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Senators aim to end MTA payroll tax

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By Judy Rife

Times Herald-Record

ALBANY — The Hudson Valley's state Senate delegation is poised to introduce legislation as early as Thursday that would repeal the new payroll tax for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in four counties.

"This tax cannot stand," said Sen. John Bonacic, R-Mount Hope. "It is grossly unfair, unjust and inequitable."

The legislation, written largely by Stephen Saland, R-Poughkeepsie, would forgive the payroll tax in Orange, Rockland, Dutchess and Putnam counties and replace it with a 13 percent fare increase on the 10,000 Metro-North Railroad customers in the same four counties.

Other sponsors are William Larkin, R-Cornwall-on-Hudson, Thomas Morahan, R-New City, and Victor Leibell, R-Patterson.

In addition, the legislation would require the MTA to renegotiate its operating agreement with Connecticut to impose the same 13 percent increase on the state's residents who ride Metro-North's New Haven Line — or reduce train service to recover the same amount.

"The State of Connecticut has paid nothing toward this bailout, and yet 26 percent of Metro-North customers are from there," said Bonacic. "And, yes, it is painful to shift the burden to commuters, but it is more equitable for people who use the system to pay for it."

The tax, which costs public and private employers in the MTA's 12-county service territory 34 cents on every \$100 of payroll, was part of \$2.26 billion in new taxes and fees that the state Legislature passed in May to bail out the agency.

Bonacic said the tax will cost employers in the four counties \$61 million a year, pushing the Hudson Valley's bill from other special MTA taxes and fees past \$365 million a year.

John D'Ambrosio, president of the Orange County Chamber of Commerce, applauded the senators' effort, saying Gov. David Paterson told business leaders in a private meeting last week that he agrees the tax is unfair and intends to address it after he resolves the shortfall in the state's own budget.

"We understand the MTA is not the enemy here, that the enemy is the Legislature," said D'Ambrosio. "But the tax is still the No. 1 topic among our members, and we are going to fight it for them." Commuters, however, were dumbfounded at the senators' proposal, since their fares jumped 10 percent in June and service on the Port Jervis Line hasn't been improved in years.

"What are they, nuts?" said Mario Guarneri of Hamptonburgh.

"The economy's still in the crapper, people are still being laid off and still not getting raises and they want to strap us even more?" Added Mike Coco of Highland Mills: "Until I get a permanent 2:45 p.m. train (home), no way. Also, skip Route 17 (a stop in New Jersey) and give me another Harriman express, when we'll talk increase."

The MTA didn't respond to a request for comment.

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