

MTA backtracks on huge Access-A-Ride hike

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The MTA is shelving an unpopular plan to more than double the fare disabled riders pay for door-to-door van service, the Daily News has learned.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority finance committee is still scheduled to vote Monday on higher fares for subways, buses and commuter trains scheduled to go into effect June 1.

But a separate provision jacking up the Access-A-Ride fare to \$5 from \$2 is no longer part of the package, a staff summary obtained by The News reveals.

Transit officials now plan to raise the van service fee by 50 cents. That would keep it equal to the cost of a one-way bus or subway trip, which is slated to rise to \$2.50.

Fare hikes of all stripes were blasted during public hearings in the city and surrounding counties this year, yet the Access-A-Ride provision stoked the greatest outrage.

Disabled riders, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, city Controller William Thompson and other officials urged the MTA to spare the service's 25,000 daily riders.

The staff summary doesn't acknowledge the strong criticism generated by the original Access-A-Ride proposal. Instead, it says staffers couldn't get the necessary paperwork and approvals completed in time for this month's MTA committee and full board meetings.

An Access-A-Ride fare greater than the subway/bus fare requires approval by the mayor and the federal government, authorities have said.

The staff summary suggests the authority will pursue the regulatory approvals while seeking savings in the program along with City Hall.

"We have to deal with the program's high costs, but before we take other actions, we have to look for savings, and there are some savings we think can be found," a City Hall source said.

To deal with massive budget shortfalls, the MTA plans to hike fares between 25% and 30% for subways, buses and commuter trains operated by its Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North divisions.

A package to rescue the agency has stalled in Albany, and yesterday, Gov. Paterson said he was not hopeful an agreement could be reached.

"Sometimes things do happen right on the deadline, but I'm not really optimistic," Paterson said.

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