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NYC commuters, cabbies not impressed with bailout

Cristian Salazar

Commuters, cab drivers and transit advocates said Wednesday they were unimpressed and disgusted with a proposed financial bailout deal for the nation's largest mass transit system, even though many expressed relief that the base subway fare would only increase by 25 cents.

"It's something you have to adapt to, you know what I'm saying? An apple doesn't cost a nickel anymore," said Larry Taylor, 53, who commutes by subway from the Bronx, as he stood at a table on a street near Penn Station selling DVDs.

Under the tentative deal, fares would rise about 10 percent, not the 20 to 30 percent that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority had threatened along with massive service cuts in its so-called "doomsday budget." Fares would rise again in 2011 and 2013.

"I'm happy to pay a 10 percent fare increase if we get 10 percent better service," said Dwight Tjornham (CHURN'-home), of Mount Vernon, a butler at a private residence who was waiting for a Metro-North train on Wednesday at the White Plains station. He noted that his train was 3 minutes late.

"I don't suppose they'll take 3 minutes' worth off the fare," he said.

The proposed bailout, which the Legislature is expected to vote on Wednesday, would include new payroll taxes for businesses and a per-ride charge of 50 cents for taxis.

Most of the money would go toward the MTA's debilitating debt" the agency has a \$1.2 billion deficit, largely due to the economic downturn. About \$400 million would be directed toward capital improvements, such as maintenance and upgrades to the subway system.

Ellyn Shannon, a transportation planner for the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA, which was created by the Legislature to make sure riders were involved in the agency's decisions, was unimpressed with the plan.

"The new fares are very high and there's still huge concern about what got passed because there's not enough for the capital budget," she said.

Peter Haynes, president of the Long Island Rail Road Commuters Campaign, said that the plan doesn't really fix the agency's problems.

"We have had several fare increases in recent years, and now they're giving us one every other year, which will add up to the same big increase they were talking about all along, which is unreasonably high," he said.

He said the plan doesn't address the agency's long-term viability. "It's not a rescue, it's a Band-Aid," he said.

Bill Mooney, the president of the Westchester County Association, a business advocacy group, criticized the possible payroll tax on employers.

"At the end of the day, the state's solution to everything is taxes. No one ever overhauls themselves," he said. "What concessions have the MTA made with their own compensation, with unions, overhauling their own operations? That's what business has had to do for the last year."

But Shannon, the transportation planner, said payroll tax is necessary. "Public transit benefits business. It saves time and gets people to work efficiently and in a reliable way, which is what business needs," she said.

Cab drivers also said they were opposed to the surcharge on rides.

"I don't like it," said driver Mostaff Hamza, before picking up a customer at Penn Station. "It's more expensive for the customer."

Tarlock Singh, a cab driver for 9 years, said that the charge would just add to cab drivers' expenses. "They are just exploiting the drivers."

MTA officials have said its fiscal woes stem from declining ridership and a steep drop in revenue from taxes on real estate transactions.

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Associated Press writer Jim Fitzgerald contributed from White Plains, N.Y.