

Mt. SAC students vote on fee for bus pass during parking crunch at Walnut campus

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SAC students are voting on a transit fee to make the "Class Pass" a mandatory surcharge, \$8 for part-time students and \$9 for full-time, to allow students a discounted pass on all local and Silver Streak Foothill Transit lines at the Walnut, Calif. community college campus Nov. 17, 2014. (Photo by Leo Jarzomb/San Gabriel Valley Tribune)

By [Steve Scauzillo](#), San Gabriel Valley Tribune

11/17/14

Talk to any college student in Southern California and undoubtedly a lack of campus parking comes up in the conversation.

Nowhere is the problem more acute than at Mount San Antonio College, the largest community college in the state, where the Board of Trustees has approved a five-story parking garage with 2,300 spaces to increase capacity, despite protests from hundreds of Walnut residents who say it will block their views and lower property values. The entire Walnut City Council showed up at the trustees' last meeting to oppose the structure.

But long before the brouhaha over a parking garage went public, the college administration worked out a deal with Foothill Transit, the West Covina-based provider of bus service, to give each of its 60,000 students a free bus pass starting in August 2013. And to the surprise of many, 7,486 students signed up for the Class Pass, bumping up ridership on bus lines serving Mt. SAC by 29 percent in a 12-month period, said Felicia Friesema, Foothill Transit spokesman. The increase required Foothill Transit to add another bus to Lines 286 and 489 just to keep up with demand.

“It showed without a doubt students are very interested in taking public transit,” Friesema said. “This helps mitigate the traffic and it means cleaner air in the area,” she said, since Foothill buses run on alternative fuels.

Now, the day of reckoning has come. Foothill Transit says it no longer can provide the service for free. It is asking full-time Mt. SAC students to pay \$9 per semester and part-time students \$8 per semester to continue the Class Pass program.

Students started voting Monday on the new fee through their online portals and in-person at certain campus locations. The voting continues through Thursday. Foothill Transit will know the results by Friday, Friesema said.

A majority of yes votes keeps the bus-pass program running. Without a simple majority, the Class Pass program will end by the close of the current semester, she said.

“Ultimately, it is up to the students to tell us what they want,” Friesema said. “And we will respect their decision, whatever that is.”

There are several issues underlying the voting.

First, even going from \$0 to \$9 a semester, there is value. The Class Pass allows students free rides on all Foothill Transit local and Silver Streak bus lines, which can connect riders to 22 cities in the San Gabriel Valley in addition to downtown Los Angeles. Local bus routes stop along Temple Avenue and Bonita Avenue, Mt. SAC Way and Grand Avenue. Foothill buses do not enter the campus.

Since it began, the program has accounted for 1 million boardings, Friesema said. Some students go as far as Claremont and Montclair by bus without using a car. With a free transfer, riders can take Line 289 to Citrus College in Glendora; Line 486 reaches the El Monte bus station where students can transfer for free onto buses to USC or Cal State Los Angeles. Often, students take classes at more than one college, Friesema said.

The cost for a 31-day Silver Streak bus pass for six months at the reduced college student rate is \$312. A discounted Silver Streak pass for college students is \$52 a month; a student monthly pass good only for local lines is \$33.

There’s also a question of equity, as demonstrated by some students’ responses via Twitter.

Mt. SAC student who goes by Jesse tweeted Monday he voted “no,” adding: “I think the students that use Foothill Transit should be the only ones paying that fee.”

On Mt. SAC’s Facebook page, Rafael Vera reminded other students to vote yes “and make the program permanent for the school.”

Foothill Transit offers subsidized bus pass programs at Rio Hondo College (GoRIO) in Whittier and at Pasadena City College (I-TAP) for full-time students. The agency does not have a bus-pass program with Cal Poly Pomona, though some of the lines serving Mt. SAC also serve Cal Poly Pomona.

The pilot program at Mt. SAC was a way for Foothill to gauge if young people take public transit, as transportation experts have said. Student ridership programs across the country account for 11 percent of public transportation users, according to a Foothill Transit memo from March 29, 2013.

The cost of Foothill’s Class Pass program was estimated at \$427,000. Most of that money comes from the half-cent sales tax measure passed by voters in 2008, Measure R.