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How Connecticut Officials Look at Fare Prices for Trains vs Buses: Cameron on Transportation

Author : David Gurliacci

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Ridership on Metro-North is still down 85% from pre-pandemic levels, but in-state bus ridership is coming back — up to 70% of normal from a March low of 40%.

Why the difference? Because bus riders and rail riders are very different.

Surveys by CDOT and Metro-North showed the average income of a Metro-North rider was about \$150,000, given that many were living in affluent Fairfield County towns and commuting to good paying jobs in New York City.

Bus riders are predominantly working class, urban dwellers who make less money and, in many cases don't own cars. They're not riding the bus (more often than others take the train) because they feel safer, but because they have no choice. No bus, no ride, no job.

And while fares on Metro-North are still the highest of any commuter railroad in the U.S., bus fares in Connecticut are low compared to "peer transit systems" — just \$1.75. While a buck and three-quarters is nothing to a Metro-North commuter, to bus riders those fares represent real money, given their lower incomes.

So the question is, who determines what's a fair fare? You have to go back to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 where Title VI prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin. Gone are the days when developers like Robert Moses can bulldoze poor neighborhoods to build highways for the rich.

Even when it comes to transit fares and service, protections are in place to protect minorities. In our case it's the CDOT that keeps things "fair and equitable" through constant surveys and public input.

That's why they must hold public hearings anytime there's a change suggested in fares or service, what I've called "political theater." Throngs of angry commuters show up to protest fare hikes, CDOT listens and, because those hikes are really required by legislative budget crises, the agency can do little to change the inevitable. Officials I spoke with at CDOT couldn't remember a single instance when hearings changed planned fare increases.

By the way, no transit fare increases are planned right now, but given the railroad's economic plight, I'm guessing there may be service reductions. There are even predictions that peak fares for rush-hour trains could soon return.

But these are different times. The combination of massive unemployment, changing working locations and conditions and people moving their homes has a new, added layer: the social justice movement. The "Desegregate CT" forces propose massive changes in zoning, replacing single family homes with affordable, multi-family dwellings. They would also have the state control housing within a half-mile of transit stations.

Though their proposed legislation has yet to come before lawmakers in Hartford, there is little doubt that Connecticut, a small state of 169 even smaller communities, could see profound change, all of which will affect transportation.

Our fares in Connecticut seem to be based on the balance between riders' ability to pay while still keeping mass transit affordable. Commuters to NYC really have little choice but to take the train. They're a captive audience. They don't like fare hikes, but they pay them.

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Bus riders also have few options, but their fares are kept low because, as CDOT told me, “we want to assist people who are struggling.”

What do you think is a fair fare?

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.