Fare Thee Well:
Bus Fares Return to Connecticut

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Abstract

Bus fares have returned to Connecticut, and more service changes will arrive for both road and rail.

A bus in downtown Hartford announces the resumption of fares beginning April 1, 2023.
Image credit: Mark Mirko, *Connecticut Public*.

After a full year of giving Connecticut residents a (literal) free ride during the worst of global inflation, the Connecticut Department of Transportation ended its relief efforts and resumed collecting bus fares on April 1, 2023.

Included in the bill last year that provided a "gas tax holiday" for drivers, American Rescue Plan Act funds were used to eliminate bus fares for CT Transit. Free rides were successful in convincing passengers to return in droves to

the state's largest bus network, as ridership rates rose to pre-pandemic levels and then some. Riders universally lauded the Lamont administration for the program, which helped many low-income riders get where they needed to go. Thanks to the fare-free program, Daisy Rodriguez of Hartford, who uses the bus for work seven days a week, saved over $750 during the worst of inflation. As quoted in the *Connecticut Mirror*, "She noted that before the program began, 'Sometimes you don't have the money for the bus fare, and you have to walk.' "

The benefits of Connecticut's fare-free program weren't just seen in the pockets of essential workers like Ms. Rodriguez. At the peak of COVID-19 as long-haul commuters adjusted to working remotely, trains saw less than ten percent of their usual passengers; however, local and essential workers continued to ride the bus, with Connecticut's buses carrying "only" about half as many passengers. For those who rode through the early pandemic, $63 per month on an unlimited-use bus pass was some deserved money back in their pockets.

Free or reduced fares are not a new concept. They've existed in some form since World War II, often as a benefit for seniors, students, military members, the disabled, or essential workers. Private companies this author has contracted with would often purchase transit passes for interns and new employees as a perk.

Providing transportation for disadvantaged Americans and military families isn't just the right thing to do: it's what any common-sense government would do. How else is everyone, regardless of background, supposed to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness when they're stuck in a city, and can't afford a car due to financial constraints or the mere logistics of owning a car in an urban area?

Connecticut's fare-free program put our cities alongside others including Boston; Richmond, VA; Albuquerque; Kansas City; and Olympia, WA. Boston mayor Michelle Wu told reporters "that removing barriers to public transportation is a major step toward climate justice, racial equity[,] and mobility."

Why did it end? Fortunately, we got to hear it directly from the source. In an interview on Connecticut Public's *Where We Live* in March 2023, Governor Ned Lamont said that the federal Department of Transportation told him, "[y]ou can't provide free bus service until you do an equity study." Though state and local municipalities may decide to set fares, federal civil rights laws prohibit changes that last more than twelve months unless a proper equity analysis is performed. A spokesperson for the DOT said in response that "this is a routine activity for large transit systems and helps them evaluate whether fare changes will have disparate impacts on the basis of race, color, or national origin."

Since then, the Connecticut General Assembly's Transportation Committee has sat down and performed the study, releasing a draft of their report on September 18, 2023. The study found that a majority of Connecticut's public transportation would not undergo major changes, and thus, no equity analysis would be required. In response to reduced ridership rates compared to pre-pandemic levels, there would be slightly fewer trains on Fridays and/or weekends. Metro-North fares would go up by about six percent, or about forty cents for a one-way peak-hours ride; and the Hartford Line and Shore Line East

would see an even smaller increase. However, it's worth noting and commending that student pricing across all lines would stay the same or decrease.

On the other hand, this year's budget gave more money to the state's bus lines, and service is getting a tune-up to focus on "better access to jobs, training, and education by providing service that operates later and seven days a week". Many bus and shuttle routes in the Hartford Division would be changed or consolidated, affecting riders in Hartford, Berlin, Newington, Bristol, and New Britain—including Central Connecticut State University; however, few routes would be eliminated entirely. On the other hands, to accommodate growth in the south-central part of the state, the New Haven Division would see new lines created covering Northford, Wallingford, Meriden, Orange, and Milford. While fare-free rides won't be returning permanently, it could make temporary comebacks due to construction, promotions, or "spare the air" days.

That said, the case for moving people from point A to point B isn't an economic one. It's not an expendable line item in the state's budget, nor in one's personal budget. Public transit is an investment in people and the local economy. Simply put, if workers can't get to work, then they can't work; and if workers can't work, then the economy suffers. Fares need to be as low as possible, and routes need to be plentiful and efficient to ensure that workers can go where they are needed. On the other side of the balancing act, bus drivers deserve to be paid well for their role in bringing an invaluable public service to every stop along the route. The next step is for our state legislators to review the committee's report and help Connecticut residents to get where they need to go.