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## MTS To Lower Youth Fares, Bring Back Free Transfers On Buses And Trolleys

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By **Andrew Bowen**



PHOTO BY NICHOLAS MCVICKER

Above: A man waits for the trolley next to a PRONTO ticket vending machine, March 11, 2021.

Board members of San Diego County's Metropolitan Transit System voted unanimously Thursday to lower one-way fares for youth and bring back free bus and trolley transfers that were eliminated more than a decade ago.

The changes are part of an overhaul to the MTS fare collection system due to launch this summer. The new system, called **PRONTO**, also includes a pay-as-you-go function that ensures passengers never pay more than the cost of a daily or monthly pass even if they pay their fares with one-way tickets.

Earlier, MTS officials were considering **raising the cost** of a one-way fare from \$2.50 to \$2.75 to make up for the lost fare revenue that passengers would be saving. But an outcry from transit riders — and additional transit subsidies included in the latest federal COVID-19 relief bill passed by Congress — prompted the agency to reverse course.

Advocates praised the decision at Thursday's MTS board meeting, saying it represented a larger shift toward viewing transit riders as customers rather than a funding source for the agency.

"Access to an affordable and frequent transit system is essential to our communities," said Carolina Martinez, climate justice director for the Environmental Health Coalition. "A decrease to youth fares and no transfer costs is in line with a much-needed strategy to protect environmental justice communities and rebuild ridership and the region's economy."

MTS ridership has plummeted during the pandemic due to a number of factors including travel and business restrictions. The system was able to avoid cutting services thanks to public transit funding included in the CARES Act passed last year and the American Rescue Plan, which President Joe Biden signed Thursday.

MTS board member and San Diego City Councilmember Vivian Moreno said the federal aid would help MTS avoid a "transit death spiral" in which lost fare revenue forces the agency to cut services, which in turn causes more ridership losses.

"I think for the next couple of years we're going to be depending more than usual on subsidy funding from the federal government to balance our budget," Moreno said. "And in this context, it makes sense to do whatever we can within reason to boost our ridership to pre-pandemic levels while we have this cushion of federal funding."

The return of free transfers from one bus or trolley route to another was a last-minute addition to the fare changes. Free transfers have been on the wishlist of transit advocates ever since they were **eliminated** at the start of the Great Recession in 2008.

In 2018, the nonprofit Circulate San Diego **launched** a campaign to bring back free transfers, arguing that the current MTS fare policy is an outlier among transit agencies nationwide.

"(Free transfers) make transit more fair to people who have to take more than one leg to complete their trip," said Circulate San Diego Policy Counsel Jesse O'Sullivan. "It makes the system's fare policy clear and predictable, which will help more riders choose transit in the future."

The fare changes still need final approvals from board members of the North County Transit District and the countywide transit planning agency SANDAG, which are expected in the next two months.