

Advertising Industry To Hitch Ride on Metro

Cash-Strapped Agency Has Change of Philosophy

By Lyndsey Layton
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Metro officials who have long striven to keep the transit system uncluttered say financial pressures have forced a new philosophy: They want to turn rail cars and buses into rolling billboards, run animated commercials in dark subway tunnels, hang video monitors inside trains to broadcast commercials and welcome ATMs, florists and shoe cobblers at stations in exchange for a cut of the action.

"We don't have any choice," said Carlton Sickles, 82, the longest-serving member of the Metro board and a steadfast guardian of the transit system's cathedral-like appearance for three decades. "I've been prophylactically opposed to advertising. But I have to recognize we need money. It's a thing we have to do."

The transit agency's leaders are moving ahead with the first steps to deliver a captive audience of 1.1 million daily riders to advertisers: 100 buses and 20 trains wrapped in computer-generated, vinyl ads from top to bottom and front to back would roll by spring, and four to five subway tunnel ads would launch by summer.

Transit officials also plan to drape advertising from the sides of parking garages, hang commercial banners from banisters inside the busiest stations, hoist advertising signs on light poles in station parking lots and sell ad space on bus shelters. "We want to leave no stone unturned," said Leona Agouridis, Metro's assistant general manager for communications.

Metro staff members will spend the next eight weeks fine-tuning the advertising ideas, deciding how to structure competitive bidding and making sure the plans don't interfere with the operations of trains and buses. The plan still must be approved by the full Metro board, and the authority expects that vote in January.

It's a dramatic departure for a transit system designed by Army generals to appear spic and span. Newsstands and shops have never been permitted inside stations, as they are in other subway systems. Advertising has been banned at Metro-owned bus shelters. And it is illegal on trains to play music without wearing headphones, let alone hang a monitor to broadcast commercials.

"I've seen a sea change from an earlier attitude which had this ideal, pristine environment where advertising was the bane of existence to today where you have this panoply of ideas, many of which I consider exciting and appropriate to raise revenue for a system strapped for cash," said D.C. Council member Jim Graham (D-Ward 1), who chairs the Metro board.

If all the ideas are implemented, they could generate as much as \$15 million a year, according to Metro staff estimates released yesterday during a presentation to directors. The agency brings in \$23.2 million a year from more conventional advertising: illuminated panels inside rail stations, modest posters inside buses and rail cars and large panels on bus exteriors.

Metro is trying to boost revenue in the face of looming shortfalls. The transit system raised fares July 1 and trimmed costs to avert a \$48 million shortfall in this fiscal year's \$899.8 million operating budget. But analysts looking ahead to next year are projecting a \$60 million shortfall and say another fare increase is likely.

The most innovative proposal is the plan to sell advertising space inside subway tunnels, using a new technology that creates mini-movies that appear to float in the darkness outside the train windows. The technique relies on illuminated panels that give the illusion of motion to a passenger on a train rushing past, much the way the images in a child's flip book appear to move.

Just a few years old, animated tunnel advertising is used by two other U.S. transit systems: MARTA in Atlanta and the PATH system between New Jersey and New York City.

Metro directors who saw a video clip of a Snapple subway tunnel ad yesterday seemed excited by the novelty. "Oh, cool!" said Katherine K. Hanley, who represents Fairfax County on the board. "Do it again!" other board members shouted.

MARTA and PATH have contracted with New York-based Submedia, the only U.S. firm in the fledgling industry. It was founded in 1999 by Joshua Spodek, who came up with the idea while a graduate student in astrophysics at Columbia University. He was mesmerized by the zoetrope, a 19th-century optical toy that makes images inside a revolving cylinder

appear to move.

Another idea never before considered by Metro is swaddling trains in vinyl advertising that is coated onto the rail cars. For a system that has stressed uniformity and made certain the newest rail car resembles the oldest, the endorsement yesterday of wrapped trains by Hanley was nothing less than startling. "Who wants to stand and look at all the train cars all alike?" she said.

The plan likely to take the longest to implement is renting space in Metro stations and parking facilities to businesses such as shoe repair and other services. Transit officials said they want to first survey riders to determine which kinds of services are desired and then seek bids.

On the platform at Metro Center yesterday, riders expressed a range of reaction to the new advertising strategy. "I'm from New York City, so it wouldn't matter if they did it or not," said Whitney Coleman-Clark, a 41-year-old Red Line rider. But Carolyn Comerford, 52, nixed the notion of wrapped buses and trains. "I kind of like the clean look," she said.

The only concern raised by Metro directors about the expanded advertising had to do with whether video monitors showing commercials in rail stations, on trains and on buses should have audio. Board members said they wanted more information before deciding.

"I love silence," said T. Dana Kauffman, who represents Fairfax. "I value what little quiet time I get."

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