

Bolt Missoula

Mountain Line's Blog



Benefits to a Fare-Free Mountain Line

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This week the Missoulian featured an article on the recent budget game that were held as the City of Missoula gears up for budget discussions. Missoula City Councilwoman Caitlin Copple, who organized the event, reported that participants at the game generated ideas that weren't part of the budget scenarios presented at the games. Copple said the top idea was that Missoula offer free bus rides. Since the article appeared I've had several residents in the community ask me what the benefits would be of a fare free Mountain Line? Here's what national research from the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) finds on the subject:

Providing public transit on a fare-free basis for all passengers occurs on a daily basis throughout the US in more than three dozen communities. Proponents claim that if other public services such as schools, libraries, and parks (as well as most roads) are considered important enough to provide at no charge to the user, then providing everyone in the community with at least a basic means of mobility should also be a public good. Think about it...when's the last time the library asked you to deposit 50 cents in exact change only for each book you were checking out? Or the last time you were asked to pay 50 cents in exact change to enter your neighborhood park?

According to the TCRP, here's a quick list of some of the benefits that occurred in communities that went fare-free on their public transit systems (with some local notes added by myself):

- In locales such as resort towns and university-dominated communities, there are often lots of passengers at many stops. A fare-free policy facilitates faster boarding, allowing passengers to board through all doors without the need to take the time to pay a fare or

swipe a fare card. The reduction in dwell time helps to reduce travel time, thereby preserving service quality and avoiding costs associated with the need for placing more buses into service. Local note: Missoula has nearly 1 million boardings each year on Mountain Line. With an industry standard boarding time of 3.5 seconds to pay a fare or swipe a fare card the time savings of a fare-free system can add up quickly, which can be the difference of Mountain Line getting a customer to their workplace or other important destination on-time.

- Providing fare-free public transit service is virtually certain to result in significant ridership increases no matter where it is implemented. Evidence from researched indicate that ridership will increase from 20% to 60% in a matter of just a few months, and even more in some areas. The most recent public transit agency to go fare-free is in Corvallis, Oregon, in 2011, which resulted in a 43% increase in ridership within two months, with no increase in service hours. Local note: Mountain Line will soon be implementing the improvements recently approved by voters, which include late-evening service on the four most popular routes and 15-minute all-day bus frequency (known as Bolt! service) on Route 2, which will complement the popular Bolt! service already in place on the system's busiest route. If Mountain Line went fare-free at the same time these improvements were implemented the total ridership increase for Missoulians could be a very conservative 400,000 rides a year. That's a ridership increase that would benefit us all.
- The subsidy per passenger drops significantly and the effectiveness and productivity of public investment in transit is enhanced. Local note: an easy way to think of this concept is to envision a cost for the Mountain Line system that doesn't change while an additional 400,000 rides are provided.
- Research indicates that a percentage of the additional trips (5% to 30%) were made by people switching from other motorized modes. In more recent implementation of fare-free public transit in the nation, it appears that choice riders are more likely to use the service. Local note: Missoulians love their transportation options, which include busing, walking, and biking. With recent improvements to Mountain Line, and additional changes on the way, Mountain Line is becoming more convenient and livable. Research suggests that fare-free in combination with high quality transit service is the right combination for maximizing efficiency and effectiveness of Mountain Line. Another added benefit of fare-free? Research shows that where fare-free public transit is implemented, current customers ride more often, which translates into buses having more customers aboard in the off peak hours of the day (driving upwards effectiveness and efficiency).
- Fare-free transit has been a source of community bonding and pride that also has helped local communities earn positive recognition. A number of communities offering fare-free transit have received state and national awards as "best places to live." Fare-free service is reported to help bridge the divides that exist in "town and gown" communities.

It's a safe bet to say that a fare-free Mountain Line system in Missoula would have lots of benefits to the community. If you have comments on whether Mountain Line should be fare-free contact the Mountain Line Board of Directors at info@mountainline.com and Mayor John Engen at mayor@ci.missoula.mt.us.