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Merits and Flaws Are Seen in Proposal for Free Crosstown Buses

By LIBBY NELSON

For bus commuters, it is a familiar ritual: Fumble for a [MetroCard](#). Dip it into the slot. Wait for the whirring machine to process and return it. Then wait some more, as other passengers do the same.

Eliminating that ritual on Manhattan's 17 crosstown bus routes is perhaps the most unorthodox of [Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's](#) proposals to improve mass transit, introduced Monday as part of his re-election campaign. On crosstown routes, Mr. Bloomberg said, rides should be free — reducing the boarding times that contribute to the buses' notoriously slow pace.

Some transit experts and observers said the idea was radical but not unthinkable, citing statistics that show many crosstown riders already do not pay bus fares because they use subway transfers. But some also said the plan might backfire, because it is unfair to other boroughs, may attract too many passengers and ignores other methods of reducing delays — including some the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) is already testing.

Manhattan's crosstown routes are the slowest of the slow. A survey by the [Straphangers Campaign](#), a riders' advocacy group, found that the six slowest New York City bus routes in 2008 were all crosstown Manhattan lines. The worst, the M96, traveled at an average of 3.7 miles per hour — about the same speed as a brisk walk. The others were the M14, M42, M23, M66 and M50.

While they might sometimes seem so, [the crosstown buses are not the city's busiest](#): those are the M15 (56,723 average weekday passengers in 2008) and the B46 (53,231). Of the crosstown routes, the M14 buses have the most riders (39,031) and the M21 the fewest (1,934).

The plan would make boarding faster, both supporters and opponents said in interviews Tuesday. But the transit authority budget is tight, raising questions about the cost of such a program. According to data provided by the transit authority, the crosstown routes provided 61.9 million rides in 2008. A single ride now costs \$2.25.

Half of the passengers on the M34 and M42 buses are transferring from the subway, according to data provided by Mr. Bloomberg's campaign. Other passengers are transferring from another bus, using free student MetroCards or paying with unlimited MetroCards. "Many, perhaps a majority, of people who take the crosstown buses have already taken transit — probably taken a subway," said Jeffrey M. Zupan, senior fellow for transportation for the [Regional Plan Association](#), an independent organization that proposed free crosstown buses in October. "Therefore, since they get a free transfer already, you wouldn't be losing the

revenue.”

A spokesman for the transit authority, Jeremy Soffin, said that Mr. Bloomberg’s figures were probably correct, but added that transfers should not be considered free rides, as the passenger has paid a fare earlier in the trip. While the terminology is debatable, the transit authority and some observers say that removing the fare will attract more riders — and more riders would need more buses. So Mr. Bloomberg’s proposal could still be costly, said Robert E. Paaswell, the director of the [University Transportation Research Center at the City College of New York](#). “Whether you make it free or make the fare \$10, it costs so much to run a bus,” Mr. Paaswell said. “If you’re going to run the buses free, you’re going to get more riders than you have now.” An earlier, even bolder Bloomberg transit proposal — charging drivers a congestion fee to enter Manhattan — [fell flat in Albany last year](#), in part because lawmakers outside Manhattan considered it unfair. If crosstown Manhattan routes were made free, a similar complaint could arise from bus riders in the other boroughs.

“The point is nobody deserves a free bus,” said Andrew Albert, chairman of the New York City Transit Riders Council.

The bus proposal has “captured people’s imaginations,” Mr. Zupan said. But Mr. Bloomberg’s plan also includes 32 other ideas, among them extending service on the V subway line into Brooklyn, adding express service on the F train and providing clocks (already available in some stations) that indicate wait times.

The proposals are ambitious. But the mayor has only slight influence over public transit policy, controlling only 4 of 17 votes on the transit authority board.

The authority would not react directly to Mr. Bloomberg’s proposal. “We welcome the mayor’s input and look forward to working with him and other elected officials in finding ways to make the M.T.A. more efficient and transparent while being certain the M.T.A. has the funding it needs to continue providing critical services to all New Yorkers,” the agency said in a statement.

The authority is already testing several programs to make buses faster, including paying for tickets before boarding, enforcing bus-only lanes and prioritizing traffic signals so buses spend less time at red lights, said the spokesman, Mr. Soffin.

Included in Mr. Bloomberg’s proposal, the idea with the most traction so far is a type of fare card known as a “smart card” that uses an electronic chip. Passengers pay by waving the card over a sensor. Smart cards are already used in London; [Jay H. Walder](#), whom Gov. [David A. Paterson](#) has nominated as the next chairman of the transit authority, introduced the system there.

The authority recently completed a study of the cards with Mr. Walder’s consulting firm, McKinsey & Company, Mr. Soffin said. A pilot program for similar technology is in place with credit and debit cards at some subway stations and will be expanded to include some buses later this year.

“We’re like two incarnations behind the rest of the world on our fare system, and that’s always the way it’s been in New York,” said Mr. Albert, who is a nonvoting member of the transit authority board.

But Mr. Paaswell suggested a quicker fix: If the city is serious about free crosstown buses, he said, the mayor should subsidize the program by using city funds to make up for any revenue the authority would lose.

“It could be done immediately,” he said. “He could just put his money where his mouth is.”

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