losing more and more of the cost advantage. Despite the previous increases, there are more people taking the train. But they haven't increased capacity, and trains can be standing-room only, particularly during winter, when more people ride because they don't want to deal with the hazards of driving. Then, there are delays from freight railroads on some lines, which I don't hear them saying they will fix."

Notably, the fare increases will not provide for any significant expansion of train service. No new routes have been announced, no existing routes will receive additional service, and equipment will only slowly be upgraded and replaced.

Daniel Tamayo, who uses the Metra Rock Island Line, said that "living on a tight monthly budget, this is only going to burden me more, and I will have to be more aware of how I spend my money. I rely on Metra to get around. I hope that the level of service will actually increase, but do I think it will? No. Because time after time I've been disappointed with Metra's service—delays can come from overcrowded trains, to signals not working, and switches not working. We live in the 21st century and there is technology to fix these issues."

Delays from failing signals, switches, and equipment problems became a large problem during the severe winter in early 2014, when the region saw weeks of subzero temperatures and high snowfall. By its own assessment, 50 percent of Metra's assets are near or beyond their expected useful lives, requiring extra and expensive maintenance to continue operation.

Metra estimates that it should be spending at least $150 million annually on programs to rebuild or replace passenger cars and locomotives. Yet in 2013, only $27.7 million was spent on those programs, and in 2014, only $45.5 million. This continues years of underinvestment that has left Metra with older cars and equipment than all of its peers. This increases operating costs, as the old equipment fails more often, requires more maintenance, and causes delays.

Metra is required to recover over 50 percent of its day-to-day operating costs from fares—currently, roughly 55 percent is covered by fares—and a regional sales tax covers its remaining operating costs. These costs rise yearly, and the 10-year plan of fare increases will largely go to cover that.

Capital costs—maintaining and improving track, stations and equipment—are funded from federal grants and state bonds, which have lagged behind needed investment for years. As a result, the Regional Transportation Authority, which oversees all transit in the Chicago region, estimates that $9.9 billion will be required to return all of Metra's assets to a "state of good repair."

Two weeks before the fare increase was approved, Metra announced a 10-year plan for capital investments. Instead of the nearly $10 billion RTA estimate, it calls for $2.4 billion toward capital needs. It will use $710 million from expected state and federal grants, $400 million from the fare increase, and as of yet unknown sources for the remaining $1.3 billion. The result will be a very meager program to rebuild or buy new coaches and locomotives over the next 10 years, and it does not cover any expansion of the fleet if service or ridership increases.

While Metra lacks the funding needed to properly maintain and expand infrastructure, equipment and service, freight railroads are booming. Chicago is the busiest center of freight railroads in the country, and many Metra lines either operate on freight routes or intersect freight routes.

Since deregulation in 1980, freight railroads have systematically cut capacity and staffing in pursuit of higher performance on Wall Street. As freight traffic began to rise in late 2013, the railroads began to spiral into a near meltdown, with traffic sometimes taking days to simply move through the city.

This has led to ongoing delays for Metra commuters on routes that compete for capacity with freight traffic; these routes have the poorest on-time performance in the system. The busiest Metra line, BNSF, is also the primary route of growing oil traffic from Bakken crude deposits through the city. It has seen on-time performance fall from 94.6 percent in 2013 to 88.3 percent from January to September 2014. North Central Service, Heritage Corridor, and South West Service trains, which all compete with freight traffic, saw similar drops in on-time performance.

The profit interests of the freight railroads also constrain the ability of Metra to expand service in response to changing population and employment trends. For years, riders of the Heritage Corridor through the southwest suburbs have called for more daily rounds trips. Presently, only six Metra trains a day operate, compared to up 170 per day on other routes. The owner of the route, Canadian National, continues to prevent the increase, and also will not allow more trains on the North Central Route.

Overall, Metra's 10-year plan offers no room for future expansion, and places rising costs solely on riders. In a region of notorious traffic jams and diverse employment and residential locations, a massive program to revitalize and modernize transportation is needed.