

# If You Understand Pizza, You Understand Subway Fares

By George Fasel

*New York Times (1857-Current file); Dec 14, 1985; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2001)*

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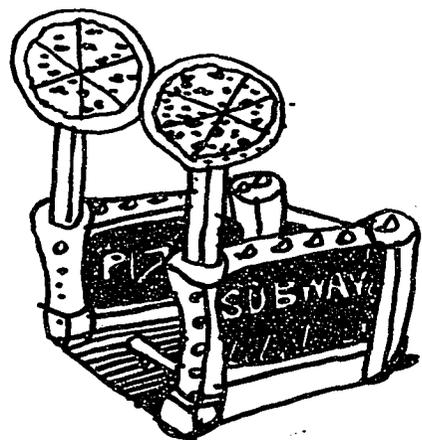
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In 1975, when I first visited New York City, the transit fare was 35 cents for service that, in my experience, ran from indifferent to poor. By 1978, when I returned, the transit fare had increased to 50 cents. It also seemed to me that service had deteriorated.

It was explained to me, however, that this was my fault: Since I had been away for three years, the inescapable decline in the service was bound to seem dramatic. If I had experienced that decline on a daily basis, I would scarcely have noticed it.

In 1979, I moved to New York. I had no choice but to become a regular subway rider, and I took comfort in the knowledge that I would barely register the system's erosion. The next year, however, there was a

*George Fasel is a vice president of the Bankers Trust Company.*



### A lesson in the most elementary economics

transit strike, which was not my fault. Unavoidably, exposure to an alternate means of transportation dramatized the decay of the subway. I walked for 11 days, and, while the experience was inconvenient, on balance I was happier.

When the fare reached 90 cents in 1984, I was pretty steamed. After all, by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's own evaluations, service was getting worse. Breakdowns, delays, accidents, crime and unspeakable indignities now came with the fare at no extra charge. If riders in rush hour had been treated instead like cattle being led to slaughter, they would have wondered how to account for the improvement in their status.

The experience was bad enough, but the principle was worse. The product was going to pot, and I was supposed to pay more for it.

A friend came to the rescue. He is a man who understands the delicate interplay of markets. "You've missed the connection," he told me. "The transit token has no relationship to capital costs, union contracts, passenger miles, or depreciation schedules. Forget all that. The critical variables are flour, tomato sauce and mozzarella cheese."

"You mean . . .?"

"Yes, the token is subtly but inextricably linked to the price of a slice of pizza. Don't ask why. It just is. Where, today, in 1984, can you get a decent slice of pizza in New York for 75 cents? It's tough to swallow" — I think he meant the truth, not the pizza — "but that's how this town works."

Not long ago, the press was full of

stories alleging epic waste and bungling in the M.T.A. (the 63d Street line, missed Federal funding opportunities, the usual sort of thing). Perversely, such stories seem to reach a peak just before we poor suckers who pay the fare get stuck with a new increase. I stiffened, determined to resist, or at least to protest. But then late one evening I stopped for a slice

of pizza at the parlor across the street from my apartment. For nearly two years, I had been accustomed to laying down my dollar bill and picking up my slice and a dime. This time, I received no change.

There it is, fellow passengers. Oh, you can fight it if you wish, and I wouldn't blame you, but you're bucking an iron law, apparently as inflex-

ible as the law of gravity is in its sphere. Mario Cuomo has decided it is futile even to attempt to save the 90 cent fare, because the Governor is a man who knows the price of a slice.

If you don't believe this fare-pizza thesis, ask yourself, on Jan. 1, when the price of a subway and bus ride becomes \$1, what other explanation there is for the increase. □

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