

FastPass appears safe, but Muni eyes other funds

Rachel Gordon, Chronicle Staff Writer

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The likelihood that Muni's most frequent riders will have to pay more for a monthly transit pass next year was all but rejected by San Francisco officials Tuesday, but higher parking fines, meter rates and parking permit fees are still possible.

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency Board of Directors held the first public airing Tuesday on a litany of options to balance the agency's budget, which faces a projected \$82 million deficit over the next two years.

The board made no official decision - that will come next month - but directors strongly signaled that raising the cost of the monthly Muni FastPass, now set at \$45, or the deeply discounted \$10 monthly pass for seniors, disabled people and youth, would be a last resort - especially until there are marked improvements in service.

"I would like to do anything but raise the fares," Director Shirley Black said.

And there are a lot of those anythings on the table. Among the ideas: raising parking fines \$10 for all penalties that cost \$90 or less; hiking by 50 cents hourly meter rates, which now range from \$1.50 to \$3, depending on the neighborhood; and charging at least \$14 more a year for residential parking permits, which now cost \$60.

The upshot: It may cost more to park in San Francisco.

"I just can't take it any more," Sharon York, a Mission District resident who gets four or five tickets a year, told the board. "Have any of you gotten a meter ticket lately? ... There's got to be some limit to those parking ticket increases. I think San Francisco has lost its heart. I think our heart has turned to stone."

The current fine to park at an expired meter is \$50 downtown and \$40 in a neighborhood commercial district, such as West Portal, the Mission District and Russian Hill.

But when it came to public comment, York was in the minority. The other half-dozen or so public speakers, most of them transit activists, said raising the cost of the monthly pass would run counter to the city's official policy of promoting transit over the private automobile.

"Every increase in a transit fare, including the FastPass, is a disincentive to ride transit," said Dave Snyder, director of transportation policy for the civic think tank, San Francisco Planning and Urban Research

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Association.

Steph Feiring, a longtime FastPass user, said the price shouldn't be increased until Muni does a better job cracking down on people who ride without paying, a common complaint among Muni's fare-paying regulars.

"People who buy the FastPass and pay are going to get penalized for people who cheat," she said.

The agency, which oversees the city's public transit system and parking and traffic operations, is facing a \$15.3 million deficit in the 2008-09 fiscal year, which starts July 1, and a \$66.2 million deficit the following year. Under city law, the agency must adopt a two-year, balanced budget. The operating budget is set to reach \$787 million next year and nearly \$821 million the year after.

The board will hold another public hearing on the budget-balancing ideas April 1. Final consideration is scheduled for April 15.

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