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Anthony McCall (left) and Patricia Thomas ride the subway in Chicago, where a filmstrip-like advertisement for Target can be seen on the subway walls Tuesday. The ad is an example of how some transit systems are resorting to unconventional advertising to boost revenue.

New media rides the rails

Transit systems bank on tunnel ads, in-train TV to rescue revenues

BY MIKE COLIAS
Associated Press

CHICAGO — On a fast-moving subway train in downtown Chicago, passengers stare out the window at an otherwise dark subway wall that briefly glows red with a filmstrip-like advertisement from Target Corp.

In New York, companies such as Cingular Wireless and the maker of Captain Morgan's rum pay handsomely for the exclusive right to plaster ads all over sections of Penn Station and other high-profile subway stops.

In Atlanta, passengers on some trains gaze at 15-inch flat screens displaying local newscasts — and commercials.

After raising fares, laying off workers or slashing services to help plug growing budget gaps, big-city transit systems are scrambling to come up with bold new advertising ventures to squeeze out extra revenue.

"There comes a point where you can't raise fares or cut services any more without risking losing riders," said Joel Keller, president of the board of Bay Area Rapid Transit in San Francisco. "We have to look everywhere we can for additional money."

BART's board has approved plans to team with a financial company to offer a "BART rewards" credit card that will let

riders earn fare credits with every purchase. BART projects it eventually could take in as much as \$1 million a year from the promotion.

The agency also hopes to reap an extra \$7 million a year by following Atlanta's lead and installing TV screens in trains and stations — an initiative also planned at transit systems in Boston and Washington.

Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority this spring began equipping its 340 rail cars with TV monitors — the nation's first large transit operator to do so. MARTA, which faces an \$18 million budget shortfall, says it will reap \$2 million in shared

ad revenue.

Transit agencies in Boston, San Francisco, Washington and other cities also are testing tunnel ads like the Chicago Transit Authority's Target spot — a series of several hundred still digital images on backlit, transparent panels that creates a flip-book effect as passengers zoom past.

While many riders seem amused by the silent 15-second display on the CTA's Blue Line at O'Hare International Airport, longtime rider Tara Betts worries ads are becoming pervasive.

"It's becoming more difficult to have quiet personal space without getting bombarded by messages," said Betts, 31.