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NVTC EXAMINES BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF ZERO AND REDUCED FARES FOR PUBLIC TRANSIT

Policies can increase access and equity in transit; implementation is not free

Arlington, Va. - An analysis undertaken by the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission (NVTC) finds that eliminating or reducing fares for public transit users can improve access, increase ridership and produce other community benefits. However, there are key considerations that transit providers need to make when designing and implementing reduced or zero fare structures. The publication of the report comes as transit systems across the nation are weighing the advantages and considerations of zero and reduced fares and serves as policy guide for transit decision makers in Northern Virginia. Alexandria's DASH will move to zero-fare starting Sunday, the first in Virginia and the DC metro area.

Zero-Fare Transit: Public transit funded in full by means other than collecting fares from passengers (may also be called Fare-Free or Fareless)

Reduced-Fare Transit: Special programs providing particular passengers with discounted fare options for public transit

Key Findings:

- Northern Virginia's unique transit environment provides both opportunities and challenges for new fare programs.
- Eliminating fares can grow ridership.
- Reduced-fare programs may result in a net cost increase.
- Full systemwide zero-fare options may reduce fare collection costs, but other expenses may increase.
- Funding is available to help establish these types of fare programs, but long-term sustainable revenue replacement sources are needed.
- Zero- and reduced-fare programs are already underway in Virginia.

- Northern Virginia transit operators have expressed desire to consider eliminating or reducing fares for improved accessibility, increased ridership and other community benefits.

"Northern Virginia's extensive public transit network keeps our rapidly-growing region moving and economically competitive," said NVTC Chair Katie Cristol. "This deep examination of fare policies will offer a critical window into options for making that transit system even more accessible, effective and equitable for our riders and our communities."



The continuum of common implementation options. These are not mutually exclusive and a transit system could implement multiple options together. Either zero- or reduced-fare policies could be developed for each option as well.

BACKGROUND

NVTC's role as a regional body provides a unique forum for discussion of important transportation issues across city and county boundaries and enables solutions that benefit all of Northern Virginia. The elected officials who serve on the Commission asked for this analysis to better understand how zero or reduced fares might impact local transit providers. Many transit systems are currently examining whether and how zero-fare or reduced-fare transit programs can be expanded as a tool to support mobility, reduce a barrier to using transit, boost ridership and achieve other community goals.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic required transit systems to quickly adapt their day-to-day fare collection practices and created an opportunity to fundamentally reexamine fare collection policy and practices. Most transit systems temporarily eliminated fares for a portion of the pandemic as a safety measure. Reduced fares are also commonplace with traditional programs for people with disabilities, seniors, children and students.

[Read the full publication here.](#)

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NVTC works to ensure that businesses and residents are served by a high capacity, high quality network of transit systems that allows the region to thrive. It funds and promotes transit in the counties of Arlington, Fairfax and Loudoun and the cities of Alexandria, Fairfax and Falls Church.

NVTC supports five local bus systems (ART, CUE, DASH, Fairfax Connector, Loudoun County Transit), WMATA (Metrorail/Metrobus) and the Virginia Railway Express. Visit NoVaTransit.org or call 703-524-3322 to learn more.

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