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# So long to tapping out 9

## Multi-zone bus riders get a break to help Compass Card system launch

Some bus riders will get a price break after TransLink announced Thursday that it would only charge single-zone fares on buses when it launches its Compass Card to all transit users in October.

The announcement shows that TransLink has given up hope of the tap-out system working on buses, and is looking to get the much-delayed \$194-million system going without further waiting.

It means that, beginning Oct. 5, bus riders will pay single fares — \$2.75 one way for an adult — no matter how many zones they travel through.

The price break does not apply to other parts of the system, including SkyTrain and SeaBus, where adult passengers will still pay \$4 or \$5.50 for two- and three-zone fares respectively. The price break does, however, apply to HandyDart.

TransLink spokeswoman Anne Drennan acknowledged the decision is expected to prompt some two- and threezone passengers to shift from train and SeaBus to buses, but insists it won't be a significant hit because about 80 per cent of TransLink's bus riders travel only one zone.

She couldn't say how much TransLink would potentially lose in revenue, noting it depends on how many people decide to switch to the bus.

"(People) will look at cost over time," Drennan said. "If you want to get there quickly, you'll take the train. Some will switch if they've got the time, but it remains to be seen how many will do that." Cathy McLay, TransLink's chief financial officer, said the change will be revenue-neutral, because offering the one-zone fare on buses will attract riders and "we think it will balance out."

"The change means one-zone buses will be effective at all times, all day, every day," McLay said.

The single zone fare is a "temporary change," McLay said, and no decision has been made on how long it will remain in effect or if the one-zone fare might rise to offset the financial hit of losing two- and three-zone fares for buses.

"Anything is possible," McLay said.

Drennan and McLay said there were no plans to increase bus fares. The last increase, in 2012, was so high that TransLink is still dealing with a decline in passengers.

TransLink said Compass vending machines will be activated in a phased manner at SkyTrain stations and SeaBus terminals starting this month. Single-use tickets will be available from the vending machines to begin and by late October the machines will carry Compass cards. Drennan said fare-saver tickets will be phased out in early 2016.

The goal is to turn on the SkyTrain and SeaBus fare gates in October.

Currently, only TransLink employees, students, West Coast Express and blind passengers are using Compass cards.

The transportation agency announced the single-fare measure as a way to deal with a nagging glitch with the tap-off function on buses which has put the Compass Card program two years behind schedule.

The tap-off function was intended to tell TransLink how many zones to charge a rider for any given trip.

TransLink acknowledged last year that field testing showed the card readers on buses were taking longer than anticipated to scan Compass cards, up to several seconds instead of the target of 0.3 seconds.

In addition, TransLink was wrestling with an eight to 10 per cent error rate on the mobile readers installed on buses. In some cases, they will not register a tap out, which means some passengers would be charged a three-zone fare when they may have travelled only one zone.

There were also concerns that riders could tap out early and then stay on the bus, thus not paying for a whole trip.

"The logistics of getting off the bus and tapping out are different than they are for a train," Drennan said. "And the lineups on the buses versus the train are much more significant."

The decision to go to a single fare for buses brings the system more in line with others around the world.

The Compass Card project was designed by Cubic Transportation Systems, which is behind several fare collection systems in cities throughout the world.

San Diego, Boston and Chicago, however, require only a single fare to take buses and light rail anywhere in the system, so customers are not required to tap out when their ride is over.

For commuters using the West Coast Express, SeaBus and SkyTrain, the existing multizone fare structure

will remain in effect and tapping out through the fare gates will be required to ensure the correct fare is charged.

Doug Allen, until recently TransLink's interim CEO, admitted earlier this year that the company should never have promised the system would be operational in three years given similar systems have taken much longer to get running in other cities around the world.

"I can't think of many examples where it was done in three years," Allen said. "It's been five years and people are saying, 'Get on with it.' "

TransLink has long been criticized for the delays in implementing its Compass Card system, which along with fare gates at SkyTrain stations had been ordered by the Liberal government concerned with reducing fare evasion on rapid transit lines.



TransLink said it is launching a public education and customer outreach program to support customers switching to the Compass Card.

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