

BUS RIDERS TALK ABOUT THE RTD

A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

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BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

The Southern California Rapid Transit District is faced with a deficit of approximately 20 million dollars in the upcoming fiscal year.

Previously the RTD has held public meetings at district headquarters to discuss fare increases and service reduction plans. However, only a limited number of riders usually attended these meetings. The people attending were generally not representative of the vast majority of RTD customers and therefore the meetings were not successful in obtaining response from a representative cross-section of riders. In view of the present financial problems facing the RTD, a more broad-based consumer research study was commissioned. The research was designed to elicit opinions from a representative cross-section of bus riders.

A total of eight focus group discussion sessions were held in four geographically dispersed sections of Los Angeles. Manpearl/ Brown Research was solicited to conduct the study.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of the research was twofold: First, to engage RTD riders in a general discussion regarding the financial problems facing the District in the coming fiscal year. Second, to elicit their reaction to alternative plans. Each alternative provided certain trade-offs.

Essentially, the trade-offs were designed to determine the riders' willingness to accept moderate fare increases and moderate service reductions, or a substantial fare increase with no service reductions, or no fare increases with substantial service reductions.

Other topics were also probed, such as how panelists felt about reduced fares for senior citizens, the handicapped, and students.

THE DISCUSSION FORMAT

Panelists were generally encouraged to speak freely and not "hold back." Group participants had a great deal to say and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to talk back to the RTD.

The format of the group sessions were as follows:

1. Panelists were initially asked to comment on their transportation habits, including how often they ride the RTD and the purpose of their trip.
2. They were next asked if they knew how the RTD is funded.
3. Riders were then read a brief statement describing the RTD's financial situation and asked to comment on it.
4. Following the general discussion of the RTD's anticipated deficit, panelists were read several alternatives calling for trade-offs between higher fares and service cutbacks. An animated discussion of the merits and deficiencies of each option followed.
5. Panelists were next asked to reveal how they felt about RTD passes for senior citizens, the handicapped, and students.

TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURES

The eight focus group sessions were conducted in four locations as follows:

Santa Monica, California

Session I	January 30	7:00 PM	10 Panelists
Session II	January 31	7:00 PM	12 Panelists

Woodland Hills, California

Session III	February 1	7:00 PM	12 Panelists
Session IV	February 2	7:00 PM	12 Panelists

Hawthorne, California

Session V	February 3	1:00 PM	7 Panelists
Session VI	February 3	7:00 PM	8 Panelists

Glendale, California

Session VII	February 7	7:00 PM	10 Panelists
Session VIII	February 8	7:00 PM	7 Panelists

Each session lasted approximately two hours. All sessions were observed by at least one representative of the RTD. Duplicate audio tapes of each session were made available to the RTD. The groups were moderated by Stephan Manpearl and Joan Brown. A copy of the moderator's guide is appended.

THE SAMPLE

Panelists were screened for eligibility on the basis of their RTD usage. At least one round trip per week was required. Both men and women were recruited.

A total of seventy-eight bus riders, forty men and thirty-eight women attended the sessions. Ages of participants ranged from eighteen to seventy-two. Panelists were recruited to reflect a broad socio-economic cross-section of bus riders.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The major findings of this report indicate that RTD bus riders are concerned and angry. They are concerned about the seriousness of the situation, that they are faced with yet another potential fare increase and possible service cutbacks. They appeared angry because they don't see any end in sight to escalating fares and because they don't really understand why fares are being raised.

Many of the panelists view themselves as being in a position where they will be forced to pay higher prices for poorer service.

The major conclusion of this study suggests that while service was far and away the most important issue to the riders, they did express a general willingness to pay higher fares for improved service.

DETAILED FINDINGS

This section of the report presents detailed responses to each of the topics discussed in the group sessions. Differences among the various rider groups are noted wherever observed.

Contrasts in response were noticed particularly between the Woodland Hills groups and the Hawthorne groups. In Woodland Hills, bus riders tended to be more affluent, more aware of the RTD's financial situation and more articulate in expressing their feelings regarding the proposed options. In contrast, the Hawthorne panelists were less affluent, their use of the RTD was more a matter of survival, and their responses tended to reflect a lack of awareness of the complexity of the problem. With the Woodland Hills and the Hawthorne groups as the extremes, the Glendale and Santa Monica groups tended to reflect a broad middle range of bus riders.

While riders disagreed over certain issues, their attitude was generally one of camaraderie.

1. AWARENESS OF HOW THE RTD IS FUNDED

Panelists were asked if they know how the RTD is funded. In response to this question it appears that most panelists seem to know that fares alone do not provide sufficient revenue and that other sources are necessary. The vast majority of people indicated that the RTD's revenue is derived from "a combination of fares and subsidies." Typical comments included:

"Subsidized by...federal government...state government...the county...the city."

"Don't make much on fares except during peak times of the day...so they have to get money somewhere else."

"From advertising on billboards on the bus."

A certain degree of confusion and general lack of knowledge was revealed by a wide array of responses to this question. In addition, when probed as to what percentage of total revenue the fare box represents, responses ranged from 10% to 75%.

2. STATEMENT OF THE RTD FINANCIAL SITUATION

Panelists were next read a statement outlining the financial problems facing the RTD in the upcoming fiscal year.

The statement was greeted with varied spontaneous reactions. Most panelists did not doubt the validity of the statement; however, they saw the RTD itself as being responsible. Panelists cited a wide range of reasons for the deficit.

Some focused on the RTD management as a cause of the problem, citing "high salaries for the RTD top brass." Others cited high wages of other RTD employees, particularly bus drivers and mechanics. Some blamed the system itself as being inefficient and not providing adequate transportation, expressed as "poor dispatching and route planning," "an awful lot of waste" and "run sloppily." Some cited a "civil service syndrome," suggesting that all public utilities and governmental type agencies are inefficiently operated and that private enterprise has far less waste. One angry panelist in Glendale stated, "The RTD is certainly not competent enough to run a rapid transit system but they can surely show a 20 million dollar loss."

Most riders felt the deficit statement was a preamble to a fare increase. Several people voiced their objections over previous fare increases. Others expressed anger and frustration over a situation in which they had no control.

Many panelists also acknowledged the impact of inflation, noting that RTD's "intake is the same, but costs have gone up."

Several panelists felt the deficit was due in part to the RTD's failure to encourage new riders.

3. THE OPTIONS

In order to determine how RTD customers feel about possible fare increases compared with service reductions, panelists were read several alternative plans. The options presented riders with choices or trade-offs. The choices centered on the riders' willingness to accept moderate fare increases with moderate service reductions, more substantial fare increases with no service reductions, or no fare increases with substantial service cutbacks.

Initial reaction was highly emotional, particularly to any mention of service cutbacks. Service emerged as the issue of utmost importance to riders. Any mention of service cutback was usually greeted by vociferous objections as noted by the following remarks:

"I'm going back to my car...With the rudeness of the bus drivers, the long wait, standing in buses, now it's going to be even worse."

"Cutting down on services is not just waiting time. It means not keeping the buses clean, using a different type of driver. It means cutting down on all services."

"Service is important. If you want to get there you don't consider a nickel or a dime. You just want to get there."

"We can take an increase in fare but not a reduction in service."

As each of the options was explained to the riders, reactions intensified. A few people attempted to deal with the problem in a logical rational manner, seeking alternatives that would be the least disruptive to their own particular transportation needs.

"It's okay if they reduce service during the day, maybe between 10 and 3 when buses are running light, but early in the morning they need the buses."

"If there is any decrease in service, it should only be in non-peak hours."

However, some people were unable to deal rationally with the trade-offs and only expressed anger, confusion and frustration. A few riders exhibited a feeling of hopelessness, indicating that they heard all this before and that any fare increase would only be a "stop gap" measure and would surely be repeated next year. One panelist called bus riders "the orphans of the city."

Again several riders directed angry remarks toward the RTD's management as well as the bus drivers and called for an improvement in service and an examination of "the people running the RTD."

Panelists also vehemently rejected any reduction in evening and weekend service. Typical comments included:

"People would have open rebellion."

"Most destructive for every bus rider."

"Hurts weekend workers and people who work late."

"What about shoppers? I go shopping on weekends."

Although many riders balked at the possibility of paying increased fares, some panelists indicated that the RTD is much cheaper and more convenient than driving a car. Even if fares were raised by 25 cents, it would still be a bargain. (For the most part these comments reflected the feelings of the Express Bus commuters who were usually the more affluent panelists.) Other such reactions were:

"They should raise it 15 cents if possible and improve the service."

"I'd rather pay extra and along with the service, improve the equipment too."

"I'd rather pay more and have dependable service."

Overall, based on the options presented, it appears that the most acceptable combination of trade-offs was a moderate fare increase with no service reduction. In addition, many people expressed a desire for more in-depth information about the deficit in order to make more realistic choices.

4. THE RIDERS TALK BACK

After a discussion of the options and trade-offs given them, several panelists attempted to devise their own plan. While riders continually expressed a desire for a situation they probably knew was unrealistic--"improved service and lower fares"--several interesting suggestions surfaced.

Again the key was service. Improved service was called for during peak rush hours. This was particularly evidenced among the San Fernando Valley panelists of whom many are Express Bus commuters. They indicated a willingness to pay 15 cents to 25 cents more per ride for better service. Better service translated to mean more buses during the rush hours and perhaps an extension of rush hour service to begin at 7:00 AM and end at 7:00 PM. Typical comments included:

"Have extra buses at rush hour, run them more frequently, and maybe cheaper. Run midday buses less frequently and maybe more expensive."

"Pay more, 15 cents, and shorten the current schedule by a few minutes."

"During the rush hour, increase the number of buses and decrease the number running in between."

Comments by riders called for the RTD to operate more efficiently.

"Improved service," "less waiting time," "more responsive bus drivers," were comments heard repeatedly in each of the groups and by panelists of all ages.

Other frequently cited complaints dealt with:

Overcrowded buses.

Buses are dirty, old and frequently break down.

Bus drivers are rude, drive poorly, refuse to give information, and often pass by waiting patrons.

Waiting time is too long.

Buses don't follow the printed schedules.

No access from side streets to main arteries.

5. ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

Panelists were asked if they had any additional suggestions to offer the RTD. Responses were varied. Some of the more interesting ones are as follows:

Small buses. Many thought a wider use of smaller "mini" buses, particularly during non-peak hours on not heavily traveled routes, would help reduce the RTD's deficit. In addition, the buses could make fewer stops...the bus stops were felt to be too close together.

Money should come from the private sector. Some panelists felt big business should help subsidize bus fares. The example of the ARCO bus program was cited. "ARCO underwrites a bus. RTD should approach industry to see if they would underwrite a portion of the expense if the RTD would provide better service for their employees." "Department stores could underwrite buses for shoppers." Oil companies should provide the RTD with fuel at substantially reduced rates.

A more responsive company. Many expressed a desire for the RTD to respond to rider complaints. "Have an open telephone line for complaints and for information on buses and routes." Several panelists suggested that the RTD's management ride the bus in order to "keep in touch with riders and what really happens."

Advertising can sell the RTD. Several felt if the RTD "advertised how good it is" and "how they're going to save us money," it could attract more riders and thus eliminate its financial problems. "Re-educate people through the media. The RTD should prove to us that we're better off being on the bus."

Discount plans. One rider offered the idea of "a commuter pass for weekday use." Two similar suggestions were, "Go back to the token system where you can buy a bunch of tokens and save a few pennies," or "A coupon system where a book of coupons is good for a month and you can use the coupons during off-peak hours."

Improve bus routes. Some panelists thought the RTD should study traffic and bus routes. "Get an efficiency expert." "Study the flow of traffic." "Rework routes."

One panelist suggested that the RTD "take a penny from the county gasoline tax revenue" and allocate it to the RTD.

6. SPECIAL RIDER GROUPS

Following the general discussion of trade-offs between fares and service, panelists were asked to express how they felt about special groups of bus riders, namely senior citizens, the handicapped and students. Group participants were probed to see whether or not they felt each should be exempt from any general fare increase and why they felt that way.

One panelist best expressed the feeling of many of the bus riders by indicating that "We have an obligation to the young, the old and the handicapped."

Senior Citizens

The majority of panelists, especially the younger ones, were in favor of not raising fares for senior citizens. They tended to be protective of the elder panelists on this issue. Most cited a willingness to "carry the load" for the senior citizens. Many of the comments offered indicated altruistic feelings toward the elderly.

"Should not raise their fares."

"Even a nickel increase isn't fair."

"They worked hard to get where they are."

"They have fixed incomes."

"We owe it to the senior citizens."

However, there was an undercurrent among a minority of riders who felt the elderly should share proportionately in any fare increase.

It was also observed that several of the senior citizen panelists expressed a willingness to share in any fare increase, perhaps to show that they are able to contribute and they are not in need of "charity."

The Handicapped

Virtually all panelists were in favor of not increasing fares for the handicapped. Several panelists informed the group of other cities where the handicapped ride free. Most thought this was a good idea.

Students

The students' discount fare evoked the most controversy. While a majority were in favor of the continuation of student passes, a vocal minority felt students should share in any fare hike and some even felt students should pay full fare. However, at this point, a clear differentiation was made between students of different ages and grades of school. Reduced fares for secondary school students was more acceptable than discounts for college students. Those in favor of student discounts noted:

"Students don't earn much money."

"Some parents have to pay for several children."

"A 15 year old can't work."

Some riders indicated objections to student discounts:

"Some students have jobs, wealthy parents."

"Life isn't easy; students have to learn that."

"If they take up a seat, they should pay full fare."

It was felt that students attending religious schools and private schools should be treated differently from public school students. Panelists felt that "If they can afford to go to college or private school, they should pay regular fares."

As a compromise solution a graduated fare scale was suggested, whereby older students pay more than younger ones. "Give college students some reduced fare, but not as much as high school students."

Other comments included:

"For parochial school students, RTD should get money from the church."

"Charge the school districts for student ridership."

"Get it from property taxes."

The possibility of reduced fares by age grouping was also raised. One mother of three reported, "It costs me \$2.40 every time I have to take my children somewhere." She felt that children under 12 years should ride for half-fare. Others concurred that "it seemed fair that children should not have to pay a full fare."

7. USE OF THE RTD

Panelists use the RTD for every phase of their transportation needs from daily commuting to work, to visiting friends, to shopping and leisure activities. The main advantages cited for using the bus were:

"It is more economical than a car."

"It's safer."

"Solves parking problems."

"More comfortable than fighting traffic."

Riders placed a lot of emphasis on bus service. Many panelists shared a preoccupation centered on coping with a transportation system that in their opinion does not adequately meet their needs. Many criticisms were echoed--criticisms of the service, of the bus drivers, of poorly maintained and old equipment, and of the whole system itself.

A desire for improvement in the system was repeated by virtually all of the panelists. Some reiterated that they would not mind paying more if doing so would improve service.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PANELISTS

A total of seventy-eight panelists participated in the study.

Characteristics of the panelists are as follows:

<u>Sex</u>	<u>Total</u>
Male	51%
Female	<u>49</u>
 <u>Age</u>	
18-29	26%
30-39	13
40-49	13
50-59	20
60 and over	23
Refused	<u>5</u>
 <u>Occupation</u>	
Clerical/Sales/Service	23%
Technical/Electronic/Labor	17
Homemaker	13
Professional/Owner/Manager	9
Retired	18
Student	13
Unemployed	<u>5</u>

MODERATOR'S GUIDE

I. Introduction - Background Information

- A. "The purpose of meeting tonight is to have an open forum with bus riders. In the past, public meetings were held at RTD Headquarters. The RTD hired MBR to engage bus riders in a direct discussion of the issues."
- B. Frequency of RTD usage.
- C. Purpose of using RTD - work, shopping, etc.

II. Explanation of Deficit

- A. Knowledge of how the RTD is funded.
- B. Statement of RTD deficit:

"Based on costs and expected revenue for this year, the RTD is faced with an extreme deficit of approximately 20 million dollars. Unless the RTD can find some new source of funds, this deficit must be made up by either raising fares or reducing service or some combination of both."

- C. General reaction to statement about RTD deficit. Believability of the situation. Reasons for deficit.

III. Explanation of Options to Meet Deficit

- A. "Nobody can be sure what is going to happen; however, here are three possible descriptions of what can happen."

Plan One:

"Modest fare increases with some reductions in service."

This plan calls for fares to be raised in general by 5¢ for all riders. In addition, waiting time between buses will be increased by about 5%. Therefore, buses could become more crowded.

Discussion of Plan One. Reactions - favorable, unfavorable, general comments.

Plan Two:

"More substantial fare increases with no reductions in service."

This plan calls for the basic fare to be raised 10¢ with Express Bus fares to be raised as much as 25¢. No reductions in service will be made.

Discussion of Plan Two. Reactions - favorable, unfavorable, general comments.

Plan Three:

"No fare increases with substantial service reductions."

This plan calls for keeping the basic fare intact. This might include a 10% service cutback. No night service after 7:00 PM, no Saturday and/or Sunday service.

Discussion of Plan Three. Reactions - favorable, unfavorable, general comments.

- B. After discussion of each option, probe which would be most acceptable and which would be least acceptable.

IV. Discussion of Other Variables

- A. Fares for senior citizens and the handicapped.
B. Student bus passes.
C. Other variables and options raised in the discussion.
D. Other suggestions - solutions - comments.

V. Close - Importance of Riders' Contribution

Thanks for attending.