



Congress boosts transit benefits

Tax break could save Metra riders about three months in transit costs

Late last year Congress delivered a huge win for Metra commuters who participate in a pre-tax transit benefit plan, passing legislation that nearly doubled the amount of money that can be set aside each month to cover transportation costs.

Americans can now set aside up to \$255 in pre-tax dollars

each month to spend on public transportation, up from the previous level of \$130 a month. The program saves commuters money because they don't pay state or federal taxes on the dollars set aside, up to the new limit. This can translate into saving as much as \$1,100 a year on their taxes. (The savings are seen

on the paycheck, not at the point of Metra sale.)

"Participating in a transit benefit program is like getting three months of free transportation each year," said Metra Executive Director/CEO Don Orseno. "And by making public transportation more affordable, this increase can potentially

boost Metra ridership."

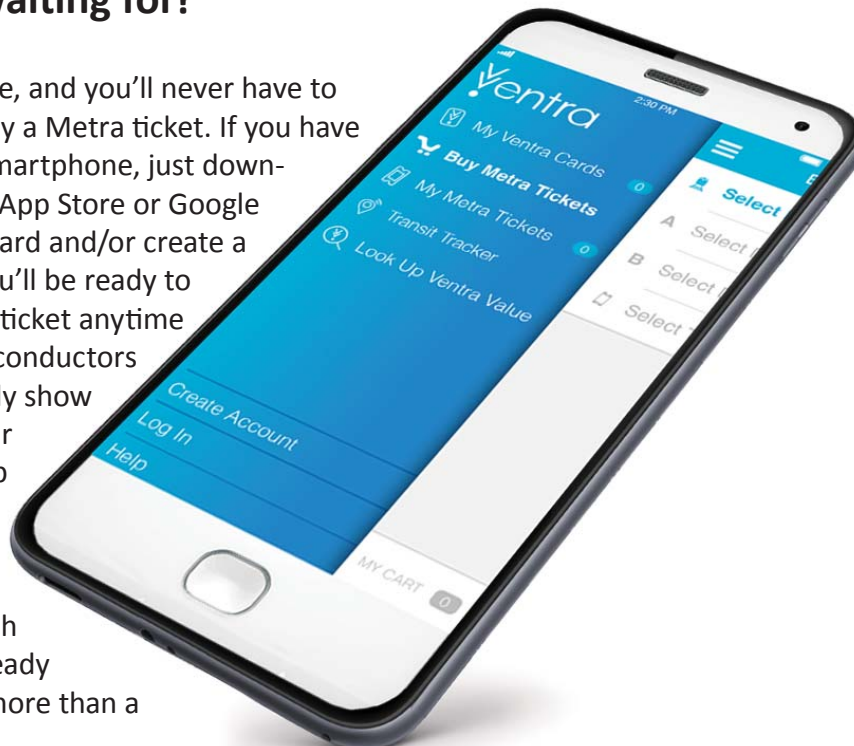
"We would like to thank the entire Illinois congressional delegation, particularly Senators Dick Durbin and Mark Kirk and Representatives Bob Dold, Danny Davis, Randy Hultgren, Dan Lipinski and Peter Roskam."

According to Metra's most
(Continued on Page 2)

Have you downloaded the Ventra App yet?

What are you waiting for?

It's free and easy to use, and you'll never have to wait in line again to buy a Metra ticket. If you have an Apple or Android smartphone, just download the app from the App Store or Google Play, register a credit card and/or create a Ventra account and you'll be ready to buy any kind of Metra ticket anytime and anywhere. When conductors check for tickets, simply show them the ticket on your phone's screen and tap it to validate. The app also features transit trackers for Metra, CTA and Pace and much more. The app has already been used to pay for more than a million Metra rides.



Modest fare increases begin Feb. 1

Metra is reminding customers of the fare change that is scheduled to begin on Feb. 1.

Approved by the Metra Board of Directors last November, the increase will generate 2 percent in additional fare revenue to fund a portion of the new operating costs for the federally mandated Positive Train Control (PTC) safety system and a bare-bones capital budget.

In addition, the surcharge to purchase train tickets onboard when an agent or ticket vending machine is available will increase from \$3 per person to \$5 per group beginning February 1. This change was previously

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Metra

On the Bi-Level

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We can't guarantee all letters will be printed or answered. Please keep letters to less than 200 words and include your first name, hometown and what line you ride. (Names are not required but strongly encouraged.) We reserve the right to edit letter for length and grammar.

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Next stop: North Pole

Santa and Union Pacific's Joel Kirchner wave to crowds gathered to watch the Operation North Pole train pass by last month. The charity group hosts the train ride every year for children with serious illnesses and their families. The 2015 event featured a fun-filled day of respite, including the train ride, breakfast with Mrs. Claus and a visit with Santa at his workshop, for 71 families.



Benefits

(Continued from Page 1)
recent data, nearly 52 percent of its 150,000 daily riders use pre-tax transit benefits to help pay for their commuting costs.

The higher threshold will now cover the cost of a monthly pass from all but the two farthest Metra fare zones. For those last two zones, customers can combine the \$255 in pre-tax dollars with another form of payment, such as a credit card, to buy their monthly pass and still see significant savings. Metra has a split-payment feature on its website and through the Ventra App to facilitate this process.

For example, a customer commuting from Route 59, Metra's

busiest station outside of downtown, will pay \$202 for a Zone G monthly pass in 2016 (starting in February). If that customer uses pre-tax dollars to buy the pass, he or she will save \$7.58 in Illinois taxes, \$15.45 in federal FICA taxes and \$30.30 to \$50.50 in federal taxes (depending on the tax bracket), for a total savings of \$53.33 to \$73.53 per month or \$640 to \$882 a year.

Other examples:

- Users of a Zone C Monthly Pass (which will cost \$138) could save \$432 to \$600 per year.
- Users of a Zone D Monthly Pass (\$159.25) could save \$507 to \$699 per year.
- Users of a Zone E Monthly Pass (\$173.50) could save \$558 to \$762 per year.

• Users of a Zone F Monthly Pass (\$187.75) could save \$597 to \$825 per year or \$49.75 to \$68.75 per month.

To participate in a transit benefit program, the benefit must be offered by the commuter's employer. Similar to health savings accounts, yet far more flexible, the programs allow employees to opt in and out according to their plan specifications. Employers also save money on payroll taxes and they may recognize improvement in employee retention and employee morale.

For more information about pre-tax transit benefits, referrals to qualified plans or other transit support, companies should call 312.322.6326 or email Transit-Benefits@Metrarr.com

Fares

(Continued from Page 1)
approved by the Metra Board of Directors as part of the 2015 Budget but was postponed until mobile ticketing was introduced.

Metra customers who buy One-Way Tickets will pay a quarter more per ticket, an increase of 2.4 percent to 7.7 percent depending on the zone. If these custom-

ers take the train 30 times a year, they will pay an additional \$7.50 annually to ride Metra.

Metra customers who buy 10-Ride Tickets will pay \$1.75 more or 17 cents more per trip. The increase works out to 1.9 percent to 6 percent, depending on the zone. If these customers ride the train to work about half the time, they will pay \$3.50 more per month and \$42 more per year.

Metra customers who buy a

Monthly Pass will pay \$2.50 more per month, an increase of 0.9 percent to 2.7 percent, depending on the zone. Assuming most of these customers use Metra to commute full-time to work each month, they will pay about 12 cents more per day and \$30 more per year.

Other fare increases include an additional 75 cents on the reduced fare 10-Ride Ticket and \$1.25 on the reduced fare Monthly Pass.

SOUND OFF

Suspicious minds

Dear On The Bi-Level,
Elvis is everywhere. If you look at the Quiet Car logo you can find him: pompadour, sneer and all. He's wearing a very wide blue collar and appears to be pointing toward his eye. Please pass this along to the proper authorities and remember, the truth is out there!

Sign me,
Elvis Spotter

Umm, we gotta say: we don't see Elvis in the decal. But That's All Right. We told ourselves Let's Pretend and see what other riders think. What do you say readers: should we have said Return to Sender?

I shall not be moved

To M., who HATES the Quiet Cars (December 2015): If you hate them, why sit in them? They are consistently the second to the last car. Sit in another car. Problem solved. Some people just want to gripe. If you know the car you're sitting in is a Quiet Car and you aren't quiet, then it is no wonder that your fellow passengers are rude to you. I am very nice when I tell someone they are in a Quiet Car. Usually I get a polite response back and they pipe down. You should do the same or move to a car you're more comfortable in.

Sincerely,
Number 1 Fan of Quiet Cars

We said something similar the day we launched Quiet Cars. Putting them in just two cars at most on a train leaves plenty of room for those who don't like them to find a seat where they don't have to be shushed. And thanks for the reminder to be nice when asking others to quiet down. Most noisy people don't mean to be.



Did he find a new place to dwell?

If I can dream

Most of the commuter rail systems across the country are diesel-powered, except for places like New York and Philadelphia where they go through tunnels. But I've noticed that Denver and Honolulu chose electric traction for their lines, and Caltrain in Silicon Valley plans to electrify in the future. Has Metra, except for its already electrified ME district, looked into it?

Peter

The Metra Electric was electrified back in 1926, when it was owned by IC – way before Metra was formed in 1984. If our other predecessor railroads had also electrified then we'd have more electric lines. But we'd need a lot more money than we currently

have to even begin a discussion about electrifying now.

Don't be cruel

Dear Commuter A (who ranted about a blood glucose test): As a Type I diabetic since childhood, I take issue with your rant on "Sound Off." I'm not sure exactly which part of that gentleman's testing disgusted you so, but the first thought to come to mind is; are you unable to look elsewhere while he performs his test? After all, it only takes him a moment or two. Perhaps you should have spent that time contemplating how thankful you are that you do not have to spend a good portion of each and every day trying to control your disease. And I wonder how scathing your rant would have

been if he had NOT taken the time to test his blood sugar level, gone low, experienced an insulin reaction, and held you to stop the train and wait for an ambulance? Next time, I suggest you follow the words of that great band, Chicago – "Look away, baby, look away."

Commuter B

Hey, we're doing Elvis here, B, not Chicago. But point taken, and our apologies for not being more sympathetic ourselves.

Little less conversation

Quiet Cars are heaven-sent. At the beginning of the day, people want to get themselves together to face another day. AND at the end of the day wind-down so that we are pleasant and agreeable when we get home. This constant loud yakking, laughing loudly, talking loudly on cellphones, and constantly talking about their personal business so loud you can hear these people in Europe. Some are trying to impress. I don't want to hear about their personal business. They have no social graces. Quiet Cars are the 11th Commandment: "Thou shall not be rude to thy neighbor."

Jacqui

As we said, the Quiet Car is for some, not all. But stay polite.

Mystery train

I wonder why it is people sit in the Quiet Car for their entire ride home but the minute they stand up to get off they begin blabbing away like there's no tomorrow. People, just because you're getting off doesn't mean it's no longer a Quiet Car.

A Rider

A fine point with which to end our letters this month.

Winter Travel Notes

Downtown Metra stations now have Wi-Fi

All five of downtown Metra stations now offer free Wi-Fi hotspots and free electric charging outlets. At Union Station, the hotspot and charging station are located near the Metra ticketing area between the north and south concourses. At Millennium, the Wi-Fi hotspot covers the passenger waiting area in the center of the station, where the charging stations were installed. At Van Buren, the hotspot reaches both the north and south portions of the waiting area and both charging stations. At Ogilvie, Wi-Fi is available in the platform-level waiting area as well as around the charging stations on the ground floor in the passenger concourse. And at LaSalle Street, the hotspot covers the outdoor concourse and the indoor waiting area. In each case, the Wi-Fi is discoverable under the name "Metra Wi-Fi." No password is required. The Wi-Fi units installed at all five stations cost Metra about \$12,000 and monthly service fees for all locations cost \$1,050. A test of Wi-Fi on 11 train cars is coming soon.

'Pets on Trains' now permanent

Metra has formally adopted a "Pets on Trains" program to allow small pets in carriers on all weekend trains after a successful pilot program first on weekend Rock Island Line trains and then on all Metra lines. The move came after the policy received overwhelming support in an online survey and conductors reported no problems with the pilot program. Only small pets in enclosed protective carriers

are allowed, and carriers can't take up seats, seating areas or obstruct pathways on trains or in stations and must be small enough to be carried on by a single person. They must fit in a passenger's lap or under the seat at all times. Metra reserves the right to remove passengers with pets that are noisy or disturb other customers, and owners will be responsible for the behavior and cleanup of their pets. Service animals are allowed on all Metra trains at all times.

Metra Board honors two police officers

Two Metra Police officers whose actions are credited with saving the life of a passenger in November were honored by the Metra Board of Directors at its December meeting. On Nov. 17 at LaSalle Street Station, Metra Police Officer Douglas Weincek observed a man in distress who then collapsed on the station floor. Officer Weincek, joined by Metra Police Officer Joseph Cusentino, immediately began administering cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). The officers also deployed an Automated External Defibrillator (AED) but the subject remained unresponsive. Officers Cusentino and Weincek continued to perform CPR until the Chicago Fire Department arrived to transport the man to Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Both the responding Chicago Fire Department lieutenant and Northwestern Memorial Hospital staff contacted the Metra Police Department later that evening to advise that the man survived, and was alive only due to the lifesaving measures taken by Officers Cusentino and Weincek.

Toy, coat and food drives a success

Metra customers once again displayed their generosity last month during our annual drives for toys, warm coats and food. About 550 coats were collected in the coat drive, and more than 3,300 toys and more than \$11,000 were collected in the Toys for Tots drive with the U.S. Marine Corps. Metra extends its sincere thanks to every customer who contributed.

Metra meets on-time goal for 2015

For the 10th straight month, Metra exceeded its goal for on-time performance in December, operating 97.4 percent of its trains on time. Metra's goal is to operate at least 95 percent of its trains on time. Like the rest of the U.S. commuter railroad industry, Metra considers a train to have operated on time if it reaches its final destination within five minutes and 59 seconds of its scheduled arrival. The December performance follows nine months in which Metra's on-time rate exceeded 95 percent: 97 percent in March, 97.2 percent in April and May, 95.8 percent in June, 95.3 percent in July, 96.3 percent in August, 96.8 percent in September, 97 percent in October and 96.8 percent in November. For the year, Metra operated 96.2 percent of its trains on time, exceeding the 10-year average of 95.5 percent and finishing as one of the best years in the last decade.



SPRING IS
RIGHT AROUND
THE CORNER.

WINTER WARM UP SALE*

Save 20% on select Midwest routes to St. Louis, Grand Rapids, Dearborn, Champaign, Springfield and more before March 30th.

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If you have a complaint, compliment, service issue or any other issue, we want to hear from you. You can call a Passenger Service Representative at (312) 322-6777 (8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays) or go to the "Contact Us" link at www.metrarail.com.