

GO Transit hikes fares; extra trains coming to Milton

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By Tim Foran
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

It's a case of good news-bad news: more GO trains are coming to Milton along with dozens more snow-clearing devices to keep tracks clear, but all riders were hit with a fare increase starting this past weekend.

An increase of 25 cents per adult or student ride took effect after GO's board of directors unanimously approved the 2009/10 operating budget at its meeting Friday. The fare hike equates to an increase of \$10 for a monthly pass. A smaller 10-cent increase was placed on single tickets for seniors or children, with a \$5 hike in the corresponding monthly passes.

The hikes don't immediately affect riders who have already purchased a monthly pass for March, nor those with unused two- or 10-ride passes, said GO.

A GO spokesperson said the lack of a notice period for the fare hike was due to the delay in the Provincial budget, which will be tabled March 26 but which is normally presented to the legislature in February.

Halton's representative on GO, Oakville Mayor Rob Burton, said prior to Friday's meeting that fare hikes are sometimes necessary.

The service needs to be improved and expanded, Burton explained. "Somebody's got to pay for it."

GO staff said the ongoing capital expansions across the system leads to increased operational costs — more crews, staff, and

maintenance — that have to be recouped through the farebox. GO fares currently cover 82 per cent of the transit system's operating budget, a high percentage for a transit system. The Province picks up the rest of the costs, as well as the majority of capital expenses. Ridership on the system is at nearly 55 million, up from about 48 million in 2006.

Burton addressed criticism that fare hikes don't come with service improvements by noting the on-time performance has been steadily improving.

However, he added riders must expect odd delays during the winter season, due to unforeseen circumstances. He pointed to the example of a chunk of ice falling off a freight train into the tracks, preventing a switching system from working until the ice can be cleared.

"It's winter. It's Canada. Stuff happens," Burton said. "I sometimes marvel at the expectation that winter can be banned."

Dealing with winter delays on the Milton line is something GO is working on with CP, which owns the tracks.

GO said CP will install up to 47 new snow-clearing devices by summer 2010, at a cost of \$1.4 million. The devices blow hot air over switches to keep them free of snow and ice and allow them to move freely.

A more immediate benefit to the Milton rail line will come this June, when GO adds a seventh train to the line for both the AM and PM peak periods.

The final schedule for the new trains still has to be worked out with CP. However, GO

said the extra morning train would arrive at Toronto's Union Station just after 9 a.m. The extra afternoon train would leave Union just after 5:30 p.m. Currently, trains take between 54 to 58 minutes to run the Milton line, when there are no delays.

The new trains will continue to be all-stop trains rather than partial or full express, said a GO official. Express trains require additional tracks that aren't available.

According to GO, the Milton line is the third busiest rail line on the GO network, with about 27,000 daily riders.

An environmental assessment for the Milton corridor — one that would examine all-day, two-way service on the Milton line — is scheduled to begin this fall and be completed by March 2010, according to GO.

"We desperately need to increase capacity on the Milton line," said Mike Wolcwk, GO's director of rail infrastructure.

Even after expanding to 12-car trains in

May 2008, seating is full, he said.

Increasing the frequency of train service on the Milton line is a higher priority than adding extra stops in central Toronto, added Wolcwk.

The transit-planning agency Metrolinx is looking at improving the Bloor station for riders on the Georgetown line. However, there hasn't been a demand to add a stop there by Milton train riders, said Wolcwk.

"We don't get customer requests for an additional stop at Bloor," he said. "We offer a (TTC) connection at Kipling."

Wolcwk said adding other central Toronto stops, such as reviving Parkdale station, is an issue of feasibility. GO has taken a cursory look at that in the past, but there are concerns about whether there is enough real estate necessary to widen the tracks at a full stop, he explained.

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