



August 14, 2014

Lee County Board of Commissioners
2120 SW Main Street
Fort Myers, FL 33901

Dear Commissioners:

On August 19th, you will hold a public hearing on LeeTran's proposed fare increase. BikeWalkLee would like to communicate its position with you in advance of the hearing and have it incorporated into the public hearing record. For the reasons outlined below, BikeWalkLee supports the proposed fare increase, provided that all the revenues coming in from the fare increase are dedicated to improving and expanding LeeTran services.

BikeWalkLee advocates for complete streets and a balanced multi-modal transportation system, including a healthy transit system which increases economic attractiveness, reduces overall transportation costs, and increases quality of life.

The county should be planning now for future transit needs that will enable it to proactively prepare for demand. This demand will be driven by a growing population accompanied by drastically shrinking transportation funding for roads. The vision for dealing with demand was envisioned in the Lee MPO's 2035 Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) and was further enhanced by the MPO Board's recent unanimous vote in support of a compact growth and transit land use scenario for the 2040 LRTP.

Last year's budget cuts to LeeTran services were a step backwards. BikeWalkLee hopes that the BoCC will support the widespread community sentiment to restore these services in the FY 14-15 budget. As you know, BikeWalkLee along with many other organizations, particularly the disability groups, have been communicating with you throughout the year about the impact these cuts have had. These cuts have negatively impacted the individual lives of our citizens who rely on transit to get to work and lead independent and productive lives, put at risk the health of the overall transit system, and resulted in declining ridership. Your willingness to listen to the citizens and to take action to rectify this problem is greatly appreciated and we welcome the restoration of these important transit services this Fall.

With respect to the proposed fare increase, we have reviewed the background materials prepared by LeeTran and believe they have demonstrated that the fare increases are both fair and reasonable. It's important to remember that the fare box revenues cover only a fraction of the operating expenses of any transit system. Nationally, the average revenue contributions from the fare box is 32.5% (APTA report, June 2014). Currently, LeeTran fares cover 16.5% of its operating costs, and LeeTran's long-term goal is to achieve a 20% fare box contribution to expenses. This proposed fare increase is part of the plan to reach that goal. In looking at how the actual fare levels in Lee County compare with other Florida communities, LeeTran's table demonstrates that our current fares are lower than our peers.

Raising the regular fares by 25 cents (from \$1.25 to \$1.50) brings us in line with the norm throughout the state. Finally, it's been seven years since LeeTran raised its rates. Based on these facts, we believe that the proposed fare increases are justified and reasonable.

According to information from LeeTran, these proposed fare increases will produce \$750,000/year in increased revenues (or \$500,000 in FY2014-15 since the fare increases are scheduled to start on Jan. 1st, one-quarter into the fiscal year). **It is essential that these increased revenues be used exclusively to improve and expand the current LeeTran services.** There are significant needs out there to improve and expand several bus routes and to reduce wait times (headways). It is unreasonable to expect to have a viable transit system if the headways are 2 hours or more, as is currently the case for many of our routes and schedules.

The disability groups have proposed three bus route improvements (2 in Lehigh and 1 in Cape Coral) that both reduce wait times between buses and add or expand weekend services, costing an estimated \$250,000. The Board has now scheduled a budget workshop to consider implementing these improvement proposals as part of the FY 2014-2015, assuming that the fare increase is approved on Aug. 19th. BikeWalkLee supports using some of these increased fare revenues to implement these three bus improvement projects and urges the Board to begin these improvements as soon as possible. For the remaining \$500,000 of the increased revenues, we support an in-depth look at implementing the Transit Development Plan.

Finally, although it is not related to the fare increase proposal before you, we wanted to communicate our support for the Good Wheels proposal made by Councilman Alan Mandel at your Aug. 12th budget workshop. Councilman Mandel serves as the chair of Lee MPO's Local Coordinating Board (LCB) which coordinates services to the transportation disadvantaged in Lee County. It is most unfortunate that the State Legislature made changes to Medicaid in 2011, which is now creating devastating funding losses at the local level for the provision of vital transportation services to the medically-needy, including in Lee County. We support Councilman Mandel's request for the Board to provide \$250,000 in its FY 14-15 budget for this Good Wheel program and hope that it is a one-time expense, as we understand that the State Legislature is looking at ways to change the law to deal with the unintended consequences of their 2011 statute. In the meantime, the citizens of Lee County who need transportation for vital medical care should not be put at risk.

Your continued leadership is needed to expand and improve the transit system, which is both smart and fiscally responsible.

We ask that the Board's motion to adopt the proposed fare increase explicitly state that the increased revenues from these fare increases will only be used for improved and expanded LeeTran services.

Thank you for considering our views and your continued support for LeeTran services.

Sincerely,

Margaret E. Banyan

Dr. Margaret Banyan
on behalf of BikeWalkLee