

children's PRESSLINE

Students learn of possible MTA fare cuts

By **JORDAN BARSKY,**
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Tara Gallagher, 17, is one of many teenagers who may be hit by the student MetroCard cut. "I know a lot of people in my school who are just talking about how much it will affect them, how they might not be able to afford getting to school," said Tara.

This hotly debated proposal would eliminate full-fare discounts, moving those students to half-fare discounts in September 2010 and stop funding student discount cards entirely in 2011.

Although the cut could be changed when details of the MTA budget are voted on later this year, even its suggestion has riled up students, parents and teachers alike. However, many question

what they can do in their community to help, and the answer seems to be to just learn to work together.

COMMUNITY REACTIONS

There have been a number of large protests, including the Day of Outrage, a rally held in late December. Students gathered in front of the MTA headquarters to demonstrate against the cuts. Endorsed and co-organized by Tony Herbert, founder of the Urban Community Council, the rally was meant to show the MTA that students felt strongly about the proposal and wanted to take action against it. However, according to attendee and student Oriana Gonzales, the protest was disorganized and students were "flicking off buses."

"That's not going to change anything," she added.

There was also no coherent message, according to another student, December Rosenberg, who attended as well. "Fifty different groups of people were yelling 50 different things," said December. "If there were one voice, everyone together on it, I think that would be more effective."

Since then, youth have said that not enough is being done in any cohesive way, and there is a lack of any large-scale effort to counteract the proposal. Student Marin Gorhim said the youth have a better chance of being heard "if more schools got involved."

Some students have said they are considering a boycott if the proposal goes through. "I think this is going to affect schools a lot, because some classmates in my school are talking about not going to school anymore," said Bernardo Caceres, 15. "They

are just going to boycott."

Adam Hall, a 13-year-old student, agrees that schools' enrollment will be impacted by any cuts. "I think it's going to make going to school a lot harder. People are going to start leaving their schools, and they're going to find closer schools," he said. "It's going to affect schools, not just students."

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Deputy Press Secretary for the MTA Aaron Donovan said that multiple government agencies and offices need to come together to meet the students' needs. Explaining why the cuts were happening, he provided a little backstory. Prior to 1994, the city and the state used to split the cost of the student MetroCard program. This plan allowed students to take the subway to school at the cost of the city and state. In most other cities, Donovan noted that the financial burden of student transportation rests on school districts. "Usually the school district will meet this by providing fleets of yellow buses to and from school at their expense," he said.

However, in 1994, the city, state and MTA agreed to a three-way cost-sharing program, with each contributing \$45 million, said Donovan. Since then, the student population has grown, as have the costs, but the city and state's funding has not.

"In most recent years, the state has decreased its proportion of funding down to \$6 million," said Donovan. "Governor [David] Paterson released a budget proposal that would partially restore their funding up to \$25 million. That does not come close to fully funding the program, which we are in the position of asking for."

So, when in December, the MTA was informed of a \$383 million funding gap, the discounted and free student fare program was an area that the MTA felt could address the gap. "This is a program that costs the MTA \$214 million a year in lost revenue," said Donovan.

However, Donovan noted that the cuts are not finalized just yet. "Before any

service reductions can actually take place, the MTA needs to hold or will hold a series of public hearings throughout the MTA region...to collect information from the public about the impact of the cuts," he said. "After those public hearings take place, the MTA board would vote again to actually implement the cuts."

Until then, Donovan encourages citizens and politicians to "talk to anyone on the city or state level. Everyone is welcome to come to the public hearings; we will have five of them, and all throughout the boroughs."

These hearings begin next week. A schedule can be found at www.mta.info/news/pdf/hearings.pdf.

James Vacca, council member of District 13 in the Bronx, is worried about the effect of the cuts on his community. He points out that a MetroCard fare amounts to around \$1,000 a year per student, and believes that if the proposal is passed, the effect on families will be "devastating."

Vacca agrees that there must be cooperation at all levels of government to keep transportation affordable for the city's 1.1 million students.

"Most people are against the cuts, but those people have to coalesce around a strategy to prevent them. There has to be action, in Albany specifically, on a state level to make sure these cuts don't go through. We on the city level are willing to help, and we have said that we are willing to talk about the MetroCard issue, perhaps financially look into how we can be helpful because we know that these are very tough economic times."

Vacca said that it's also important for citizens to get involved too. They can "contact the MTA, contact their elected officials, [and] certainly let them know how they feel. Go online and see what organizations are fighting this and be involved. I think students can be involved also...by letting the public know that this has got to stay on people's radar screens until it's resolved."

—Additional reporting by **EMMA BALLY**

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