

SAN FRANCISCO

Mayor tells Muni to investigate eliminating fares

Newsom says he expects report in about a month

Rachel Gordon, Chronicle Staff Writer
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San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom has asked transit officials to study eliminating fares on city buses, streetcars and cable cars -- a plan that if enacted would be the largest such experiment in the nation.

"If it could happen anywhere, it could happen in San Francisco," said Newsom, who said free transit could lure people out of their cars and cut traffic.

No major transit agency in America has a systemwide free-fare policy. But more than a dozen cities -- including Seattle, Portland and Salt Lake City -- offer free rides in their downtown business corridors. The small East Bay city of Emeryville provides free bus shuttle service around town and to and from an Oakland BART station.

Newsom, who is up for re-election this year, said he has discussed such a program with Muni officials for months.

He told The Chronicle that free rides may not be a big financial stretch after considering the costs of collecting fares, including enforcement and maintenance of fare boxes.

Newsom said the Municipal Transportation Agency's financial team is still crunching the numbers and should conclude its report within a month or so.

Agency officials plan to collect a projected \$138 million in transit fares during the new fiscal year that starts July 1. That accounts for just 22 percent of the annual Municipal Railway budget -- below the national average of 34.2 percent.

City officials suspect fare cheats are partly to blame for the low collection rate, and Muni plans to hire more fare inspectors.

If the idea does go forward, Newsom said it likely would start out as a pilot project, perhaps on certain lines or on certain days.

"When you add everything up, this idea certainly deserves consideration," Newsom said.

The possibility of free transit was broached during the last mayoral election by Newsom's chief opponent, then-Supervisor Matt Gonzalez.

The reaction Tuesday from Muni was noncommittal. The agency is "aggressively reviewing all options" to address system's financial viability and "nothing is off the table," said agency spokeswoman Maggie Lynch.

Muni, which has about 700,000 boardings a day, charges \$1.50 for a regular adult fare and \$45 for a standard monthly Fast Pass, and offers discounts for seniors, children and the disabled.

Newsom said the costs to purchase and maintain fares boxes, to count the money and to pay a crew to catch fare cheats are major expenses that could be eliminated if people could ride for free. Muni officials are studying how much money, if any, could be saved under a free-fare system.

But such a policy would increase the number of riders, which in turn could put increase the system's expenses. Probably, more buses, streetcars, drivers, guards and maintenance workers would be needed.

"All of these issues are being analyzed," Newsom said.

Last year, when the Bay Area's public transit agencies offered free rides during Spare the Air Days, the number of riders spiked. Some regular commuters grumbled -- particularly those who take BART and the ferries -- about overcrowding and rowdy, joy-riding teens. Crime reports on BART went up.

Margaret Cliver, a 50-year-old Mission District resident who commutes by bus, fears the same problems on Muni.

"Gavin Newsom must have taken a leave of his senses to even consider this. Muni is already overloaded with stinky crazies, loud-mouth-behaved louts and other zoological forms of low life. The day it becomes entirely free, it will become a dumpster on wheels, and I, along with the rest of those who currently attempt to use the system, will give up on it entirely," Cliver said.

But Larry Foard, another Muni regular, supports the idea.

"Passengers get to their destination faster," said the 40-year-old Castro resident. "How many human lifetimes are wasted every year while Muni collects fares?"

Newsom's comments quickly reverberated at Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting, affecting a vote. Initially, supervisors narrowly defeated on a 6-5 vote a nonbinding resolution urging the Municipal Transportation Agency to offer a discounted \$30 fast pass for riders age 18 to 21.

Board of Supervisors President Aaron Peskin interrupted the meeting to call for a rescinding of the vote on the resolution, citing an online Chronicle story on Newsom's free Muni idea. Peskin switched his vote for the resolution, saying it was a step in the right direction toward a free transit system.

Other supervisors expressed their concern about free Muni service.

"Supe Peskin, I would just suggest that you stay strong with your initial beliefs when you came in here and not allow yourself to fall victim to what appears on just the surface to be a bit of an election-year gimmick," Supervisor Sean Elsbernd said. "Let it alone, and just vote no on this."

Peskin was not swayed and ultimately provided the key vote to pass the resolution.

Newsom said his re-election bid did not influence his decision to ask Muni to explore the idea.

Chronicle staff writers Charlie Goodyear and Cecilia M. Vega contributed to this report. E-mail Rachel Gordon at rgordon@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/03/07/BAG8ROGRI21.DTL>

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