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## Missoula bus officials eye possible zero-fare system

by Scott Zoltan  
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MISSOULA, Mont. - Officials with Missoula's main bus system, Mountain Line, are looking at how to create a zero-fare bus system. The Mountain Line bus system runs throughout most of the city. Right now, a one-way ticket costs a dollar.

an researching the possibility of a zero-  
or John Engen supports the effort, though

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program is not currently in the 2015 fiscal year budget.

Engen says if the city's tax base grows, the city could possibly put forth about \$50,000 of general fund revenue.



"It would cost about \$400,000 a year to move to a zero fare. That would get about 40 percent more folks riding the bus. We think that's a pretty sound investment. So, if our property tax base grows in a way that makes sense we would like to help fund that zero-fare program," said Engen.

Mountain Line General Manager Michael Tree says a scenario that might play out in the future would be partners coming together to help fund the fair-free system, though he's not sure who those might be at the moment. He says examples could be downtown businesses, or the University of Montana.

Mountain Line officials stress two things though. They say they won't be raising taxes in order to pay for free buses, and that the money generated from a 1.7 million dollar levy passed in November won't be going to free buses either. Those funds will go to expanded bus services and more vehicles on the road.

It's important to note that Mountain Line has had its critics in the past.

Opponents of the levy argued that folks with fixed incomes can't help fund buses they don't think have enough ridership.

Supporters of a zero-fare system argue that free bus rides would increase ridership, and thus bring benefits like reduced traffic.

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