

Slipping away

Leaving money on the table?
TriMet doesn't collect on every ticket it writes – last year, it brought in less than a third of its billings. But even so...



If TriMet replaced all fare warnings with citations, it would be billing another \$1.1 million annually – enough to roll back last fall's cuts to the #9, the #14 and half the cuts to the #4.



If TriMet were still issuing citations at its 2010 rate, it would be billing another \$563,000 annually – enough to pay starting salary and benefits for 5.8 full-time fare inspectors.

April 2009
504 citations
\$46,000 value

March 2010
674 citations
\$62,000 value

August 2010
421 citations
\$38,000 value

September 2010
17 fare inspectors cut
186 citations
\$17,000 value

December 2009
370 citations
\$34,000 value

Myles Vaylon has heard it all before. He's been hearing it since he took this job, in 1994.

"People would tell us, 'I haven't seen you guys in a year,' when I know for a fact we were on that same train the previous day," the TriMet rail supervisor said, idly scanning the platform at Beaverton Transit Center as he talked.

But here's the thing: this time it's true.

With TriMet scrambling to keep vehicles on the road and redirecting millions of dollars toward its newly beefed-up transit police, agency records show that fare enforcement at TriMet is in sharp and continuing decline.

Fare-evasion citations are down 64 percent in the months since September, when TriMet cut 17 inspection positions, leaving only seven full-time inspectors to the 1500-mile system. Overall enforcement is down 45 percent, in part because first-time offenders typically get off with warnings, and repeat offenders are less likely to be caught twice.

Vaylon, one of 52 supervisors who theoretically set aside one hour each shift to check rail or bus fares, isn't complaining today. Not to reporters, at least. But he'll wax nostalgic for his first years on the job, when there was only one MAX line to Gresham.

"There were, like, 35 fare inspectors," he said. "Will we ever get back there? I don't know."

TriMet operations executive Shelly Lomax said she's considering restoring positions to her skeletal fare inspection staff, who start at a wage of \$67,000 a year plus health and pension.

"It's one of the things that's on the list of budget requests," Lomax said.

Meanwhile, many TriMet riders say they've been noticing the change.

"I used to see them every day at 42nd," said Taylor Bacon of southeast Portland. "Now I haven't seen them in five months."

"I've been tempted," he added.

Back on the Beaverton rail platform, Vaylon is tallying two hours' work. He's checked about 200 fares, caught seven first-time offenders, and let them all off with warnings.

If he'd issued citations instead, TriMet would have netted \$91.40 from each \$175 ticket, after state and county fees. Though many TriMet tickets are never paid, it would have taken only two of those seven tickets to pay for Vaylon's time.

But Vaylon said he'd rather be a teacher than an enforcer.

"I think I just made 7 friends," he said. "Instead of 7 enemies."

It's not your imagination.
TriMet fare citations have quietly slid

since September.
64%

*photos of Vaylon:
Michael Schoenholtz*

As fare inspections plummet, is TriMet inviting riders to break the law?