Study: Cash payments remain key part of equitable transit

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Today, there are more ways than ever to pay a bus fare. Instead of painstakingly counting their change into a farebox, transit riders can quickly tap their phone or swipe an auto-reloadable transit card.

These modern options bring increased convenience for many riders and speed up the boarding process. But they also risk leaving behind the most marginalized public transit users. Leaving an option to pay with cash remains an essential part of equitable public transit, a new study says.

To modernize public transit while keeping it accessible to everyone, "there needs to be a lot of outreach and connecting to community leaders," said UO planning and policy professor Anne Brown, who contributed to the study alongside collaborators at other universities. "People have such unique circumstances, so we need to think about how to reach people and address their needs."

Public transit agencies in Eugene, Portland, Denver and Washington, D.C. commissioned the project to evaluate how removing cash fares on buses would affect people's access to transit.

As part of the study, Brown and her colleagues conducted surveys and focus groups to assess riders' concerns about the possible removal of cash fares.

Low-income people are more likely to rely on public transit on a daily basis. They're also less likely to have a credit card, smartphone, or even the cash reserves to pay for a monthly transit pass upfront. So removing cash fares would hit hardest for the people who need transit the most.

More specific concerns emerged, too. Some riders expressed privacy concerns over having a fare card linked to a credit card or worried the card would be stolen, Brown said.

Others detailed the difficulty of reloading fare cards if cash payment options aren't available on board a bus. If people have to visit a gas station or convenience store to reload their bus card with cash, how will they get there? Figuring out where to locate those reloading stations is an additional equity challenge.

Brown's team also did a cost-benefit analysis to evaluate the financial implications of eliminating cash fares. Maintaining cash fare boxes is very expensive; each one can cost thousands of dollars. But accepting cash also increases ridership, giving people more flexibility to hop on a bus without having to jump through hoops to set up an account or link a credit card. So although cutting out cash on buses could save money upfront for transit agencies, that savings would be offset by the lost revenue from having fewer riders, the analysis showed.

There's another option too, one that levels the playing field even further: Removing fares altogether. Fares make up only a part of the budget for most transit agencies, and that financial gap could be closed in other ways.

"Beyond equity, removing fares gets more people to ride," Brown said. "It takes the calculations out of it."

More information: Research project: nitc.trec.pdx.edu/research/pro … ublic_Transportation

Provided by University of Oregon

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