

Summary: “Should Transit Be Free?”

Original Article appeared in Transit Center January 28, 2019

In spite of the controversy that fare-free creates, the number of cities experimenting with fare-free public transit (FFPT) is on the rise. In 1980, there were only six. By 2000, the number had grown to fifty-six. Today, FFPT exists in “full” form in at least ninety-eight cities and towns around the world. Full fare abolition means that ticket-free rides are available for the vast majority of local public transport routes and services, for the vast majority of users, and for most of the time. In several hundred more cities, fares are suspended in a partial way – either in specific city areas or modes of transport, or in specific periods of the day or year.

The idea of abolishing fares is criticized for threatening the financial stability of public transport networks. Free access to buses and trains eliminates revenue from tickets while increasing the cost of maintaining security and responding to a higher passenger demand. However, abolishing fares can help decrease equipment and personnel costs. Getting rid of the various devices and machines used to sell, validate and control tickets saves money. No money has to be spent on secure cash management systems that include counting rooms, cameras, cash pickup, and deposit services.

The lost revenue from ticket sales usually constitutes only a part of public transport budget. This means the actual costs of maintenance and investment in a public transport system are never fully covered by its passengers – the public subsidy plays a much more important role in this regard.

Before Tallinn, the capital and largest city of Estonia, switched to a fare-free system, only one-third of the operational budget of its public transport network was covered by revenue from fares, while the remaining two-thirds were provided by a direct municipal subsidy. Crucially, free fares are offered only to registered residents of the city.

As a result, between May 2012 and May 2016, the number of Tallinn residents increased from 415,000 to 440,000, visibly attracted by access to free rides. Gaining twenty-five thousand new residents meant generating \$40 million of additional revenue per year. This largely covered the money lost from fares (12.2 million) and investments to respond to increased demand (11.7 million). As a result, instead of losing money, Tallinn gained \$16.3 million per year.

Sustainable transport is seen as a key component of the “good city”, which is not only economically strong, but also socially cohesive and diverse, environmentally friendly, healthy, and participatory. To increase “quality of life” and “livability,” the proponents of sustainable mobility focus on the challenge of facilitating a shift from cars to public transport and “soft” modes such as cycling and walking. In Tallinn, within three years of fare abolition, the number of passengers increased by 14 percent and cars decreased 3 percent.

The fundamental value of fare abolition lies in simplifying the way public transport is used: it can be taken by anybody, at any time, according to any needs they may have. Public transport is thus imagined not as a commodity, but as a -common good- – similar to many other public services such as health care, education, parks, roads, sidewalks, cycling paths, libraries, schools or playgrounds.

Providing unconditional access to public transport has been praised for directly addressing the issue of social exclusion, inequality and transport poverty. Increasing accessibility for lower-income passengers means creating a more socially-just transport system. A fare-free network “shows solidarity with the

weak, with those who cannot afford a car, with those who are dependent on public transport, who are particularly affected by its drawbacks.”

So What? Should OMNIRIDE Go Fare-Free?

No large transit system in the United States offers free fares on a system-wide basis at the present time. A fare-free policy will increase ridership; however the type of ridership demographic generated is another issue. Per the Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR), the larger transit systems that offered free fares suffered dramatic rates of vandalism, graffiti and rowdiness due to younger passengers who could ride the system for free, causing numerous negative consequences. Vehicle maintenance and security costs escalated due to the need for repairs associated with abuse from passengers. The greater presence of vagrants on board buses also discouraged choice riders and caused increased complaints from long-time passengers.

Furthermore, due to inadequate planning and scheduling for the additional ridership, the transit systems became overcrowded and uncomfortable for riders. Additional buses needed to be placed in service to carry the heavier loads that occurred on a number of routes, adding to the agencies’ operating costs. However, the crowded and rowdy conditions on too many of the buses discouraged many long-time riders from using the system as frequently as they did prior to the implementation of free-fares.

Based on the findings by CUTR, it is concluded that a fare-free policy might be appropriate for smaller transit systems in certain communities, but is ill advised for larger transit systems in major urban areas. The results of their research demonstrate that the more effective way to increase ridership in larger systems would be to offer incentives such as reduced fares to students and the elderly, all-day passes, or pre-paid employer-provided passes to workers in areas served by transit.

CUTR also concludes that people are more concerned about issues such as safety, travel time, frequency and reliability of service, availability and ease of schedule and route information, infrastructure at stops, and driver courtesy, than they are about the cost of fares. When fares are eliminated, substantial revenues that help pay for such service characteristics are lost.

For FY19, OMNIRIDE budgeted \$11.1 million for farebox recovery. The majority of the farebox income comes from our Express (commuter based) service. A small portion (\$665K) comes from our local bus service. It would not be feasible for OMNIRIDE to go fare-free system-wide, but the possibility exists on our local services. However, before implementing fare-free, OMNIRIDE would need to restructure and increase the frequency of our local buses within Prince William County, Manassas City and Manassas Park. OMNIRIDE would also need to upgrade amenities at the majority of our bus stops within our current local service area, to include making all bus stops accessible for ADA passengers. We need to improve and enhance our system to encourage and increase ridership. If the transit system isn’t accessible or frequent enough now, free-fares will not attract new riders.

Per the United States Census Bureau 2018 population estimates, Prince William County, City of Manassas and Manassas Park have a combined population of 521,115. There are 141,500 citizens under the age of 18 and 33,032 below the poverty level. Currently OMNIRIDE offers a reduced fare for senior citizens and for passengers with a medical disability. OMNIRIDE also offers free fares for up to 2 children accompanying any fare paying adult. OMNIRIDE should consider offering free fares to all children under the age of 18 and to any Prince William County, City of Manassas and Manassas Park resident living in poverty.