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1 888 838 5355**Miami Intermodal Center****News Clip**From: *Miami Today*, Thursday, April 15, 2010Subject: **Miamians escape transit fare hike, but for how long?**Provided by: Jenine Spoliansky, Kommunikatz, Inc.
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TRANSPORTATION

MIAMI TODAY

Miamians escape transit fare hike, but for how long?

BY RISA POLANSKY

Though most US transit agencies are looking at hiking fares or cutting service in the face of dwindling government budgets, don't expect either in Miami-Dade this year, Transit Director Harpal Kapoor says.

Eighty-four percent of US transit agencies since January 2009 have cut or are considering cutting service or increasing fares – "and we are not one of the 84[%]," Mr. Kapoor said, citing an American Public Transportation Association survey released this month.

"We are not doing any fare increases," he said, "a good thing for Miami-Dade Transit."

It was a long ride to get here. Two years ago, the transit department faced a \$20 million operations gap.

Commissioners in 2008 agreed to raise fares 50 cents, with an automatic increase every three years based on the consumer price index, marking the first fare hike in 15 years.

Last year, they voted to re-route most of the revenue from the voter-approved half-penny sales surtax meant for new transportation projects to patch holes in the transit department's general operating budget.

And since 2006, the county has cut millions of miles of annual bus travel, saving tens of millions of dollars.

The fixes added up to a balanced budget last year, and Mr. Kapoor expects the same this year – though the road ahead could be bumpy.

To pay down existing and future debt for near-term projects, Miami-Dade Transit faces potentially huge budget shortfalls beginning in 2014.

The size of the expected budget gap depends on fare collections and transportation surtax revenue in the next few years.

Meanwhile, the department keeps trucking.

The new EASY Card has been a "huge success," Mr. Kapoor said, helping increase rider convenience, cut fraud, monitor system efficiency and track and project revenues.

"It's a good data bank used for different areas," he said.

Miami-Dade Transit rolled out the new system last year, allowing riders to load onto their cards up to \$150 in fare charges or a day, week or month transit pass.

Already, most riders are choosing the card over cash.

Clinton Forbes, senior executive assistant, said he takes the bus and observes that only about three of 40 riders are paying cash.

"The technology has changed the cultural behavior of our riders," he said.

Transit users can buy a card at a Metrorail station or one of 84 private sales outlets, like Sedano's.

The cards have meant savings for both passengers and the transit department.

Bus transfers with an EASY Card or EASY Ticket are now free, and a bus route restructuring that came with it saved the department about \$12 million.

Transit has also added some service. A bus between Miami Beach and Miami International Airport is carrying an average 1,200 riders a day.

For what would be a \$44 cab ride with tip, \$2.35 gets you from the Beach to the airport or vice versa with only one stop, Mr. Forbes said.

Enhanced service in Kendall is expected around June – 9.5 miles along Southwest 88th Street from the Dadeland North Metrorail Station to 167th Avenue in 60-foot hybrid electric buses.

"Green" buses are also on the way for the 95 Express service in the highway's high occupancy toll, or HOT, lanes.

As far as transit expansion, the Miami Intermodal Center-Earlinton Heights Metrorail extension project is "moving fast," Mr. Kapoor said, with 95% of the foundations done.

Service is to begin in two years.

And more new Metromover cars are on the way, with 17 on order, Mr. Kapoor said.

Overall, the department's efforts are paying off, he said, citing as an example a 300% improvement in bus breakdown problems.

And the department continues to work on infrastructure repairs and modernization projects, he said, "to make sure that things are convenient for the customers."

Photo by Maxine Udani

The transit department's new EASY Card has helped cut fraud, monitor efficiency and track revenues.