

Nation

Subways tune in to new revenue

Transit systems turn on TVs to turn up cash flow

By Larry Copeland
USA TODAY

ATLANTA — Subway riders here soon will be able to watch television and hear piped-in music in a first-of-its-kind venture designed to raise money for the city's cash-strapped transit agency.

The Rail Network, a private company based in New York, is installing five 15-inch, flat-screen televisions inside each of 100 rail cars and eventually will put them in all of the Atlanta system's 338 cars. Later this spring, trains will feature updated news programming in English or Spanish from Atlanta's ABC affiliate, as well as three music channels.

Passengers will have to bring their own headsets. Televisions will have closed captioning, and audio will be available only through FM radios and FM-ready cellphones.

The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) expects to generate \$20 million over 10 years in advertising revenue from the deal. That's a small part of MARTA's \$316 million operating budget and is unlikely to delay a proposed one-way fare increase from \$1.75 to \$2.

But for today's transit agencies, every little bit helps. David Lane, CEO of the Rail Network, says company officials have met with "every major transit system in North America" and received indications of interest from all of them.

He says the transit agencies in the Washington, D.C., area and in Vancouver, British Columbia, have requested proposals from companies to modify rail cars for the TVs.

Systems get on board

Most of the nation's transit agencies are facing deficits and struggling to get back in the black while holding fares as low as possible. Several are turning for help to televisions on the trains, tapping into a relatively captive audience. The concept is similar to elevators in office buildings that feature TV screens offering news updates and advertising. Among the cities looking at transit TVs:

► **Washington, D.C.** Metro, the capital region's public transit system, is planning a two-year pilot program with a private company that will install TV monitors on two six-car trains and 25 buses. "The video monitors would display news, weather, sports, transit authority information and ads," says Met-



By Curtis Compton, The Rail Network

In Atlanta: A television plays on a MARTA train as Astride Justin from Norcross, Ga., tunes her radio to the first TV and radio network for rail riders.

ro spokesman Steven Taubenkibel, who won't identify the firm. Taubenkibel says that over two or three years, the video monitors — along with new advertisements in subway tunnels and ATMs in stations — are expected to generate "a couple of million" dollars. The Metro budget for the current fiscal year is \$943 million.

► **Denver.** The Regional Transportation District is studying Atlanta's experiment to see if it could work in Denver. In February, the district approved a pilot program to install 19-inch screens and speakers on some buses and light-rail cars. But the agency was unable to agree on a contract with the provider of television programming, assistant general manager Tony McCaulay says.

► **Boston.** The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, facing a \$10 million deficit next year, announced

a plan last month to install television screens in subway cars on three lines within a year. The agency says the plan could generate \$3.5 million a year in advertising revenue.

More transit systems are likely to follow suit, says Bill Millar, president and CEO of the American Public Transportation Association, which lobbies to improve public transit. "Pressures on governmental budgets have been building over the years, and transit systems have been seeking sources of revenue so they can keep their fares low while maintaining the tax revenues necessary to run them," he says.

While subway TV appears to be a new concept, Orlando pioneered TVs on buses several years ago, Ruskin says. The Orlando transit system, nicknamed Lynx, now has them on 162 of 238 buses, spokesman Brian Martin says. The

audio is broadcast through the speaker systems of the buses, but he says few passengers have complained.

Using technology it invented, the Rail Network televisions will provide subway riders with news and advertising programming that is updated throughout the day. "The passengers will get content that is relevant to them," Lane says. "They're going to see what they would see at home while they're riding in that rail car."

But viewers at home increasingly have ways to avoid TV and radio advertising. Systems such as TiVo and older technology such as videocassette recorders allow people to fast-forward through ads to watch their favorite shows. Commercial-free satellite radio is increasingly popular.

Public opinion

Commuters on subways have no such options. Even if they don't have headsets, they will be exposed to the video — an idea that doesn't thrill every passenger. During public hearings on Washington's plan, "some people were concerned about the video monitors intruding upon the quiet of the buses and trains," Taubenkibel says.

Despite assurances from transit officials here and in Boston that their systems will be silent, television on the subway is "a bad idea for a lot of reasons," says Gary Ruskin, head of Commercial Alert, a group based in Oregon that opposes commercialism in government.

"First, people shouldn't be forced to watch ads," he says. "This is part of the advertising industry's trend toward coercive advertising. The ad industry is so unpopular, they think they have to force people to watch ads. Second, those (rail cars) are civic spaces that are used to discharge civic duties like read the newspaper and do homework."

Commuters in Atlanta — MARTA has about 225,000 rail riders a day and another 225,000 bus riders — are taking a wait-and-see approach.

"I think as long as there's news being presented and people can have access to educational content, it's probably a pretty good idea," says Marselle Harrison-Miles, 31, getting off a train at the Hamilton E. Holmes MARTA station in west Atlanta. She says she'll ride MARTA "a lot more now that gas is going up."

Marcus Snell, 35, a valet parking attendant at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, says he usually brings a compact disc or digital music player for his commute. "I'm into music," he says. "So it really won't affect me. If it'll help them raise money and keep fares low, I'm fine with anything that keeps money in my pocket."