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## METROPOLITAN DESK

## NYC; Digging Deep For a Slice Of the Pie

By **CLYDE HABERMAN (NYT)** 828 words

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NOT to alarm New York City subway and bus riders, but a pizza shop around the corner from our Times Square office is charging \$2.20 for a plain slice. At a Famous Famiglia parlor a few blocks north, the price is up to \$2.25.

This horrifying discovery left us no choice but to place an urgent phone call to Eric M. Bram. He confirmed our worst fears for the subways.

"Are you going to get another fare increase?" he said. "I guess it's inevitable."

On this score, there is every reason to heed Mr. Bram, a Bronx-born patent lawyer who moved to Westchester some time ago.

In 1980, he articulated what we have since come to call the Pizza Connection. He noted that, from the early 1960's, the price of a pizza slice -- we're talking here about a no-frills wedge of mozzarella and tomato sauce, unmarred by toppings -- matched the cost of a subway ride "with uncanny precision."

At the time, a slice typically cost 60 cents. Thus did Mr. Bram conclude that the prevailing 50-cent subway and bus fare was doomed. He was right, of course.

He had history on his side.

In 1960, the fare was 15 cents. That was what a slice of pizza cost, too. By the early 70's, the fare had risen to 35 cents. So had pizza.

Three years ago, with the fare at \$1.50, we invoked the Bram rule, noting that pizza was typically selling for \$1.75 in many neighborhoods and for as much \$2 in Midtown. It seemed unlikely that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority could hold out for long. And it couldn't. A year later, the fare zoomed to \$2, after nearly eight years without change -- a defiance of the Pizza Connection that obviously could not be sustained.

So now that a slice goes for as much as \$2.25, what are the long-term prospects for the \$2 fare? Probably no better, we figure, than the odds that Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie will still be together by this time next year.

Granted, pizza doesn't cost \$2.25 everywhere in New York. A slice for \$2, even for \$1.75, is common in many neighborhoods. Still, the higher price has gained a foothold here.

Granted, too, that the situation is more complex than three years ago. With the subway token gone and the MetroCard in command, the subwaymeisters can tinker more readily with what in this city qualifies as natural law. The transportation authority did exactly that this year when it left the \$2 base fare intact but managed nonetheless to dip deeper into riders' pockets by raising the prices of monthly and

weekly cards.

That action dealt a body blow to the Pizza Connection. "Who knows if the fundamentals of economics will hold?" Mr. Bram asked.

AS it is, the fare is beset by other pressures, some almost as serious as the price of a slice.

Future budget deficits loom for the transportation authority. They could rise to \$1.1 billion in 2010, the state comptroller said. Peter S. Kalikow, the authority's chairman, has said it was a mistake to go eight years without a change in the fare, only to then sock riders with a 33 percent increase. Smaller but more frequent increases make more sense, he said.

His agency will also have to borrow billions to renovate subway stations and pay for other improvements. Borrowing inevitably means higher interest payments, adding to the pressure on the fare.

Beyond that, the authority has assumed certain costs that some New Yorkers believe should be borne by others.

An example is a commitment to spend \$80 million to rebuild the Cortlandt Street station on the No. 1 line, wiped out when the World Trade Center collapsed in 2001. Why, some wonder, is the authority -- and by extension, the riding public -- paying for this instead of the federal government, out of funds intended for post-Sept. 11 recovery?

"If the station was there and it was destroyed, that's exactly what 9/11 money was intended to cover," said Gene Russianoff, the staff lawyer for the Straphangers Campaign.

All in all, even without higher pizza prices, times are tough for subway and bus riders. It hardly helps that city and state subsidies for mass transit have shrunk over the years.

Maybe the problem, though, is not the size of the aid but rather where it goes. What if the city and state were to reinterpret the Bram rule and, instead of subsidizing subways, offer pizza parlors millions to keep their prices stable?

The way things are going, that may well be our best shot at stopping the fare from going up, and soon.