



DATE: March 18, 2026
TO Citizens Oversight Committee Member
FROM: Eddy Cumins, General Manager
SUBJECT: Review the Free-fare for Youth and Seniors Pilot Program

RECOMMENDATION: Review the Free-fare for Youth and Seniors Pilot Program

SUMMARY:

Since April 1, 2024, youth (ages 0-18) and seniors (over 65) have been fare-free on SMART. The intent of the program was to remove barriers for youth and senior riders, introduce more riders to the system, and better serve these population segments that were underrepresented among SMART's ridership base. Due to the success of the program, the SMART Board of Directors elected to extend free fares for youth and seniors through FY26. In preparation for the FY27 budget, it is important for the Board to direct staff regarding the future of this program.

Background

In 2024, the SMART Board of Directors approved a 15-month pilot program for free fares for youth and seniors on SMART, from April 2024 through June 2025. At the time of pilot adoption, it was estimated that the program would result in an estimated 25% increase in youth and senior riders and a 16% decrease in fare revenue.

Prior to the implementation of this program, youth and seniors made up 24% of SMART's ridership (14% youth/10% seniors). Since the program went into effect, 43% of SMART riders are estimated to fall into the category of youth and seniors (26% youth/17% senior). Over the same period (FY24-FY26), SMART experienced an overall increase in ridership of 65%, with the growth in senior and youth riders contributing to this growth as youth and senior ridership increased 195% and adult ridership increased 23% over this period. The dramatic difference between the youth and senior increase (195%), and the increase in adults (23%), suggests that removing the barrier of fare payment was the primary factor supporting this change. SMART has also observed an anecdotal increase in adult ridership due to adults accompanying youth and seniors on trips.

Throughout the program, SMART’s fare revenue has not decreased as originally anticipated, and instead has increased with the net gain in ridership. Fare revenue is up 16% when comparing FY26 projection to FY24, and the farebox recovery rate remains consistent at 6%.

Discussion:

To date, the fare-free program for youth and seniors has met the intended objectives of the pilot. Furthermore, the program did not have the anticipated negative impact on the farebox recovery rate. Continuation of the program in FY27 would likely result in maintaining the current youth and senior ridership levels and maintaining the current farebox recovery rate of 6%. Elimination of the program in FY27 would likely result in an increased farebox recovery rate but would potentially result in reduced ridership.

FISCAL IMPACT:

At this time, it is difficult to estimate the financial impact of the continuation or elimination of the free fare program, in part because SMART will also be implementing other ridership initiatives including the increased service with the MASCOTS schedule changes. If all youth and seniors who rode in FY26 paid half fare, and the elimination of the program did not lose any riders, the impact would be \$1,354,500. However, youth and senior ridership likely would not have increased as much without the free fare program. Absent the free fare program, youth and senior ridership would have likely increased similar to adult ridership. A 23% increase over FY24 in youth and senior ridership at half fare would be a fiscal impact of \$564,750.

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2
Scenario Parameters	Lower ridership growth consistent with adult ridership growth	Observed ridership observed in FY26 projection
Youth/senior ridership increase	23% above FY24	195% above FY24
Fare	Half price	Half price
Revenue impact	\$564,750	\$1,354,500

Sincerely,

/s/

Eddy Cumins General Manager

Attachment(s): None