

Bills would put safety officers on buses and LRT, lower fare evasion fines

Bipartisan measure would also make fare evasion similar to parking ticket.

By Janet Moore (<https://www.startribune.com/janet-moore/6370516/>) Star Tribune |

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Just 49 people were fined for failing to pay their fares on Metro Transit buses and trains in 2018 and 2019. But that doesn't mean Minnesotans are especially diligent about paying their way on public transportation.

The reality, according to the Metropolitan Council, is that local prosecutors are inclined to pursue far more serious crimes instead of a \$180 fine for an unpaid \$2 transit ticket.

Two measures pending at the State Capitol would change the way fares are collected on public transportation in the Twin Cities — a pivot that supporters say will make the system safer and more pleasant to ride.

Both bills would make fare evasion on Metro Transit a \$35 administrative citation, akin to a parking ticket.

They also call for "uniformed transit safety officials" — not police officers — to ride light-rail trains and some buses to collect fares, answer questions and connect homeless passengers and those with mental health or substance abuse issues to available services.

The effort at the Legislature has rare bipartisan support.

"I think the prospects are pretty good," said Rep. Steve Elkins, DFL-Bloomington, who authored the [House bill \(https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?b=House&f=HF1306&ssn=0&y=2021\)](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?b=House&f=HF1306&ssn=0&y=2021). "Last time, it was hard-fought. This year's bill is simpler and cleaner."

One recent convert is Sen. Scott Newman, R-Hutchinson, chairman of the Senate Transportation Finance and Policy Committee. "There's really nothing wrong going from a criminal citation to a civil citation," he said during a recent committee hearing.

"It's important to have someone on the train in a uniform [who] is easily identified as someone a passenger can talk to, with a certain appearance of responsibility and authority," Newman added.

The new transit agents wouldn't be armed but would work closely with Metro Transit's police force. The Met Council, which operates Metro Transit, hopes to hire up to 54 of them by 2023.

The agents would make their rounds on the Green and Blue light-rail lines and on several rapid bus routes where fares are paid at transit stations and not on board, roughly a third of Metro Transit's service.

The concept of decriminalizing fare evasion and deploying unarmed transit agents is gaining popularity in cities across the United States.

A [study](https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/comm/docs/rao_kP9DTUKnoCZLaZzfcg.pdf)

(https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/comm/docs/rao_kP9DTUKnoCZLaZzfcg.pdf) released by the transit advocacy group East Metro Strong found more than a dozen transit agencies nationwide use unarmed, uniformed staff to patrol their systems and



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Two bills at the Legislature would change enforcement of fare evasion on Metro Transit LRT trains and rapid buses.

check fares. Most agencies penalize fare evaders with a petty misdemeanor or administrative citation. East Metro Strong's executive director, Will Schroeer, said those efforts at other agencies "improve safety and the customer experience."

Seattle's transit system will begin using uniformed fare checkers in a pilot program later this year, focusing on educating riders about fares and connecting low-income passengers with reduced fare programs, said spokeswoman Rachelle Cunningham.

Not everyone is on board with the Minnesota legislation, however.

Rep. Donald Raleigh, R-Circle Pines, a member of the Public Safety and Criminal Justice Reform committee, said he worried that transit agents would violate passengers' Fourth Amendment rights prohibiting unreasonable searches by demanding their personal information.

Fare checks would result in "a private citizen asking another private citizen for your papers," he said, noting the practice could open the state and Met Council to litigation. The measure passed the committee despite the objections of Raleigh and six others.

The push to create a force of transit agents and decriminalize fares began early last year at the Legislature. But the bill stalled in a House committee and failed to get traction in the Senate.

A highly publicized surge in serious crime — robberies, aggravated assaults and theft — on light-rail trains in late 2019 made the debate over transit safety especially charged. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, priorities at the Capitol shifted.

The Senate bill (https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=SF1513&session=ls92&session_year=2021&session_number=0&version=latest) calls for Metro Transit to adopt and post a passenger code of conduct, mark paid fare zones at transit stations, and launch real-time security monitoring systems to suss out crime — all practices already in place.

The bill would strengthen the ban on passengers who have committed crimes on public transit, and it would require Hennepin and Ramsey counties to help finance the program. The Met Council has said it would use federal pandemic stimulus money to pay for the program for the next two years.

Transit ridership plunged (<https://www.startribune.com/met-council-ridership-on-metro-transit-plunged-in-2020-owing-to-pandemic/600026478/>) 53% in 2020 because of the COVID-19 outbreak, and trips remain limited to essential excursions such as work, school and grocery shopping.

Still, said Rep. Jon Koznick, R-Lakeville, a co-author of the House bill, "As riders come back [to transit], they will have a new experience. Everyone agrees safety is important to a successful transit system."

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