



ON THE

BI-LEVEL

Commuter Newsletter, July 2009



Taking credit

Yes, it's true. Metra passengers will soon be able to use credit or debit cards to pay for their monthly passes or other tickets. The plan is to allow credit card payments online by early fall and at all staffed stations by February 2010. We know there are a lot of questions about this important change, and we're here to answer them.

What took you so long? OK, that's the one everyone is asking and it's a fair question. The answer boils down to costs. Accepting credit cards requires an upfront investment. We have to upgrade our website, and we have to equip each staffed station with at least one credit card reader, and one dedicated phone line. We have to get vending machines that can take credit cards at downtown stations and at the busiest stations on the Metra Electric line (which does not have ticket agents). All that could cost more than \$2.2 million. It's an investment we judged we could defer, given that our lack of capital dollars has forced us to put off more critical projects. Plus, we estimate the recurring costs at \$3 million to \$5 million a year, mostly in credit card fees.

So why now? A variety of factors, not the least of which is the fact that state lawmakers gave us a mandate to start accepting them. But we're also in the process of upgrading our accounting system and our website, so it makes sense to make them credit-card compati-

ble. We recognize we are playing catch-up and that it's time to bite the bullet.

Will it cost more to use a credit card? No. We decided (and the state ordered) that all passengers will pay the same fare, no matter how they pay it.

Does that mean fares will increase? No, not as a direct result of taking credit cards.

Won't you save in money-handling and check fees? Maybe some but not much. Those costs aren't that high in the first place. And we're still going to be taking cash and checks, so we'll still have some of those costs.

What about getting new riders, and therefore new revenue? Maybe some. We're not convinced that we've lost a lot of riders because they couldn't pay with a credit card. After all, last year was a record year for ridership on Metra.

What can we buy on the Web? You'll be able to purchase up to two monthly passes or up to three 10-ride tickets per transac-

tion. You'll have to buy monthly passes by the 24th of the previous month to guarantee delivery by the 1st. You'll also be able to create a "My Metra" account to order the regular purchase and delivery of monthly passes or 10-ride tickets.

When will we start to see vending machines that take credit cards at all stations? That won't come for awhile. It will require a multi-million dollar investment, and quite frankly we don't have the money.

Didn't state lawmakers pass a capital bill to give you more money? Yes, although at the time of writing Gov. Pat Quinn hadn't signed the bill yet. Between that bill and an earlier, smaller, bill, Metra should get about \$1.1 billion. That's a chunk of cash, but you have to remember that the

state hasn't had a capital bill in more than five years. There's a huge backlog of projects that need to be done just to keep our system in a state of good repair, and \$1.1 billion won't even fund all of them. For instance, roughly half that amount will be spent buying badly needed new cars for the Metra Electric.

Is this the first step to a universal fare card that can be used on Metra, the CTA and Pace? It is a necessary step, yes, but the universal fare card idea is really a separate, complicated issue. The difficulty with a universal fare card, to be brief, is that Metra has a) an open system, without turnstiles, and b) a distance-based fare structure. It will be expensive and logistically complex to equip stations and conductors with the card readers that would likely be needed for us to accept a universal card. A years-old study put the regionwide cost of a universal card at anywhere from \$60 million to \$170 million. We're not against the idea, but it's going to take a lot of money to do it.





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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 letters for length and grammar.

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SOUNDING BOARD

Got a question, we've got an answer

Hold the strudel

I ride the UP West line from Geneva to Chicago. I've noticed that the washrooms are without water at the sink. Included in each washroom is a dispenser. The dispensers are not labeled. Do these dispensers contain soap, hand sanitizer or strudel icing? It really looks like icing.

Bill
UP West

Well, it's not strudel frosting, although maybe you're on to something there. It's waterless hand sanitizer.

Schedule confusion

This happened the Friday before Memorial Day. As typical on the day before a holiday weekend there were special trains scheduled in the afternoon. I normally leave work aiming for the 3:25 UP Northwest train out of Ogilvie for Park Ridge. When I got to the station I entered the platform area and glanced at the signboards looking for 3:25. I found it, got on the train and buried my face in the book I was reading just as I do every other day. But it turns out I was on the wrong train, a UP West train to Elmhurst, and so were about 15 other people.

Sure it's my responsibility to read the boards and choose my train accordingly. I'm not debating that. However, setting the departure time for a "special" train to be exactly the same as a normally scheduled train will continue to cause these same problems in the future. I think a small change to the scheduled time for the "special" trains would reduce the potential confusion in the future. Since it's "special," it would seem to me

that scheduling it a minute or two either side of the regularly scheduled trains would eliminate any of this kind confusion and wouldn't conflict with any other regularly scheduled departures.

Rick
UP Northwest

That's a good suggestion, and it's one we're going to follow. Thanks, and sorry for the confusion.

And can you whistle?

Pointing to the stimulus advantages you mention a \$71 million project will save 62 jobs. I'd feel better if you did not brag like that. I have 61 friends willing to give up our jobs for just \$62 million to split between us – and the treasury would be \$9 million ahead!

Jeffrey

Ah, but we wouldn't get renovated locomotives out of the deal, would we? That's the main goal of spending the money. We're sure you could do a lot of stimulating things with a million bucks, but can you pull a nine-car train?

CUS work underway

What plans, if any, are there for the reinforcement of the ceiling above Union Station's south side platforms? I find it unconscionable that safety officials deem them safe. They leak like sieves and steel infrastructure is exposed because chunks of concrete have collapsed exposing it. The problem is not solved by the haphazardly constructed drop ceilings which are also collapsing in spots.

Peter

You may not have noticed (because you can't yet tell from underneath and we don't know which exit you use) but Chicago last month began renovating the Jackson St. viaduct over the South Side platforms. Jackson from Canal to the river is closed for the work, which will take until next spring. The structure, which dates from the 1920s, is being rebuilt, which will solve problems with leaks and concrete.

While unsightly, the temporary measures that have been used at Union Station have been safe. But we're glad the city was able to find the money to do the repairs.

No means no for all

I am a commuter on the BNSF line and I truly hope someone reads this. I need to ask you: why are conductors allowed to smoke on the platforms? There are signs posted all over, "NO SMOKING" by city/state ordinance. May I ask why conductors are exempt from this law? I often take the 4:48 p.m. train home, and I generally get to this train very early (about 4:10-4:15 p.m.) so I wait outside the closed doors til they open. Meanwhile another train has just pulled up on the adjacent track, and a conductor gets off and starts walking on our shared platform toward the station, lit cigarette in hand, puffing away.

Ann

Well, the answer is, they're not exempt. We forwarded your message to the BNSF and they have assured us that the conductor in question has been warned to stop lighting up and stop setting such a bad example.

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

Plenty of room

I would just like to say to those of you who sit on the end seat away from the window. Just because a person is plus-sized does not mean that they are going to take up the whole seat or cause you to be uncomfortable in anyway, unlike some average-sized riders, those of us who are plus-sized do know how to judge the space needed for you as well as us to be comfortable, so please don’t feel the need to move.

Anonymous

Thanks for the reminder, and thanks even more for your plus-sized politeness.

Not a good idea

The young girls who were giving the show on the 3:30 out-bound Milwaukee West line were making sure no one was able to rest, work or concentrate on much of anything. Really was the throwing of the frisbee necessary? Somehow I think the conductor might notice groups such as these if some of the dangling youngsters fall over the top rail as they drape themselves over to entertain the riders.

And here’s a message for those of you who play the game of hiding your cans, lunch sacks, beverage cups etc.: if you will leave them in plain sight someone might dispose of them as they detrain. Obviously, you have no interest in keeping the area clean, but some of us daily riders really don’t object to a clutter free area.

Vera
Milwaukee West

Everyone should clean up after themselves, including the slobs. And for the record, the throwing of frisbees or any other flying objects is not permitted on Metra trains.

Turn it down, please

Frankly, my music may be loud because it’s needed to drown out the incessant drone of so many conversations, that I for one do not want to hear.

Rochelle

Please. If your music is loud enough to leak out of your headphones and annoy others, then it’s way too loud to be simply drowning out all those annoying people talking, interacting and refusing to be mute for you.



All calls aren’t equal

How about this for insensitive, self-absorbed commuters: A Metra passenger confronted me this morning about using my cell phone because it disturbed her. I rarely use my phone on public transportation, but today it was necessary to sort out urgent healthcare issues for a very sick family member. Also, I don’t shout into my phone so my voice level was moderate. Having far more important things to deal with, I simply ignored her.

Lesson to be learned is don’t rush to judgement complaining about every cell phone call. Some of them are urgent and necessary. To the woman who was rude and insensitive to me,

remember, what goes around, comes around.

Linda
UP Northwest

Another example of why we should all take a deep breath and think about things before we say or do something we regret.



What a choice

I had to write in – how’s this for a twist on the people who complain about the irreverently foul “nail clipping” people:

For those of you who do not like the sound of people who clip their nails on the train or file their nails. I do clip my nails on the train, if I have a pair of nail clippers. However for those of you who would prefer I not clip them, I’d be happy to go back to my normal habit of biting my nails. Often I bite my nails until I’ve reached the nail bed, then chew on the skin and cuticle until it’s gone. I wonder if you prefer nasty nail clipping to bloody digits?

Ann
Milwaukee North

Um, well...yikes. There is another choice: doing it in private. That’s what a certain OTBL editor who also bites his nails does.

Connection missed

To the girl I tried to speak to in Barrington: Last month, a couple of minutes before the 6:05 p.m. UP Northwest train No. 656 to Chicago from Barrington arrived at

Barrington, I tried to talk to you, and all I did was say “hello,” but you had the gall to say that you did not want to be bothered and wanted me to leave you alone. Well, guess what, YOU BLEW IT!

A. Jones
Metra Electric

Well, that’s certainly one way of looking at it.

Impressive example

I was so impressed by the young woman the other day who got off the train at Union Station and went up to the conductor to tell him that he forgot to punch her ticket. As tempting as it is to get a free ride, Metra needs every dollar for train car repairs, track and signal repairs. In the end, the more money Metra collects, the safer our ride will be for all of us.

Mary
Heritage Corridor

Couldn’t have said it any better ourselves.

Great service

I just wanted to say that I really enjoy the crew on the 7:40 p.m. Union Pacific West Line #63 Chicago to Elburn. They make the ride a lot of fun and always provide excellent customer service. In fact, I think all crews on this line are great but that crew in particular makes the ride really enjoyable. Please pass along my compliments to them. I wish my fellow passengers would show some of the same common courtesy and respect. Especially when it comes to leaving trash on the train.

Tim

We need a pat on the back every now and then. Thanks.

Summer travel notes

Take Metra to Ravinia

Concerts will begin and end on a high note for music buffs who take advantage of Metra's seasonal rail service to and from Ravinia Park this summer.

Those planning to attend any of the concerts at the 2009 Ravinia Festival, which runs through Sept. 20, can board the Union Pacific North's "Ravinia Park Special" from Ogilvie Transportation Center at Madison and Canal Streets to reach the world-renowned park.

The special train departs Chicago at 5:50 p.m. and makes all stops to Central St.-Evanston, then travels nonstop to Ravinia Park for a 6:30 p.m. arrival. On weekends, the "Ravinia Special" departs Ogilvie Transportation Center at 5:35 p.m. and arrives at 6:16 p.m. In addition, a special return train departs approximately 15 minutes after the concert is over. Due to earlier concert times, the special will not operate on July 5, July 12, July 19, July 26, August 2 and August 9.

Discounted \$5 round-trip special event tickets, available on the train and at the downtown terminal, can be used for the 5:50 p.m., 6:00 p.m. and 6:44 p.m. departures. Pre-purchased tickets may also be used. For complete schedule information, call Metra Passenger Services, 312-322-6777, during business hours, visit metrarrail.com, or call the RTA Travel Information Center at 836-7000.



Supercuts train wraps appear

You've probably already seen them. Three Metra cars wrapped with an advertisement for Supercuts have been in service since last month and will ride the rails through the end of the July. It's all part of our efforts to bring in more non-fare revenue. Look for more wraps in the coming months.

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