

Metra's ticket app leaves behind low-income and elderly riders, critics say

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Metra plans to roll out a smartphone app this fall that makes the phone a virtual ticket for customers, but some Chicagoans and legislators are concerned that certain riders will get left behind by technology.

Questions are also being raised about whether the new app fulfills the intent of a state law that called for implementation of a single "universal fare card" that transit riders can use interchangeably on the CTA, Pace and Metra.

Members of three South Side community organizations contend that Metra's plan for a "mobile ticketing" app won't be available for some low-income and elderly riders because they either can't afford the smartphones or don't have the need or ability to use them.

"My phone is not good enough, nor it is smart enough," said Linda Thisted, an activist with the Hyde Park-based Coalition for Equitable Community Development, which has broached the issue along with the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference and the Coalition for a Lakeside Collective Bargaining Agreement.

The groups also contend that Metra is taking advantage of a loophole in the legislation to allow the commuter rail agency to avoid adoption of the Ventra card in the same way that the CTA and Pace have done.

The groups plan to raise their concerns at Metra's board meeting Wednesday.

The free app is intended to modernize Metra's antiquated paper ticket fare-collection system, officials said. Customers will be able to download tickets or monthly passes onto Apple or Android phones by selecting their Metra line and the departure and destination stations, and paying via credit or debit cards. Once aboard the train, riders will show their smartphone screen to conductors and tap the image of the ticket or pass to confirm they are a paying customer, officials said.

The impetus for the app is the 2011 legislation that called for the Regional Transportation Authority and the three transit agencies to develop a "universal fare card that may be used interchangeably on all bus, rapid transit (and) commuter rail" lines.

The hitch, however, is that this wording was used only in the legislation's synopsis, not in the actual text of the legislation itself. The text calls for implementation of "a regional fare payment system," not the single fare card mentioned in the synopsis.

The system "must allow consumers to use contactless credit cards, debit cards, and prepaid cards to pay for all fixed-route public transportation services," the text said.

The same legislation also mandated that the transit agencies provide real-time transit information to customers and that Metra install automated external defibrillators on trains, both of which have been done.

The CTA and Pace have adopted the Ventra card, allowing tap-on access to buses and trains. Metra officials say the agency satisfies the law because customers can use credit or debit cards, including Ventra cards, to buy tickets.

Metra faces more obstacles to a single-card system because it does not have turnstiles and its fares are distance-based, officials say.

State Reps. Barbara Flynn Currie and Christian Mitchell, who represent South Side districts, also have questioned whether Metra is complying with the spirit of the 2011 law.

"Although installing contactless credit/debit card readers at all Metra ticket terminals may technically satisfy the legislation by allowing the purchase of paper Metra tickets with such cards, it does not satisfy its intent," the legislators wrote Metra in a May 5 letter.

A recent Pew Research center study shows that 27 percent of people 65 and older and 50 percent of people who make \$30,000 a year or less own smartphones.

"Many of our constituents on the Southeast Side of Chicago who ride the Metra Electric fall into these two categories," the lawmakers said.

Currie told the Tribune on Monday that her concerns were not allayed at a meeting last week with agency officials.

"Metra is making progress, but when it comes to access for low-income people and seniors, what they are going to be offering is not likely to suit the need," Currie said. "They don't seem to be ready to do what we asked for."

Mitchell said he feels Metra's current leadership is making an "earnest attempt" to ensure wide access to low-income and elderly riders.

Metra and the RTA said Monday that both agencies believe Metra is in compliance with the state law.

The app is "just the next step with our regional partners to implement more fare payment options," Metra's Michael Gillis said, adding that future upgrades will add more functionality to the app.

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