

Moooooove In; With the number of passengers on the rise, CTA considers packing 'em in by ripping out seats on buses, L cars Chicago Sun Times July 17, 2008 Thursday

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BYLINE: Mary Wisniewski, The Chicago Sun-Times

BODY:

Mooooo!

CTA L cars could become more like cattle cars if the transit agency goes ahead with plans to remove seats on some L cars in the next few months to squeeze in all the riders leaving their cars home and turning to mass transit.

That's one idea under consideration to deal with soaring ridership prompted by high gas prices.

The CTA also could make some trains short runs that would cover just the busiest stretches, to accommodate more passengers at rush hour. For instance, a southbound Blue Line run might start at Jefferson Park, instead of O'Hare.

The transit agency -- which said Wednesday it saw a 6.9 percent increase in passengers last month -- is considering removing seats on busy bus routes, too.

The CTA says such steps are being weighed because it can't afford to buy more train cars and buses without a new capital-spending bill from legislators in Springfield.

The CTA attributes most of the increased ridership to fast-rising fuel prices. It also estimates that perhaps one-tenth of the additional riders are seniors who have ridden free, under a new law, since March 17.

"While we're very excited to have as many seniors as we can, it's becoming a capacity challenge," CTA President Ron Huberman said Wednesday

Under the new plans, an eight-car L train might include two seatless cars, so passengers could decide whether to get on a standing-room-only car, Huberman said. Pregnant, elderly or disabled passengers could choose cars with seats.

That "makes sense," said CTA rider Mark Enselman, 21, of Wrigleyville -- at least as long as the CTA is "smart about it" and does it at the right times on the right routes.

A female L rider, who didn't want to be identified, called the idea "crazy." "They need to add more cars, not standing-room only," she said.

Revenue hasn't risen at the same rate as the passenger load, because the number of passengers riding free or buying unlimited-ride monthly passes is growing. The CTA also faces budget problems because of higher fuel, energy and maintenance costs. Gov. Blagojevich's decision last week to cut the reduced-fare subsidy would cut about \$16 million out of the CTA's budget this year, and another \$31 million in 2009.

To help build revenue outside the farebox, the agency Wednesday decided to hire Jones Lang LaSalle to bring vendors like dry cleaners and mini-banks into L stations and to act as the CTA's real estate broker.

The CTA plans layoffs of administrative and management personnel. A fare increase for 2009 is possible, though no service cuts are planned, according to CTA Board Chairwoman Carole Brown.

VERIZON PHONES TO WORK IN SUBWAY

For better or worse, there soon will be more cell phone chatting in the subway.

Verizon customers will be able to talk on their wireless phones in the subway tunnels, under an agreement with the CTA. Currently, U.S. Cellular is the only wireless provider able to provide regular service for CTA customers underground.

The change applies to customers who want to make non-emergency calls -- most cell phones already can dial 911 from the subway.

CTA personnel will be able to use Verizon service underground by the end of August, but it's not clear when all Verizon customers can use the service in the tunnels.

"We are trying to move it along as quickly as we possibly can," said Verizon spokeswoman Carolyn Schamberger. Verizon has 67.2 million customers nationwide, compared with 6 million for U.S. Cellular.

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