

Chicago Tribune

No CTA fare hike, 'slight' service increase in 2015

Jon Hilkevitch | October 27, 2014

The CTA will freeze fares for the second straight year in 2015 and offer a slight increase in Blue and Orange line service aimed at easing crowding, under a proposed \$1.44 billion budget that will be unveiled Monday.

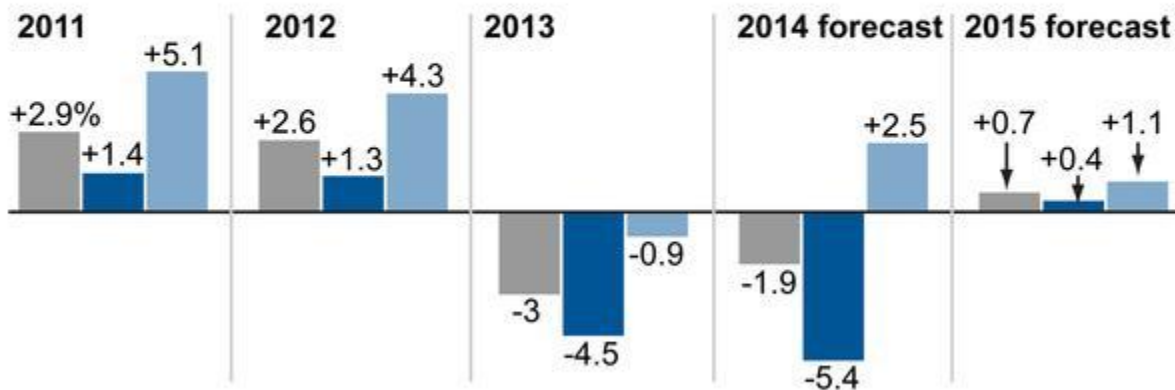
The spending plan, which will take effect as Mayor Rahm Emanuel runs for re-election, relies on ridership gains rather than fare hikes to help pay for a roughly 4.5 percent increase in CTA expenditures compared with 2014.

But there's a potential hitch. The CTA projects less than 1 percent growth in overall ridership next year. The agency expects passenger bus trips to increase 0.4 percent and rail ridership to rise 1.1 percent versus this year.

CTA ridership

Percentage change in overall ridership from previous year

■ Total ridership ■ Bus ■ Rail



Source: Chicago Transit Authority

@ChiTribGraphics

In its forecast for 2014, the CTA envisioned ridership declining 2 percent overall from 2013 levels, with bus ridership down 5.4 percent and rail ridership up 2.5 percent.

In the wake of last winter's "polar vortex" weather, which hit bus ridership more severely than rail ridership, the CTA 2015 budget book said bus ridership is expected to rebound next year if "more normal" winter weather returns.

Labor costs, which include guaranteed annual salary increases for the CTA's unionized employees, will rise by \$52.3 million and account for about \$1 billion of the proposed operating budget, according to budget documents.

CTA Chairman Terry Peterson, CTA President Forrest Claypool and CTA budget experts were not available to discuss the 2015 proposal.

Budget documents that were released said next year's spending plan calls for no increase in the \$2 bus fare, the \$2.25 base rail fare or for any passes.

In 2013, riders were hit with increases on all passes, as well as some service cuts. That same year, the CTA also implemented a \$5 fare for Blue Line trips originating at O'Hare International Airport.

Under the Ventra fare system introduced in September 2013, CTA rail riders who use cash to buy single-ride paper tickets are paying \$3 instead of the regular fare of \$2.25.

In his 2015 budget letter, Claypool said the 2013 changes were made to bring "long-overdue balance between fares and pass discounts." He also said he has brought financial stability to the CTA after the previous administration left him to wrestle with a \$308 million deficit when he started the job in 2011.

"The CTA is at last fiscally sound," Claypool said in his 2015 budget message to customers. Before last year's pass increases, the CTA last raised fares in 2009, when both bus and rail fares were increased by 25 cents.

The 204-page budget document for 2015 repeatedly mentioned the financial pressure — more than \$100 million annually in lost fare revenue — that state-mandated free rides for disabled riders and low-income senior citizens as well as reduced-fare rides are costing the CTA.

But CTA budget officials offered no hint about when riders could expect the next fare increase. Many transportation experts recommend that transit agencies adopt a policy of implementing regular but small fare increases as a way to stabilize budget cycles from year to year and to avoid socking commuters with hefty fare hikes all at once.

Metra is proposing fare increases averaging almost 11 percent next year, and the commuter railroad will seek additional hikes totaling about 68 percent over the next decade.

On the service front, a CTA restructuring in late 2012 eliminated about a dozen bus routes and reduced service on other bus routes with low ridership, while service was increased on the busiest rail lines to alleviate "crush-loading" conditions at the peak of rush periods, transit officials said.

Claypool's proposed 2015 operating budget includes "a slight increase in overall service levels, primarily for rail service, to accommodate demand and maintain standards of minimal crowding," the budget said.

Starting in January, two extra train trips will be added on the Blue Line and on the Orange Line during each rush period, according to the 2015 budget.

Last month, extra rush-hour service was added on the Red, Brown and Purple lines, and more rush-period service is scheduled to start Nov. 2 on the Brown and Orange lines, the CTA said.

Most of the new service is funded by the 2015 budget, CTA spokesman Brian Steele said Sunday. Some of the changes are taking effect this year because of work rules affecting how rail employees select their shifts, he said.

Meanwhile, the CTA next year will continue carrying out more than \$5 billion in systemwide improvements that began in 2011, officials said. Projects include replacing the 95th Street terminal on the Dan Ryan branch of the Red Line, overhauling the Red Line's Wilson station on the North Side and purchasing new buses and rail cars.

The transit agency will also open its 146th rail station next year, the Cermak/McCormick Place station on the Green Line.

The CTA, along with Metra and Pace suburban bus, will also face the challenge of testing and implementing a mobile fare-payment system in 2015 that will let riders pay fares with smartphones. The mobile ticketing project is being led by the CTA's Ventra contractor, Cubic Transportation Systems, which stumbled badly when it introduced the Ventra fare card last year.

The 2015 CTA budget must be approved by the boards of the CTA and the Regional Transportation Authority by Dec. 31. The public can comment on the budget at a hearing set for 6 p.m. Nov. 17 at CTA headquarters, 567 W. Lake St., Chicago.