Partners for a Zero Fare Mountain Line

May 15, 2014,

Dear Members of the Missoula Transportation Policy Coordinating Committee,

We are writing to ask you to initiate an effort to convert Mountain Line into a zero-fare community bus system. Zero-fare community bus services substantially increase ridership, increase operations efficiency while saving administrative expenses, and make communities more livable. As Missoula grows, measures to maximize our community bus service are becoming increasingly important.

We know from looking at other communities that providing zero-fare community bus service is virtually guaranteed to result in a significant increase in bus ridership for Mountain Line. For example, a survey of 39 communities with zero-fare systems showed ridership increases between 20 and 60 percent. Corvallis, Oregon, a city approximately the same size as Missoula with a similar bus system, adopted a zero-fare community transit system in 2011. Ridership increased 43 percent within two months.

Elimination of on-board fare collection increases the efficiency of the transit system. Without the need to collect money, buses can load passengers faster, spend less time at bus stops, and increase on-time route efficiency. Additionally, zero-fare systems save money by eliminating the need for costly administrative functions and equipment related to handling cash, tickets, transfers, and passes.

Zero-fare bus service contributes to livability and public health objectives as well. Significant increases in ridership lower the carbon and other pollution produced in a community, contributing to cleaner air, reduced traffic congestion, and less dependence on gasoline and autos. Increased ridership means a more active and healthier community.

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.

Mountain Line will soon implement improvements recently approved by voters, which include 15-mintue all-day bus frequency (Bolt! Service) on Route 2 and late-evening service on Mountain Line’s four most popular routes. Professional transit planners estimate – that when combined with these new services – zero fare would produce a total ridership increase of 400,000 rides each year by the third year following implementation. That translates to an estimated 45% ridership increase benefiting us all!

We represent community partners that contribute financially to Mountain Line in our community. We respectfully request that the funds we contribute over the next three years be utilized to fund a three year zero fare demonstration project.

We believe Mountain Line should convert to a zero-fare bus community bus system in January 2015, along with the other great changes that will occur at the same time. We urge you to give this due consideration, and we look forward to working with the Committee to help make this important step a reality.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,