

MTA rides to games to be curbed

New federal rules restrict the types of services that public transit agencies can offer

By Michael Dresser

Sun reporter

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Fans who ride the Maryland Transit Administration's buses from local park-and-ride lots to Orioles and Ravens games will soon have to find a new way to the stadium under new federal rules restricting the types of services public transit agencies are permitted to offer.

As of June 2, the MTA will stop offering \$10 rides from its White Marsh, Essex and Southwest parkand- rides to Orioles games, spokeswoman Jawauna Greene said yesterday. The same rules, issued by the Federal Transit Administration, also will force cancellation of weekend bus service from the Greenbelt Metro station to Oriole Park at Camden Yards.

The number of riders affected by the cutoff of Orioles service is relatively modest.

The buses carry relatively light loads to regular weekday baseball games, rising to more than 100 for Yankees and Red Sox games and 150 on Opening Day, Greene said.

The heavier impact will be felt during football season. According to the MTA, its \$10 special sports service carries about 2,550 fans to Ravens games from its commuter lots at Dorsey light rail stop, Southwest, Warren Road light rail stop, Carney, White Marsh, Essex and Anne Arundel Community College.

Greene said the MTA will offer special services to tomorrow's Preakness but expects to be forbidden to continue those rides in future years.

The federal ruling comes as a result of decades of tug-of-war between private charter bus companies and public transit agencies around the country.

In January, the federal agency issued rules that took effect April 30 providing financial penalties for public agencies that offer services viewed as unfairly competing with private

charter companies.

Jim LaRuch, chief counsel and vice president of corporate affairs for the American Public Transit Association, said the details of the complicated rule-making are not all clear. But he said that public transit agencies around the country, many of which offer sports services like the MTA's, have been forced to interpret the rules very conservatively.

"No transit agency wants to risk [its] federal funds," LaRuch said. "It's very important."

The transit administration is interpreting the rule to apply to such functions as supplying buses for legislative committees and state agencies as well as sporting events. According to Greene, the agency will help find charter operators for such trips.

Clyde Hart, vice president for government affairs for the American Bus Association, said the new rules put teeth into regulations already in effect preventing public transit agencies from competing with private operators.

The MTA services, he said, fall clearly within the scope of prohibited practices.

"That's providing charter," he said.

While Orioles and Ravens fans on the special buses pay more than riders of regular routes, the \$10 fare covers only part of the cost.

Hart said the charter industry views the partly subsidized rides as allowing the public transit agencies to use taxpayers' dollars against them.

He said that with public agencies out of the picture, charter companies will move in to offer similar service.

"I wouldn't see why not," he said. "My guys are always looking to do as much charter work as possible."

Greene said the transit administration has provided the subsidized service because it sees one of its missions as providing a community service. She said the agency would look into whether private companies could fill the void but expressed skepticism whether they could do so at a comparable price.

"The free-market economy will probably charge \$25 to \$30 for the same service," she said. The ruling will not affect light rail, Metro or any of the regular bus routes serving the stadiums.

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