

Bus fares too high, city residents say

SRTA official hears residents' concerns on city bus service

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Fall River —

For the array of neighbors and groups concerned about city bus service, the new administrator of the Southeastern Regional Transit Authority brought good news and bad news.

First the good news: A pilot program of Sunday bus service will start early this summer.

"It will run for a minimum of six months, and we're hoping to begin it July 1," SRTA Administrator Joseph Consentino told about 40 people gathered Monday night at Barresi Heights. At least half were senior citizens.

Consentino, who took over after Jan. 1 for Lou Pettine, said, "We're not sure what the routes will be. It can't be the entire system" because of costs.

SRTA received about \$250,000 in state and federal matching grants for pilot expansions and also will add selected bus service a few days a week into Freetown, Consentino said.

SRTA will publicize details as they become available, he said. They also plan to put new buses on line later this spring.

"I would like to see buses run on Sunday and later at night," said 74-year-old Germaine Thompson, who told her story to the co-sponsoring human services agencies United Faith Action and United Neighbors.

"I want to start using my car less and less to save money," said Thompson, who lives with her disabled daughter, Maddy. They live on Social Security checks, and like many of last night's participants, bus costs were the main concern.

"We try to teach our people to be as independent as possible," said Carol Coie, representing St. Mary's Cathedral.

Fare costs — multiplied as one changes through the various city zones — was cited as the No. 1 reason for not using the bus system more, according to a recent survey, said United Neighbors' Jenny DiBlasi.

Eighty-one percent of the 400 people surveyed said cost was stopping them from using city buses, 77 percent said lack of night/Sunday buses also stopped them, and roughly 60 percent cited problems

with frequency of buses and lack of run-time information.

Joseph DaSilva, Fall River Housing Authority youth services coordinator, said parents with several children pay \$5 to \$6 for busing within one zone and pay double of that — each way — to travel from the south to north end of the city.

They're choosing to eat or take the bus, said DaSilva, stating school busing and related costs contribute to dropouts.

City Councilor Cathy Ann Viveiros said Superintendent Nicholas A. Fischer told her students were being forced to choose between transportation and lunch.

Consentino said he did not foresee a drop in fares or extended night service. "It's too expensive and too costly to do it," he said, citing union contracts requiring minimum shifts at straight pay.

City bus fares regularly cost \$1.25 per zone and 60 cents for seniors, disabled persons and children 6 to 11. Student discount bus passes are available at schools, but one parent echoed DaSilva's report on costs and said unreliability of bus times and their being too crowded at times add to access problems.

Barbara Berry, a Barresi Heights resident who works while attending Bristol Community College, asked SRTA officials to expand the 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. routes until 11 at night, have them run on the half hour and put shelters at each stop.

"It is embarrassing to stand out in the cold and rain like we did today," Berry said.

Meanwhile, Jordohn Bealue, an outreach worker with YouthBuild, said his job is to help city youths stay out of gangs while "needing something to replace it." Sports and jobs are two ways. "I'm trying to get them out of their community (areas), and without transportation they can't do it," Bealue said.

Agencies' recommendations included elimination of the zones, offering free student passes, improving maps and signs and extending bus service to Sundays and evenings till 11 p.m. They suggested dropping standard and reduced fares to \$1 and 50 cents, respectively, while offering monthly passes. Consentino said they'd need new revenue sources, unless ridership increased. Jane Kirby, SRTA's longtime executive secretary, compared finding "fair, corrective action" to 'Solomon trying to divide the baby.'

She said state Proposition 2 ½ limits and federal cutbacks make expanding the system nearly impossible.

Depicting the individual needs, Baressi Heights senior citizen Evelyn Charron said, "I'd like to see a 3:30 Pleasant Street run. If you miss the 2:30, you have to wait until 4:30 because of the school buses."

Moderator Donna Morell of St. Joseph's Parish called the meeting "a good first step" and complimented Consentino on being "very prepared." He promised to review the zone costs and other issues raised.

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