

ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA TRANSIT DISTRICT



STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: 12/10/2025

Staff Report No. 25-525

TO: AC Transit Board of Directors
FROM: Salvador Llamas, General Manager/Chief Executive Officer
SUBJECT: Media and Public Statement Policy

ACTION ITEM

AGENDA PLANNING REQUEST: ☒

RECOMMENDED ACTION(S):

Consider the adoption of Board Policy 455 - Media & Public Statement Policy. [Requested by President Shaw - 10/23/24; Director Walsh - 11/13/24]

Staff Contact:
Robert Lyles, Media Affairs and Strategic Initiatives Manager

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE:

There is no strategic importance associated with this report. However, maintaining credibility and transparency in the District's official communications remains essential to engagement with riders, stakeholders, and the many communities served by the District.

BUDGETARY/FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no budgetary or fiscal impact associated with this action.

BACKGROUND/RATIONALE:

The proposed Board Policy 455 - Media & Public Statement Policy reinforces the District's established commitment to credibility, transparency, and consistency in both internal and external communications. The Policy establishes clearly defined procedures for developing and issuing official District statements, including a structured approval process and the formal designation of an authorized District spokesperson. These provisions ensure that media inquiries are handled by trained staff who can provide accurate, thoroughly vetted, and legally sound information on behalf of the District.

In addition to clarifying the roles and responsibilities associated with public communication, the Policy offers clear and accessible guidance to employees and Board Members regarding the authorization and release of official statements. It outlines expectations for coordinating information, maintaining message alignment, and upholding communication standards when representing the District. At the same time, the Policy affirms the individual right of employees and Board members to express personal views, provided such expressions are not presented as official District positions. This balanced approach protects the integrity of District

communications while respecting individual freedoms of those covered by the Policy.

DISCUSSION

While the Policy codifies the District's media procedures, it is important to note that the General Manager has a longstanding practice of consulting with the Board President to identify and develop messaging for potential media responses related to matters before the Board or its ratified decisions. This practice is consistent with Board Policy 101, Section 2.8(c), which designates the President as the Board's official spokesperson. The Board President may delegate this responsibility to the Vice President or another Board member, as appropriate. Following an executive determination regarding a Board response, the Media Affairs Manager prepares a statement for authorization and subsequent release.

Similarly, the General Manager ensures that the Board of Directors receives timely and informative updates for matters involving District employees, District properties, vehicles, initiatives, or operational exposures that have the potential to attract media attention. These updates provide context regarding the nature of the issue, any actions being taken by Staff, and potential implications for the District. By keeping the Board informed, the General Manager facilitates a clear understanding of ongoing developments, supports effective oversight, and enables Board members to respond with accuracy if individual media inquiries arise.

In practice, Media Affairs routinely asks journalists whether their requests are time-sensitive or on deadline and consults with Staff across departments to ensure responses are accurate, informed, and aligned with District priorities.

Additionally, Staff consulted with peer Bay Area transit agencies for insight on shared media market conditions, including audience demographics, the ways in which local news outlets frame transit-related issues, and the prioritization of public transportation topics within broadcast and print coverage. This effort included direct outreach to Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), Eastern Contra Costa Transit Authority (Tri Delta Transit), Golden Gate Bridge Highway & Transportation District (Golden Gate Transit), Napa Valley Transportation Authority (NVRTA), San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA), Solano County Transit (SolTrans), Water Emergency Transportation Authority (WETA), and Western Contra Costa Transit Authority (WestCAT). These agencies were selected due to their geographic proximity and participation in a common regional media landscape.

Of the eight peer agencies surveyed, five reported that they have not adopted a formal media policy. Their reasons varied but generally centered on maintaining operational flexibility, adapting to limited or inconsistent media attention, and preserving the ability to adjust communications approaches during rapidly evolving situations. Agencies noted that formal policy documents may not reflect the dynamic nature of media engagement, particularly for smaller transit providers with limited staff, funding, and fewer external communications demands.

Three agencies - BART, Golden Gate Transit, and SFMTA - reported having formal, codified media policies. These policies generally outline core requirements such as the designation of authorized spokespeople, standards for developing and delivering public messages, defined employee roles and responsibilities in external communications, and clear coordination procedures for emergency or crisis situations.

Despite varying approaches to formal policy adoption, all participating agencies identified similar best practices, including the need for centralized message coordination, the use of a consistent and authorized spokesperson, and a strong commitment to transparency and accuracy in public communications. These shared principles informed the development of the proposed Policy and shaped its structure, key definitions, and guidance on roles and responsibilities.

With the adoption of this Policy, Staff are positioned to implement a Districtwide media training program, led by Media Affairs, that will be dynamic and adaptable to the specific needs of the District. This approach allows training to be designed with flexibility in mind, addressing the unique roles, responsibilities, and communication needs of individual departments as well as the Board of Directors. By maintaining media training as a departmental practice, Staff are able to adapt media strategies as needed. This practice-based approach to media training complements the District's broader communications framework and aligns with existing oversight of official statements.

An analysis of media activity for the calendar year 2024 has been completed and is provided in Attachment 4, titled Media Analysis: News Releases, Coverage, Themes, and Narratives (2024). The analysis notes that the General Manager-CEO exercised full discretion over external communications and issued 14 official statements on major District priorities, including Realign network actions, federal clean transit initiatives, operational adjustments, safety projects, funding awards, and leadership transitions. As part of cost-containment measures, the District discontinued its third-party media monitoring service and relied on manual web-based reviews to identify coverage trends for this analysis. Despite this limitation, Staff identified substantial earned media across local, regional, and national outlets, with particularly strong attention to Realign, zero emission leadership, automated camera enforcement, and federal funding announcements.

ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES:

The proposed Board policy supports AC Transit's goal of maintaining Safe and Secure Operations by establishing structured guidelines for the coordinated, accurate, and timely dissemination of information. These guidelines help minimize misinformation and reduce reputational risks, particularly during emergencies, legal proceedings, labor negotiations, or periods of heightened public or political attention. The Policy also fosters internal collaboration and aligns with the District's strategic objective of building and sustaining strong public support. When the communities we serve and policymakers can rely on credible, fact-based communication, it enhances confidence in the District's actions and decisions. No disadvantages have been identified with the implementation of this Policy.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS:

Staff's evaluation is limited to the requested Policy and no alternative options or analyses were developed at this time.

PRIOR RELEVANT BOARD ACTION/POLICIES:

Board Policy 101 - Board of Directors Rules of Procedure

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Proposed BP 455 - Media and Public Statement Policy
2. Agenda Planning Request - Vice President Shaw (Media Affairs Policy)
3. Amended AP Request - Director Walsh (Media Policy)
4. Media Analysis: News Releases, Coverage, Themes, and Narratives 2024

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Approved/Reviewed by:

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