Demonstration Project

Partners for a Zero Fare Mountain Line

Goal: Through financial contributions from multiple partners, Mountain Line will operate zero fare for riders during a 3-year demonstration period to increase total ridership on the fixed route system by 45%.

Period of the Demonstration Project: Calendar year 2015 through 2017

***Benefits of a Zero Fare Mountain Line to Missoula***

Community Bonding and Pride

Zero fare transit has been a source of community bonding and pride that also has helped local communities earn positive recognition.  A number of communities offering zero fare transit have received state and national awards as “best places to live.”  Additionally, zero fare service is reported to help bridge the divides that exist in “town and gown” communities.

Significant Ridership Increases

Providing zero fare transit service is virtually certain to result in significant ridership increases no matter where it is implemented.  Evidence from research indicates 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 zero fare is in Corvallis, Oregon, in 2011, which resulted in a 43% increase in ridership within two months, with no increase in service hours.

Mountain Line will soon be implementing improvements recently approved by voters, which include 15-minute all-day bus frequency  (known as Bolt! service) on Route 2. This service will complement the popular Bolt! service already in place on the system’s busiest route. Additional improvements to be implemented with Bolt! service on Route 2 include late-evening service on the four most popular routes.  If Mountain Line went zero fare at the same time these improvements were implemented the total ridership increase is estimated at a very conservative 400,000 rides a year by the third year of implementation.

Reduced Subsidy Per Passenger and Increased Productivity of Public Investment

With zero fare, the subsidy per passenger drops significantly and the effectiveness and productivity of public investment in transit is enhanced.   An easy way to think of this concept is to envision a cost for the Mountain Line system that stays constant while an additional 400,000 rides are provided.

More Choice Riders

Research indicates that a percentage of the additional trips generated from operating with zero fare (5% to 30%) are made by people switching from other motorized modes.  In more recent implementation of zero fare public transit in the nation, it appears that choice riders are more likely to use the service.  With recent improvements to Mountain Line, and additional changes on the way, Mountain Line is becoming more convenient and livable.  Operating zero fare in combination with high quality transit service is the right combination for maximizing efficiency and effectiveness.  Another added benefit of zero fare?  Research shows that where zero fare 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.

Reduction in Dwell Time

In locales such as resort towns and university-dominated communities, there are often lots of passengers at many stops.  A zero fare 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 to maintain service quality.  Mountain Line has nearly 1 million boardings each year.  With an industry standard boarding time of 3.0 to 3.5 seconds to pay a fare or swipe a fare card the time savings of a zero fare system add up quickly, which can be the difference of Mountain Line getting a customer to their workplace or other important destination on-time, and significantly decrease operating costs in the future to maintain headways.

Reduction in Expenses and Administrative Functions

Zero fare public transit allows agencies to save on the costs associated purchasing and maintaining electronic fare boxes, producing and distributing fare media, collecting and managing fares, and other related duties. These cost savings can be reinvested in improved services.

Increased Support from Bus Operators

Bus operators are reported to be very supportive of zero fare policies in almost all locations where they now exist. Although they might have to contend with a few more “problem passengers,” they regard that as a fair tradeoff for not having to deal with fares and fare disputes. Vehicle operators often serve as better ambassadors for the system and the community when they do not have to collect and enforce fares, and can spend more time answering passenger’s questions and focusing on safe bus operation.

Benefits to Students, Seniors and Low Income Residents

In small urban communities, local property owners are able to promote their locations as “being on the free bus line.” Additionally, zero fare transportation systems are attractive to those considering where to retire. Finally, universities have been able to minimize their investments in parking facilities when fare-free transit is offered, enabling them to build more teaching facilities and dormitories. University communities also noted that zero fare transit provides a measure of equity to nonstudent residents who are usually lower-income and would be the only ones needing to pay a fare when they board.

Contributions to Livability and Environmental Objectives

Offering zero fare service contributes to livability and environmental objectives. Significant increases in ridership lower the carbon produced in a community, contributing to cleaner air, reduced traffic congestion, and less dependence on gasoline and autos.

Provides Essential Services

The elimination of fares essentially places transit in the same category of services as schools, libraries and most community parks. Although these services are paid for with community taxes, people usually do not pay a service charge to use them. They are regarded as essential elements of what a community deems important and why it is worth living in. Removing the fare requirements of transit democratizes the service, making it equally available to everyone regardless of income, to use as often as they like. If properly funded and maintained, the image of the buses change from being the clunky transportation choice of last resort to the service that connects all elements of the community and provides equal opportunity to access all that a community offers.