

Park-and-ride may feel budget pinch

Fairfield, West Chester Twp. commuters may see increase in rates, reduced service

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HAMILTON — Commuters using Metro's park-and-ride service in Fairfield and West Chester Township may need to brace for some unpleasant changes in 2005.

The 450 to 500 Butler County residents who use the service

daily to get to their Cincinnati jobs may soon see fare hikes or a reduction in service. In a worst-case scenario service would be discontinued, officials said.

The reason: soaring fuel costs which have forced Cincinnati Metro to seek more money from the Butler County Regional

Transit Authority, its partner in the park-and-ride service.

If the BCRTA cannot come up with the money — an estimated 15 percent increase — it might be forced to implement some of the changes.

"We know it's an important service for a lot of people. We hope we can resolve this," said Carla Lakatos, BCRTA executive director. BCRTA and Metro are planning to meet to try to work out a solution

before the year's end, officials said.

Sallie J. Hilvers, Metro's director of public affairs, said the exact amount the BCRTA will be asked to pay has not been determined. However, she anticipated it would be similar to Clermont County's 15 percent increase.

"This is a year-to-year contract. It's our sincere hope that both parties can come to an agreement. This service has been going on for several years. It is our

hope that we will be able to come to terms on this," she said.

Lakatos said she doesn't know, without having met with Metro, whether the BCRTA will be able to come up with the money.

This week Metro finalized its 2005 budget, which reflected the strains of rising fuel costs, higher health insurance premiums and stagnant revenue.

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Metro's other cost-cutting measures include raising base fares in Cincinnati, Hamilton County and Clermont County for the first time in 12 years.

The BCRTA pays nearly \$1 million to run the park-and-ride service, although that money is later recouped through fares and federal grants.

This is not the first time the future of the service has been in jeopardy.

For its 2003 contract, Metro asked BCRTA to start paying the full cost of the service. BCRTA tried unsuccessfully to get financial assistance from both jurisdictions where the service was based. The city of Fairfield was agreeable to giving money, but West Chester Township was not.

So instead, the BCRTA and Metro negotiated a transit model by which the BCRTA paid the direct cost of the service, then re-allocated federal grant money to pay Metro. It also raised fares \$0.25 to \$2 per one-way trip.