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METROPOLITAN DESK

NYC; As Inevitable As Pepperoni: Higher Fares

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By **CLYDE HABERMAN (NYT)** 809 words
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JUST before the Fourth of July holiday, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg began bracing New Yorkers for the inevitable: fares on the city's subways and buses are about to go up. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is "strapped," Mr. Bloomberg said, and "I think in the fall they're going to have to make some tough decisions."

"They," for the uninitiated, means not only mass-transit managers but also their ultimate master, Gov. George E. Pataki.

But even by Albany's dubious standards, raising the fare would not seem to qualify as the toughest of decisions. Is there a workable alternative? Forecasts are that the M.T.A. will run a deficit of well over \$600 million next year. Given these hard times, anybody counting on new state subsidies to close the gap is as optimistic as someone getting married for a third time -- the triumph of hope over experience.


It might be noted that a fare increase was predicted in this column six months ago, for reasons having nothing to do with budget deficits or subsidies. That methodology is simplistic. The one used here was far more scientific.

A slice of pizza, it was noted, costs \$1.75 in much of the city, and runs to \$2 or more in Midtown. In this environment, there is no way for the \$1.50 fare, in place since 1995, to survive.

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If you do not understand, you are clearly unaware of the Pizza Connection. A strange interplay of markets in New York dictates that the cost of a subway ride runs parallel to the price of a slice. Don't ask why. It simply is so, and has been for decades.

In January, this column credited this important discovery to a banker named George Fasel, who wrote about it in 1985 for this newspaper's Op-Ed page. Not so fast. That's what you get for relying on a computerized network of data retrieval. The system failed (we blame machines rather than ourselves) to note that the pizza-subway link had been made in these pages five years earlier by Eric M. Bram, a Bronx-born patent lawyer who works in Westchester.

Mr. Bram has kindly set the record straight. And, he said yesterday, "with the cost of pizza being what it is, I'm expecting a fare increase any day."

The logic seems irrefutable, and it is borne out by Mr. Bloomberg's warning about tough decisions ahead.

Note that the mayor mentioned the fall. What he meant was after the gubernatorial election in November.

Although a political arriviste, Mr. Bloomberg has quickly absorbed some of his new profession's more enduring conventional wisdoms. One is that you don't ask leaders in an election year to do anything that reveals true leadership.

That is why the mayor has delayed asking Albany for new taxes, even though he also suggests with increasing clarity that they will be essential if he is to have any hope of balancing city budgets in the next few years. By the same token, he has accepted pushing off those "tough decisions" about the subway and bus fare until after the leaves are on the ground and the governor's race is over.

The scripted line from Mr. Pataki's office and the transit system is that it is "premature" to talk about the fare's future. It is not at all premature, however, for bond rating agencies, some of which are already predicting increases.

HOW high will the fare go? Who knows? The Pizza Connection would indicate a rise to \$1.75, maybe even \$2. But the governor and his people could technically leave the present fare intact and instead raise the price of the MetroCards that provide daily, weekly and monthly discounts. As it is, thanks to those discounts, few regular riders pay the full \$1.50. Far from it.

Naturally, when the price does go up, there will be hollers.

"Our position is always opposed to a fare increase," said Beverly Dolinsky, executive director of the M.T.A.'s Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee. But she added that the MetroCard discounts have in effect led to a fare decrease for most New

Yorkers. Some shift in direction, she acknowledged, is inevitable.

Then, too, seven years have passed since fares last went up. There has not been such prolonged stability since the period from 1953 to 1966, when a subway token was fixed at 15 cents. From then on, increases came on average every three years.

By now, you almost have to wonder what is all that tough about imposing a higher fare. It hardly seems the political equivalent of biting the bullet. Chewing on thin-crust pizza is more like it.