

Metra Board OKs \$613 million budget

Despite the tough economic times, there are no service cuts or across-the-board fare increases included in the 2010 spending plan that was approved by the Metra Board of Directors in November.

The \$613 million budget does call for increases in one-way and weekend fares. But most Metra riders won't be affected, because they use 10-ride tickets and monthly passes and those fares won't change. The board also voted to increase the penalty for buying a ticket on the train to \$3 from \$2. The board felt the initial plan to increase the penalty to \$5 was too severe. The penalty is not assessed on passengers who board at stations where agents are not on duty.

The fare changes take effect on Feb. 1, 2010.

One-way fares will increase about 6 percent, or an extra 10 cents for the closest zone and an extra 45 cents for the farthest zone. The increases were rounded to the nearest quarter to simplify on-board fare collection.

Weekend fares will increase to \$7 from \$5. That will be the first increase in weekend fares since the program began in 1991.

To help balance the budget, Metra also froze management salaries, left 150 positions unfilled and asked non-union workers to pay more for health insurance.

French market opening

Fresh produce and meat, artisan breads and cheeses and lots of sweets and coffee will be available in early December when the long-awaited Chicago French Market opens within the new MetraMarket development at the Ogilvie Transportation Center.

The nearly 30 individual local artisans and purveyors are putting the final touches on their spaces within the new development, which also includes a CVS Pharmacy and a soon-to-open café, Espresso by Lavazza.

Open six days a week, Chicago French Market will be the city's first year-round indoor market.

What you'll find at Chicago French Market:

- Fresh produce, meats, breads, cheeses and sweets to cook and eat at home
- Distinctive prepared meals and snacks to grab on the go
- Delicious and unique breakfast, lunch and dinner offerings to enjoy in the market's dining space
- Artisan-made goods, special essentials and flowers for yourself or that perfect gift
- Ongoing special events and chef demonstrations



For all the delicious details on Chicago French Market's vendors and their offerings, visit www.ChicagoFrenchMarket.com.

In addition to the market, restaurants and retailers at MetraMarket, a number of improvements and changes have been implemented in OTC's suburban concourse, including the installation of new energy-saving lights to brighten up the concourse, renovation of the restrooms and the creation of a new family restroom.

We'd like to thank all the suburban concourse commuters for their patience and cooperation while we've been building a new and improved transportation center with added amenities for

you. To stay up-to-date on the latest news on MetraMarket and Chicago French Market, join the e-mail list at www.metramarket.com.

The \$43 million MetraMarket development is being built for Metra by U.S. Equities Realty, which is funding construction with a \$25 million loan and \$12 million in tax increment financing. Metra contributed \$6 million to carry out structural work that would have needed to be done with or without the project.

More than 105,000 Metra Union Pacific riders pass through Ogilvie every weekday. In addition, more than 500,000 people work within a mile of the site and more than 40,000 people live nearby.

Don't ride the UP? Come on in, anyway

Just because you don't use Ogilvie doesn't mean you can't get excited about MetraMarket. For one, you can always stop by – we think it's exciting enough

to warrant a detour. And even if you never set foot inside, MetraMarket will benefit every Metra rider.

That's because we expect to

receive \$38 million to \$40 million in profits over the next 25 years. Every dollar we get from the project is a dollar we don't have to get from fares.



On the Bi-Level

Published by Metra's Media Relations Department. Send letters, questions or feedback to On the Bi-Level, Metra, 547 W. Jackson, Chicago IL, 60661-5717. Or e-mail onthebilevel@metrarr.com.

We can't guarantee all letters will be printed or answered. Please keep letters to less than 200 words and include your first name, hometown and what line you ride. (Names are not required but strongly encouraged.) We reserve the right to edit letter for length and grammar.

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SOUNDING BOARD

Got a question? We've got an answer

Heritage delays...

I was on the Heritage Corridor 5:25 p.m. train from Chicago to Lemont on Friday, Oct. 23, 2009. Our train moved out of Union Station and then sat on the train tracks just south of the station and did not move for about an hour. Our arrival time to Lemont is typically 6:12 p.m. but we arrived 7:50 p.m. This is unrealistic and unacceptable for a commuter train ride! There was no given reason for us to be sitting idle on the tracks for so long. We were basically held hostage on a train without any reason or validation for the delay.

I checked the Metra website before I left work Friday evening for any service updates and the update status memo stated that delays would be 15 to 30 minutes on the Heritage Corridor line. At this point, this was manageable and acceptable to me. The next day I was told by others who travel on the Southwest Service line that their trains on Friday were only delayed 15 minutes! Why was our train delayed for over 2 hours and the Southwest Service was almost on time?

Jody

We had a lot of e-mail about Heritage Corridor service on that night and would like to offer our apologies for the delays and for the inaccurate estimate of how long those delays would be. Here's what happened: The freight train that derailed the day before blocked the two sets of tracks used by the SouthWest Service and Heritage Corridor. Those tracks are owned by Amtrak, not Metra. Early that Friday afternoon, Amtrak was able to open one set but needed to repair the other – which included a damaged switch used by Heritage Corridor trains but not SouthWest Service trains.

With one track open we thought we could operate both lines, with some delays, thinking it was better to offer a delayed train instead of no train. However, we did not anticipate the traffic jam that formed with freight and passenger trains waiting for Amtrak to give them clearance to go through the area. And because the signals were damaged in the derailment, trains had to move through the area at a slower rate. Heritage Corridor trains were more affected because they had to make a complex detour around the damaged switch.

The wait was just like the one that airline passengers experience during iffy weather – you wait, hoping that at any moment you'll get clearance to take off. We thought we'd get the OK to go through the area at any moment, and that's why we didn't turn back. We thought wrong, and we're sorry. Adding to the communication problems was the fact that the PA system on one car of the train malfunctioned. You would have thought it was Friday the 13th, with all that bad luck.

...and BNSF delays

I ride the BNSF to Route 59 and have found the 5:45 train from Union Station to Route 59 to be frequently late – either it slows west of Chicago or stops east of Naperville to let other trains pass. Aside from safety, your prime mission is for trains to be on time and that is not happening with the train I ride. When I ask the conductor, I get a vague comment about freight trains determining schedules. If you have no control over train schedules and cannot fix the lateness of this train then change your arrival times to reflect that reality or lower the fare since you are not achieving your key objective of on time arrival.

Tom

That line has not had a good few months. All of you who have written us know it, we know it, and BNSF - which operates the line through a purchase-of-service agreement with Metra – knows it. We offer our apologies, but you also want action: BNSF says it is taking a number of steps to address performance issues, including weekly meetings to review delays, address their root causes and implement corrective actions. They are also implementing a freight curfew during rush hours that will lead to fewer interactions between freight and passenger trains. And they are flying dispatchers in from Fort Worth for field trips to get exposure to the commuter operation to enhance their understanding of the suburban trains and the impact of delays on passengers. In addition, the major project to replace 55,000 ties and resurface the rails is coming to an end, and better service will be the result.

Leaky window

For weeks now we have been informing Metra of a leaky window on car 799. It leaks every day and at this point is getting quite annoying that nothing has been done about it. Can someone please address this issue?

Dennis

The window was being fixed the very day you wrote to us.

Restroom renovation

I hope that the revenue from MetraMarket will allow Metra to renovate the restrooms on the Ogilvie concourse. I can only speak for the men's room, but it's outdated, dingy and quite gross.

Danny

You've probably noticed by now that the restrooms were renovated and are reopened.

SOUND OFF

“...the snarky, snotty observations by Metra’s customers about fellow commuters ... offer some of the best free entertainment around.” - SouthtownStar, March 13, 2009

Code of Conduct

I have been riding the Metra for 10 years now and it seems like the same common sense courtesies are being broken again and again by either folks who don't know or just don't care.

Recently I was stunned at a rude passenger who abused the poor conductor who politely told him to remove his feet from the seat. The rider said, “Show me where it says I can't do it!”

Inspired by a recent trip to Europe where train travel is much more sophisticated, there is a written code of conduct printed and made readily available on the train. (Note: it's a code of conduct, not enforceable rules.) They are suggested “common sense” rules posted for all to see. And folks there seem a bit better behaved on the rails.

So a Metra code of conduct, nice and simple, is as follows:

- 1) No seat hogging
- 2) Cell phone voice should be low (as well as conversation voice).
- 3) No clipping nails, applying nail polish, or other personal grooming that emits offensive odors, sounds, or spreads disease.
- 4) No feet on the seat or into the backs of others
- 5) Don't crowd the vestibule until your stop comes.
- 7) Pick up your trash
- 6) Treat conductors and fellow passengers with respect and common courtesy.

I'm sure there are more. But post those key rules and educate the public. Conductors job will be easier, riders will know the “common sense” guidelines, and we'll all ride happily ever after.

Jeff

Hey buddy, what are you trying to do, put us out of business?



“I did not eat the last banana.”

We asked last month for riders to submit funny phone conversations that they couldn't help overhearing. We didn't get a lot of responses, but the ones we did receive were darn good ones:

Fruity debate

On my train in the morning there is an elderly gentleman who gets a morning call from I assume his wife. One morning it was 10 minutes of who ate the last banana. He's telling her he didn't eat it and where she might find the banana. It was back and forth – he must have said it 20 times: “I did not eat the last banana.”

She never did find the banana that he supposedly didn't eat.

I do tattoos

Here's a highlight from a recent conversation on the UP

Northwest that was overheard by almost everyone on the car:

“Does the wedding dress cover your tattoos? Do his parents know about all of the tattoos you have?”

The loud conversation went on for more than half an hour. After the woman got off the train (while still on the phone), half the car burst out laughing. We all wanted to know what the tattoos looked like!

Unprivate talk

This was not on a cell phone but two passengers sitting in front of me, drinking, and not realizing how loud they were talking:

Man: “I love my wife and kids, but I've always thought you were the one for me.”

Woman: “No doubt. Let's ditch our families tonight and get a room at the Starwood.”

Clear as day.

A good cause

I am a BNSF Metra commuter collecting [huge] stacks of papers. The used newspapers

that I collect are delivered to animal shelters, providing lining for cages housing hundreds of homeless animals. Visit an animal shelter. Look into the ani-

mals' faces. Having volunteered for almost five years in Patient Care at the Anti-Cruelty Society of Chicago, I have witnessed firsthand the horrific condition in which many of these animals arrive. In return for their unconditional love of us, so many of them have been abused (bones broken, eyes poked out, burned, limbs tied requiring amputation, abandoned, etc.). I encourage all Metra commuters to collect newspapers. Take them to local animal shelters. Used towels, cat litter and many other items are needed. Other commuters hand me their used newspapers as I make my way through the train. Thank you for spurring me to use Sound Off to reach so many.

Dave

Here's a pat on the back for your good work. May it spur others to do the same.

Back to backpacks

A few words for the person who really has it in for backpackers: (October issue)

1. Don't you dare lump me in with all those rude and ignorant people. I am very courteous when I have my backpack.

2. You say we're adults and should get a briefcase because backpacks look stupid on adults. In my job, a briefcase would look stupid. I have to walk 1.3 miles every single day when I get off the train, and having a backpack makes the trek a lot easier.

3. You say people bump you who are unaware and unapologetic. If they are unaware they have bumped you, how can they apologize? (duh!)

Nanette

We declare this debate over, with a clear win for (considerate) backpackers.

'Twas the Holiday Rush Hour

'Twas the time before Christmas and folks on the rails
Were crowding the aisles...and clipping their nails.
They were sitting in stairwells, and propping wet boots
On overhead railings...(uncaring galoots!)

Conductors were thwacking their punches on walls,
Waking the dozers with noise that appalls.
A lawyer was spreading his briefs on three seats,
A Walkman was clicking non-musical treats.

Three women gaggled, two gentlemen brayed,
A self-centered person said his/her nerves were quite frayed.
A typical rush hour retreat from the city;
("Those wet boots are dripping, my hair's getting gritty!")

But we'll be home quickly, they all know that's true,
Commuting's a bother – but they do get you through.
The on-time performance is okay, I guess;
And this sure beats driving – the highway's a mess.

But the express train is slowing! We shouldn't stop here!
"What's wrong on the railroad?" they queried in fear.
They all checked their watches. "We'll be two minutes late."
"I'm very important! Don't stop! I can't wait!"



The loudspeaker crackled, all ears went a-twitch.
The engineer spoke, his voice catching a hitch.
"Forgive the delay, folks," (He sounded uptight).
"There's something out there that just isn't right."

"There's a man on the tracks in my headlight ahead,"
"He's got a big belly, and his suit is all red."
On the railroad, of course, all-red means you stop.
The express did just that. The schedule was shot.

"We're close to him now," word crackled on back.
"He's waving his arms, he's lugging a sack."
"And blocking Track One is a bell-bedecked sleigh,
We'll just have to stop – we regret the delay."

The passengers grumbled. This must be a stunt.
"It's those newsletter people!" said one with a grunt.
I know what they've done," said another, in rage.
"They just had to fill this @%#&@\$ last page!"

This poem first appeared in the December 1989 issue. We're re-running it to wish everyone a joyful holiday season and to give you a taste of our silver anniversary issue, coming this winter. It will include some of the greatest moments in OTBL history.

Jeanne Hartig
Ph.D. in Community
Psychology student
V.P. of Marketing
and Communications

"Sometimes you get a second
chance to get it right. That's
why I'm getting my Ph.D.
in Community Psychology."

Groups forming now for
spring 2010 start.

NLU
I got it here.