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RTD considers higher fares for A-Line and local and regional bus routes as it tries to help transit-dependent riders

Agency's board of directors might vote on the increase this spring or summer

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Fare increases could be coming to RTD's bus and rail system -- including a possible jump in the price of a train trip to the airport, from \$9 to \$10.50 -- to help cover the cost of discounts for some of the system's most frequent riders, such as youths and low-income families.

The higher-fare proposal, which would also affect local and regional bus routes, could go to the Regional Transportation District's board of directors for a vote this spring or summer, assuming it makes a list of final recommendations that will be sent in the meantime to senior agency staff.

The list will be generated by a 25-member working group that on Tuesday will have its final meeting, which is open to the public. The group has been meeting for the past year to review and update RTD's expansive pass program.

Michael Washington, RTD's transit equity manager and a member of the working group, said at the heart of the year-long effort was the aim to give maximum assistance to the agency's most transit-dependent users without harming its largely taxpayer-funded budget.

"How can RTD remain fiscally solvent while alleviating the burden of our fares on low-income individuals?" Washington asked. "What can RTD afford in terms of a discount?"

The group concocted two new passes for RTD's consideration: a youth pass, which would give a 70 percent fare discount (the current discount is 50 percent) for riders under 20 years of age (exact age cutoffs for the discount will be discussed Tuesday), and a low-income pass that would cut fares by as much as a half for someone making 185 percent or less of the federal poverty level -- or around \$45,000 annually for a family of three.

But those discounts don't come for free, Washington warns.

"Every benefit you offer to one group will make it a little more difficult for others," he said.

Jeff Su, who heads up Mile High Connects and is in the working group, said it's critical that price breaks be available to those who rely on transit every day, especially with the reality that fares would go up across the entire system to help pay for the changes. Aside from the \$1.50 bump for a ticket on the University of Colorado A-Line to Denver International Airport, local bus fares would go from \$2.60 to \$3 and regional fares from \$4.50 to \$5.25 under the plan.

The last time RTD raised fares was in 2015.

"This is RTD's main constituency," Su said. "Fifty-three percent of their riders are transit-dependent."

According to data from the Colorado Fiscal Institute, 48 percent of RTD riders live in households making less than \$35,000

Others want even more from the transit agency. Jenee Elise, transit organizer for the working-women advocacy group 9to5, said the low-income pass should be given to families making twice the federal poverty wage, as opposed to the 185 percent threshold currently on the table.

One of the problems with the working group's charge over the last year, Elise said, was RTD's insistence that any solutions connected to the pass program revamp be revenue-neutral. She said RTD has other money streams it could tap to cover the cost of extending discounts where systemwide fare increases wouldn't be needed.

"It's robbing Peter to pay Paul," she said of the revenue-neutral approach. "RTD's not a business — they're a public service that we are paying for with our taxes."

The majority of RTD's annual revenue — around \$626 million — comes from sales and use taxes. Some have suggested that the agency might raise additional revenue by scaling back the rebate that retailers receive to cover their cost of collecting RTD's 1 percent sales tax. This "vendor fee" reduction would apply only to large retailers in RTD's eight-county area, and backers have approached lawmakers about drafting a bill for consideration at the legislature.

Donnell-Kay Foundation's Matt Samelson, said RTD could generate revenue to help transit-reliant students by charging for parking at its park-n-ride facilities (it's currently free to park for the first 24 hours). He said a 70 percent discount should go to riders 13 to 19 years old and that anyone 12 or younger should ride for free.

"If you're transit-dependent, how can we in a growing city increase mobility opportunities for students and youth so they access educational opportunities or get to a job?" Samelson said.

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