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U.S.

Cities Offer Free Buses in Bid to Boost Flagging Ridership

While national rider numbers have been declining, Lawrence, Mass., saw them jump about 24% on routes where it ceased charging fares



Riders on the free 85 bus route in Lawrence, Mass., this week. PHOTO: M. SCOTT BRAUER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Jon Kamp

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LAWRENCE, Mass.—The driver on a bus circling downtown here merely tapped a button to count riders on a recent weekday morning as people streamed by the farebox without paying.

The riders weren't doing anything wrong: the region's transit authority in September stopped collecting money on three routes in this old industrial city north of Boston. Instead, Lawrence used \$225,000 in reserves to waive fares for two years.

“These three lines go through the poorest parts of our community,” said Lawrence Mayor Dan Rivera, a Democrat, explaining the rationale for free rides. “We could support those citizens to mobilize themselves out of poverty.”

The free-ride concept is also catching on in cities like Olympia, Wash., and Kansas City, Mo. Boston and others are debating the idea. It has had limited adoption historically and marks a radical departure for transit agencies that count on fares for their budgets.

Cities are broadly rethinking bus service as they face increasing traffic and falling ridership. Competition ranging from electric scooters to ride-hailing services like Uber are driving people away from buses nationwide, according to transit officials. Subways, which don't have to fight street congestion, have also seen ridership decline but not as much.

In Lawrence, the regional transit agency said ridership on the three free lines has climbed quickly—up about 24% in the first few months from a year earlier. Full cash fares are typically \$1.25, and monthly passes cost \$30.

The city of about 80,000 will have to find more money to keep the free buses rolling when the current two-year plan ends. Giovanni Mendez, a 32-year-old recently riding to an adult-learning center, said not worrying about fares has helped him get to GED classes. He wants to become an emergency-medical technician.



Bus operator Henry Allen, of Lawrence, places a "Free Bus" sign in the front window of a route 34 bus. PHOTO: M. SCOTT BRAUER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"It's working out," he said.

Tight budgets may limit how many agencies can realistically consider forgoing fares, said Paul Skoutelas, chief executive at the American Public Transportation Association, a trade group for transit agencies. Using fare revenue to help expand service is another option for many transit agencies trying to attract riders. But the free-fare concept has sparked growing interest, he said.

In Olympia, Washington’s capital, a recent ballot measure that boosted transportation funding helped the Intercity Transit agency start offering free service on all buses this month, said Ann Freeman-Manzanares, the system’s general manager.

Fares there amounted to \$2.7 million annually, a small portion of the agency’s budget, and some of that is spent maintaining fareboxes and collecting cash. “It actually was surprising to us when we started digging deep how much it costs to collect fares,” Ms. Freeman-Manzanares said.

In Kansas City, the local transit authority is overhauling its bus service and already offers free rides to veterans and students. It aims to completely cancel fares by late spring, Chief Executive Robbie Makinen said. The city council voted unanimously in December to find about \$8 million a year to cover free buses, which are already heavily supported by taxpayers.

The city manager is working to identify funds for free transit and has found several million dollars, including money spent collecting fares, Mayor Quinton Lucas’s office said.

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“That dollar fifty can go a lot further outside the farebox than in it,” said Mr. Makinen,

pointing to analysis from a local university showing that letting riders keep their fare money will pump up the local economy.

This concept has also drawn some support among city councilors in Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts’ two biggest cities. Advocates say free buses in Massachusetts would speed up boarding times, draw more passengers, aid poor residents and help reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

Around Boston, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority is working on a major overhaul aimed at improving bus service, which is currently cheaper than subway rides. But it isn't planning free rides.

"If we're truly treating it as a public good that has benefits to everyone when everyone uses it, then we should remove barriers," said Michelle Wu, a member of the Boston City Council who supports free transit.

LivableStreets Alliance, a transit advocacy group in the Boston area, estimates all Massachusetts transit agencies could make bus service free for \$60 million a year, including Boston's. That translates to a 2-cent increase in the state gasoline tax, the advocacy group said.

Massachusetts' Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack, whose agency oversees the MBTA, said advocates are substantially underestimating the cost of eliminating bus fares around Boston. Also, unlike smaller systems like in Worcester, the MBTA hasn't been losing bus riders, and seats on its busiest routes are already filled, she said.

"If someone wants to give me more money," Ms. Pollack said, "my first choice is going to be investing in and improving the buses."

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