

California Legislature

Select Committee on Bay Area Public Transit

Tuesday, May 16, 2023 – 2:30 pm – 1021 O Street, Room 2100

Working Together: Challenges and Opportunities for Bay Area Public Transit

Background Paper

Public transit connects the Bay Area’s roughly 8 million residents with jobs, housing, services, recreation, and other transportation needs. The region’s transit network is a crucial lifeline for those who cannot afford a car and those seeking to opt out of traffic congestion. Operating throughout the pandemic, public transit has continued to be a crucial uninterrupted service for essential workers. The Bay Area’s transit investments have significantly reduced the region’s carbon footprint, continuing to help the region combat climate change.

Pandemic-Induced Transit Ridership Declines

While transit ridership in the Bay Area, like the rest of the California, saw overall pre-pandemic ridership declines, transit ridership across the Bay Area dipped precipitously from 40 million passenger trips per month to under 10 million passenger trips per month with the onset of Covid-19 stay-at-home orders. Transit ridership has steadily recovered to 54% of pre-pandemic levels, with the ridership recovery varying greatly by transit operator.



Source: National Transit Database

Figure 1: Monthly Passenger Trips on Bay Area Public Transit¹

¹ <https://mtc.legistar.com/gateway.aspx?M=F&ID=2c386775-18c4-4c99-9176-c437867337ab.pdf>

In general, fare-reliant transit operators that historically transported a larger share of choice riders have experienced slower ridership recovery than transit operators that serve a larger share of transit-dependent riders. While this slow ridership recovery is primarily driven by pandemic-induced remote work trends and higher office vacancy rates in downtown San Francisco that have significantly reduced commute trips, public safety, convenience, and other rider experience-related concerns are also contributing factors to the ridership decline.

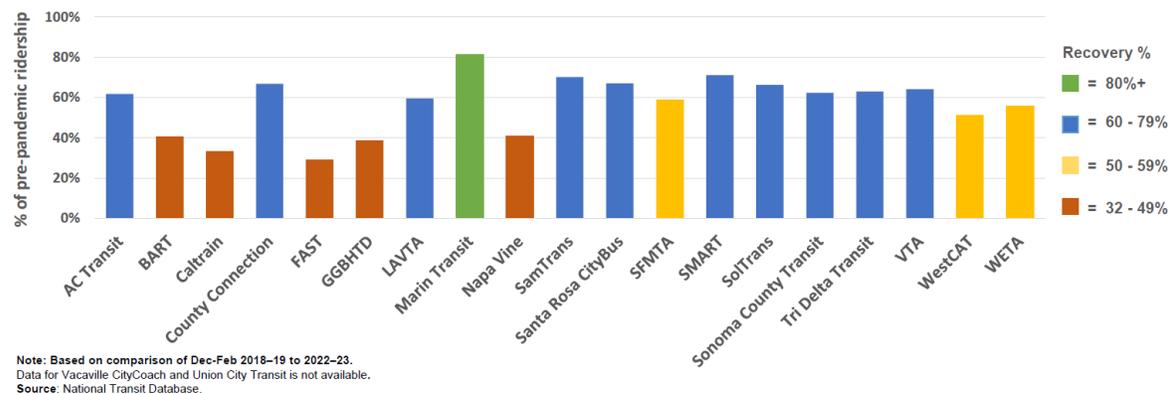


Figure 2 Ridership Recovery by Bay Area Transit Agency²

Fiscal Cliff

Due to the previously discussed slower ridership recovery, fare reliance, increasing operating and capital costs due to inflation and supply chain delays, and the exhaustion of federal emergency relief funds, Bay Area transit systems are projecting large near-term operating budget shortfalls and are at risk of being forced to implement major service cuts. If transit service becomes less frequent, and thus less attractive to riders, these potential cuts would result in further ridership and revenue losses, which would necessitate still more service cuts. Additionally, some agencies may need to increase fares or slow down much needed capital projects.

Bay Area transit agencies collectively project roughly \$2.5 billion in budget shortfalls over the next 5 years. This accounts for close to half of the estimated statewide need. While the California Transit Association, Metropolitan Transportation Commission, advocacy groups, and State Lawmakers continue budget advocacy for near-term state relief, discussions surrounding a potential regional measure for long-term, sustainable transit funding to be placed on the ballot in 2024 or 2026 have begun.

² <https://mtc.legistar.com/gateway.aspx?M=F&ID=2c386775-18c4-4c99-9176-c437867337ab.pdf>

Bay Area Five-Year Annual Operating Deficit Forecast

CORRECTED: 4/24/2023

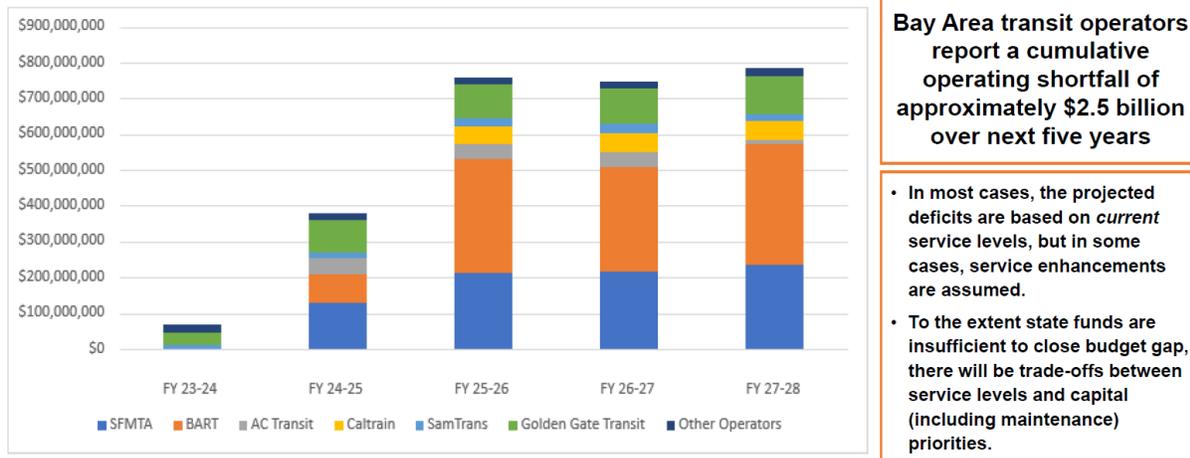


Figure 3: Bay Area Five-Year Annual Operating Deficit Forecast³

Opportunities and Challenges

While the fiscal cliff and ridership losses are a challenge and even if remote work trends remain constant, there does exist the opportunity to bring riders back to the system. The transit mode share of those still commuting in the Bay Area fell from a rate of 14% in 2019 to 5% in 2021, indicating a change in mode choice among commuters.⁴ Furthermore, the system can still be improved to better benefit the more than 21 million monthly passenger trips that are still being taken on public transit in the Bay Area, incentivizing the riders who are currently taking those trips to use transit even more.⁵ Finally, reduced need for higher frequency and capacity during peak commute hours provides transit agencies the opportunity to devote more service outside of peak hours to help capture additional all-day non-commute related trips (such as trips to school, the grocery store, doctor's offices, etc.). The non-peak hour demographic was a main driver of pre-pandemic transit ridership declines, and a greater focus on higher quality service at those times can help increase this ridership.⁶

Emerging from the height of the pandemic, Bay Area transit agencies are working hard to improve the rider experience, improve transit speeds, service frequency, and reliability, equitably increase transit ridership, address homelessness, and decarbonize their facilities and fleets, among other goals. To reduce vehicle miles traveled and meet the state's transportation and climate goals while improving service for riders and the region, agencies are engaging in bus network redesigns, investing in zero emissions vehicle fleets and facility upgrades to maintain

³ <https://mtc.legistar.com/gateway.aspx?M=F&ID=2c386775-18c4-4c99-9176-c437867337ab.pdf>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ <https://www.its.ucla.edu/publication/whats-behind-recent-transit-ridership-trends-in-the-bay-area-volume-ii-trends-among-major-transit-operators/>

those fleets, and implementing transit speed and reliability improvements such as transit-only lanes and transit signal priority. Agencies have greatly increased regional coordination and are working collaboratively on measures to improve the rider experience, such as universal wayfinding, fare integration and network management improvements, and project development and delivery policy.

After the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the passage of the first round of federal relief funds, MTC convened the Blue-Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force, a 32-member committee charged with determining how federal transit relief funds would be distributed, coordinating operator health and safety protocols, and laying the groundwork for transit recovery and transformation. In 2021, the Task Force's work resulted in the adoption of the Transit Transformation Action Plan (the TAP) committing transit operators and MTC to 27 initial actions.⁷ Many of these initiatives are already in progress and are being closely monitored by both policy makers and advocates.⁸ Some of these programs were also envisioned by SB 917 (Becker, 2022), the Seamless Transit Transformation Act.⁹ MTC and transit operators are aggressively pursuing design and implementation of the customer-oriented improvements and organizational reforms identified in the TAP, but it will take several years at least before the results of these efforts reach their full, effective scale across the region's transit system and are fully reflected across the system's ridership counts and balance sheets.

Although such reforms are likely to be longer term reforms, agencies are taking nearer term action. The General Managers of the Bay Area Transit agencies meet weekly to discuss opportunities for further coordinated action to improve transit operations and the rider experience. Pilot projects such as the Clipper BayPass – a two year pilot for an all-agency transit pass with free and reduced cost transfers for a select group of universities and affordable housing developments – have resulted in a 35% increase in ridership among pass-holders across multiple transit systems so far.¹⁰ Such a program illustrates the benefits that targeted regional fare discounts and integrated fare policies can have on increasing ridership across multiple operators and leveraging network effects of treating multiple transit agencies in the same region as a unified system. Other TAP-identified initiatives such as universal mapping and wayfinding standards and real-time transit arrival data collection standards are underway across the Bay Area's transit system. In line with the TAP, legislation such as SB 922 (Wiener, 2022) has removed barriers to transit priority improvements by providing categorical CEQA exemptions for certain classes of transit priority, among other, projects. Such improvements make the transit network more convenient, reliable and competitive for riders.

⁷ [Transit Transformation Action Plan | Metropolitan Transportation Commission \(ca.gov\)](#)

⁸ [Transformation Action Plan 1-Year Report Card — Seamless Bay Area](#)

⁹ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220SB917

¹⁰ <https://www.seamlessbayarea.org/blog/2023/2/16/insights-on-uc-berkeleys-clipper-baypass-six-months-into-unlimited-transit-pass-pilot>

Transit Transformation Action Plan – Desired Outcomes

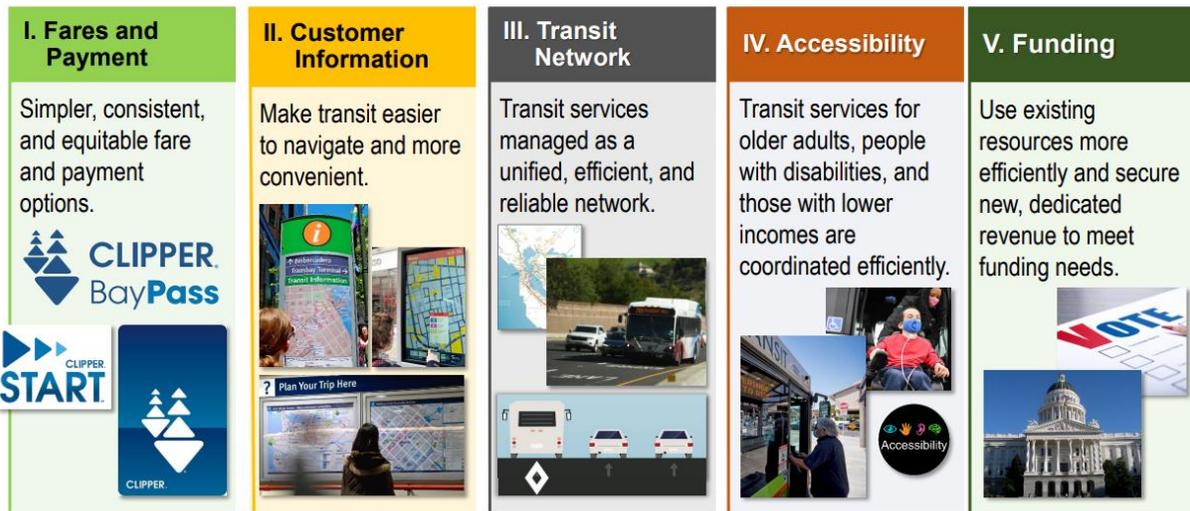


Figure 4: Transit Transformation Action Plan - Desired Outcomes¹¹

Advocates' Perspective

While a range of transit, urban policy, and other advocacy groups laud the aforementioned agency and regional efforts to make Bay Area transit a more accessible, user-friendly, service, they have argued that agencies should take more aggressive changes in both the near and longer term to help improve with key metrics such as ridership, rider satisfaction, accessibility, convenience, and improved real and perceived public safety conditions. Advocates such as Seamless Bay Area, which sponsored SB 917, note that the region is making uneven progress on the many actions outlined in the TAP and envisioned by SB 917. Notable areas that advocates are pushing for faster action include planning transit priority corridor projects, removing more barriers to implementing planned transit priority improvements, and completing a business case analysis for a network manager that with centralized authority to oversee key transit network functions such as transit network planning, fare policy, schedule coordination, and project delivery. Although legislation such as SB 922 has helped remove barriers to transit priority, sub-regional transit agency governance structures can make it more difficult to plan cross-jurisdictional transit priority projects and muster the appropriate political will to implement plans and make use of the exemptions afforded by SB 922. To address what they see as a slower and less aggressive pursuit of some of the longer term seamless reforms outlined in the TAP and SB 917, Seamless Bay Area specifically proposes requiring the development of a Bay Area Transit network manager and initiation of an agency consolidation business case to identify efficiencies and increased collaboration amongst agencies as conditions for authorizing legislation for a regional revenue measure. Such conditioning, the organization argues, would

¹¹ https://mtc.ca.gov/sites/default/files/meetings/agendas/5716_A_Metropolitan_Transportation_Commission_Workshop_23-04-27_Generic_0.pdf

provide voters with a positive vision for a future transit system that works better than the system of today, making such a regional measure more likely to pass than a measure focused on preserving the operation of the status quo.

Bay Area advocates and business groups are not just pushing for longer term reforms to enhance the user experience on transit systems, but short-term changes to address issues aggravated by the covid-19 pandemic as well. The Bay Area Council commissioned a poll of residents in Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, and Northern San Mateo counties, which found that 63% of respondents felt that adding additional crisis intervention specialists should be a high or very high priority to improve the system. Additional polling results illustrated that 73% of respondents felt it a high priority to add armed law enforcement to trains and stations, and a whopping 85-90% of respondents stated that making sure restrooms, stations, and BART cars are clean are of high priority.¹² In 2022, 2,300 people accepted referrals to shelter beds or other services through BART's transit ambassador and crisis intervention specialist program.¹³ BART notes that a challenge towards funding such programs and services is that the agency is ineligible for many pots of state and federal funding used to finance these programs. Other steps that BART has taken in the short-term include redeploying police officers and unarmed civilian personnel to trains traveling through core parts of the system, as opposed to police officers stationed in squad cars. BART continues its heightened focus on bathroom and station cleanliness, as exemplified by the long-awaited opening of attended restrooms in downtown San Francisco stations.¹⁴ However, despite the aforementioned reforms underway at BART, groups such as Chinese for Affirmative Action/Stop AAPI Hate note that transit is a lifeline essential service that still feels unsafe for many marginalized communities, and are focusing advocacy on strategies to reduce incidences of street harassment that do not overly rely on an armed police presence.¹⁵ Specifically, the group is sponsoring legislation, SB 434 (Min, 2023), which would require the state's largest transit agencies to collect qualitative and quantitative data from subpopulations of riders on incidences of street harassment for the purposes of improving rider safety and reducing street harassment.¹⁶

Transit Service Adjustments to Respond to the Pandemic, Meet Demand, and Regrow Ridership

In order to adjust to the onset of the pandemic and preserve operating resources, Bay Area transit operators made significant service reductions in the early days of the pandemic. As the pandemic progressed, agencies began targeting service restorations in an equity-driven manner, prioritizing frequency increased on high-traveled routes used primarily by low-income

¹² <https://www.bayareacouncil.org/press-releases/new-poll-overwhelming-support-for-more-police-on-bart-greater-focus-on-cleanliness-and-stronger-enforcement-of-rules/>

¹³ <https://www.mercurynews.com/2023/02/13/running-the-trains-and-helping-those-in-need-bart-takes-on-the-bay-area-homelessness-crisis/>

¹⁴ <https://www.mercurynews.com/2022/02/02/bart-reopens-bathroom-shuttered-for-20-years-bringing-much-needed-rider-relief/>

¹⁵ <https://19thnews.org/2023/02/california-introduces-bill-harassment-safety-public-transit-systems/>

¹⁶ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB434

essential service workers to improve to and from in-person jobs. Additionally, recognizing that higher frequency begets higher ridership, agencies attempted and are still attempting to restore service. Some agencies, such as SamTrans, AC Transit, and VTA, have embarked or are embarking upon visionary transit network plans and/or network redesigns to increase service, or redirect service resources to higher ridership routes in an equity-driven manner that prioritizes serving areas with high numbers of transit-dependent riders. The initial implementation of SamTrans' reimagined network have already resulted in increased ridership and greater service for equity priority communities. VTA's visionary transit network process illustrates the possibilities that transit agencies can further embrace when not faced with major funding shortfalls. Other network improvements transit agencies are making include transit priority improvements such as bus-only lanes, which have been implemented to great effect in San Francisco. The Van Ness BRT has helped ridership on bus route 49 (which uses the transit-only lanes) greatly *exceed* pre-pandemic ridership, indicating the benefits that can be received from it.¹⁷ Such improvements have played a significant role in driving up SFMTA's rider satisfaction survey to its highest level in 10 years.¹⁸

Furthermore, while they have less flexibility to serve new geographies, fixed rail operators such as BART and Caltrain are still able to modify their service patterns to better meet ridership demand and serve transit-dependent populations more equitably. For example, Caltrain began running more frequent service initially after the passage of a dedicated sales tax, and specifically added midday service to help those not going on traditional commute trips. Similarly, BART recently adjusted its schedules to add more trains per hour to its most crowded line, the yellow line between Antioch and San Francisco International Airport, while also increasing evening and weekend frequencies – those times have seen high ridership recovery – to better capture those riders.¹⁹ Challenges to increasing service on bus and rail networks remain. Transit agencies across the Bay Area and state are experiencing a transit worker shortage due to attrition during the pandemic and high housing costs that make it difficult for bus operators to afford to live in the Bay Area region. Such transit operator shortfalls have led to canceled BART trains, and the inability for agencies such as SamTrans to implement more phases of their network redesign that increased service in addition to restructuring transit routes.

Accountability

As discussions regarding funding to help transit agencies avert budget shortfalls continue, legislators and advocates have made clear their desire to see improvements made to the transit system and its ability to compete with other forms of transportation. Such improvements could include statutory codification of elements of SB 917 to formalize a network manager role, expansion of transit priority in line with previous successful efforts such as SB 922, greater

¹⁷ <https://www.sfmta.com/blog/muni-improvements-draw-increased-ridership>

¹⁸ <https://www.sfmta.com/blog/muni-rider-satisfaction-highest-10-years>

¹⁹ <https://www.ktvu.com/news/bart-unveils-schedule-to-cut-wait-times-on-nights-and-weekends>

mandates for agencies to identify and seek to implement specific transit priority corridor projects to increase ridership and reduce operating costs, and other improvements that can make for a more user-friendly transit system. Finally, land use policies that concentrate housing and destinations around transit can help transit agencies combat the structural factors that have contributed to reduced ridership, including increased remote work trends and high housing costs that are pushing transit-dependent riders into transit deserts.²⁰

Conclusion

Bay Area transit agencies face many headwinds, including lagging ridership recovery, inflation-driven cost increases, impending disastrous fiscal shortfalls in the next few years, and public safety and homelessness-related challenges aggravated by the Covid-19 Pandemic, among others. However, the Bay Area's transit agencies and the region at large have taken great strides in collaborating to address these near-term and longer-term issues through public safety enhancements, assisting homeless individuals and others with service referrals, network planning, and transit priority improvements, among other reforms. Appropriate regional and statewide structures should continue to be put in place to further foster enhanced regional collaboration and improved service for riders to regrow ridership and help California meet its climate, housing, and equity-oriented goals.

²⁰ <https://www.its.ucla.edu/publication/whats-behind-recent-transit-ridership-trends-in-the-bay-area-volume-ii-trends-among-major-transit-operators/>