

KING COUNTY METRO TO RESUME COLLECTING FARES WITHOUT ENFORCEMENT ON OCTOBER 1

Article by Jack Russillo

Summary Joe Stainsby, PRTC's Chief Development Officer

After suspending fares in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, King County Metro will resume collecting fares on Thursday, October 1.

All county transit services — including buses, Access paratransit, Vanpool, and Via to Transit — will be requiring full fares. Fare collection is already taking place on Sound Transit Express buses and Link light rail. Like all King County Metro employees, Metro requires all riders to wear a face covering, as does Sound Transit. Per Washington state public health guidelines, all trips should be for essential reasons only.

Metro has also suspended fare enforcement at least through the end of 2020. Fare enforcement officers will still be a presence around transit stops, but they will be providing a broader range of customer services, like answering transit or safety questions.

“We are really in honor of not contributing to breaking that six foot halo,” said Terry White, King County Metro’s Interim General Manager.

Metro is currently working with King County, King County Sheriff’s Office, cities, and community stakeholders to implement alternatives to fare enforcement no later than 2022. The current contract with a private security firm to provide fare enforcement services is \$4.7 million, according to King County.

Current ridership levels are down more than 60 percent compared to last year and the loss in fare collection revenue for Metro is an estimated \$5.5 million per month.

“We remain diligent in working to ensure that these riders, these essential riders, that are still with us right now have the opportunity to remain mobile and provide these services to their work, whether that’s groceries, medical, food, and those types of things,” said Terry White, King County Metro’s Interim General Manager. “We are being impacted, but we’re working through that. Our commitment is to continue to make sure that there’s mobility for the region.”

In March, Metro halted fares and required that passengers enter and exit vehicles through rear doors to help protect passengers and operators from the potential spread of COVID-19. Boarding and exiting through the front doors will return on October 1. All Metro vehicles are disinfected daily, masks are required on all transit, and physical distancing is enforced by permitting only 12 or 18 riders at a time, depending on the size of the bus.

If a bus is not at capacity when it arrives at a stop, drivers will allow passengers to board even if the new passengers put the total number of riders over the limit. If a bus is full when it arrives at a stop, it will not stop to pick up more passengers until some riders ask to disembark and the bus is below capacity again. Drivers may show their bus is at capacity by switching the destination sign from the “Essential Trips Only” reminder to “Coach is Full, Sorry” or “Bus Full.”

There is only one ADA priority seat on each bus, which does contribute to the overall number of passengers. If the ADA seating area is empty, a rider needing that space is allowed to board. Customers with disabilities whose essential travel needs are not being met can also use Metro’s Access paratransit service. They can call 260-205-5000 for assistance.

When paying fares, King County Executive Dow Constantine is encouraging riders to use a contactless payment option — like an ORCA card or ORCA LIFT card — to speed up the boarding process and further protect themselves and the operators. Fares can still be paid in cash.

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So What? How does the largest transit systems effort compare to OmniRide's, especially when looking at the Vanpool Program?

King County, which has the nation's largest vanpool program and owns all of the vans themselves, has waived fares for its bus riders and vanpool customers. PRTC's vanpool program acted at the same time with financial relief and PPE protections for its commuters. The Vanpool Alliance program, which is administered by OmniRide, has also taken many steps since the onset of COVID-19 to mitigate the ridership and sanitation issues posed by the virus, and by so doing, protect the program and its earnings. Firstly the program has waived all of the ridership requirements for the monthly reporting. This allows vans that are experiencing low ridership due to teleworking to still receive the \$200/\$400 monthly payment to allow them to bridge this troubling period. In addition, the program has provided over 12,000 masks and hundreds of bottles of hand sanitizer to program participants to help ensure they are commuting as safely as possible. The program also provided hanging tags that show how to keep high touch surfaces clean in vans. In addition, the program provided over \$300,000 in Emergency Vanpool Relief Assistance (EVRA) by re-tasking a state vanpooling grant, to make payments to the 50 plus vanpool companies that participate in Vanpool Alliance. This money acted as a bridge to allow companies to cover their fixed costs such as vehicle loan payments and insurance and buy them the time that they needed to right size their operation and be able to continue participation in Vanpool Alliance.

OmniRide has also made many alterations to bus service including the waiving of all fares on local services and the exclusive use of cashless payments on express services to minimize dwell times and prevent possible infection through touching contaminated cash, as well as enhanced cleaning and social distancing markers at commuter lots to name just a few.

OmniRide will continue to look at industry best practice, even looking as far afield as the West Coast, to find ways to keep our operators and customers safe as we continue to deal with this pandemic. We aim to ensure that all of our services are able to return as robustly as possible once the current crisis passes, and this is why we will continue to support them where appropriate, such as with the Vanpool Program which continues to generate funding in excess of \$6 million annually for the region.