

ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA TRANSIT DISTRICT



STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: 11/10/2021

Staff Report No. 21-508

TO: AC Transit Board of Directors
FROM: Michael A. Hursh, General Manager
SUBJECT: Network Redesign Timeline Update

BRIEFING ITEM

RECOMMENDED ACTION(S):

Consider receiving a report on the District's plans and timeline for redesigning the service network.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE:

Goal - Convenient and Reliable Service
Initiative - Service Quality

Since the onset of the pandemic and ensuing shelter-in-place order in March 2020, a multi-disciplinary team has been working on a plan for service recovery. Providing high-quality, reliable bus service with available resources is the District's core responsibility and this staff report outlines the staff's focus on service recovery in lieu of a network redesign in 2022. This approach reinforces the District's commitment to service recovery and leaves large-scale system planning efforts further into the future when there is more certainty about funding, operator availability, rider levels, patterns, preferences and regional mobility needs. A secondary goal of this approach is engendering Strong Public and Policymaker Support.

BUDGETARY/FISCAL IMPACT:

This approach will allow the District to save approximately \$200,000 currently budgeted for planning consultant support this fiscal year and allow those funds to be used to support other recovery efforts.

BACKGROUND/RATIONALE:

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a loss of ridership and revenue significant enough for staff to begin the process of redesigning the network to better match available resources and provide as much service as possible for those who need it most. Staff initially reported this plan for a network redesign to the Board in April 2020 with a timeline of implementing a new network by March 2021. The unpredictable trajectory of the pandemic, necessitated a revised timeline in July 2020 anticipating a June 2021 rollout, and a subsequent revision in February 2021 targeting Summer 2022 implementation.

By late 2020, the District had received initial federal aid and developed a budget to effectively navigate the immediate financial uncertainty; however, ridership patterns remained unknown due to the ongoing COVID-related shelter-in-place orders. During the District's Transit Talks series in Spring 2021, staff reported to the

Board and the public that the District would be moving forward with both restoring service (including minor improvements where available) and a redesigned network which would be implemented no sooner than August 2022. These timeline adjustments were made as the pandemic continued and a clear timeline for regional recovery remained elusive.

On June 15, 2021, California officially reopened after COVID-19 cases had remained low and flat since the Spring. Unfortunately, in July 2021, the highly contagious COVID-19 Delta variant triggered a reintroduction of certain health precautions. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the current landscape and continues to cast unprecedented and extraordinary uncertainty on numerous factors which are critical to the successful planning and deployment of a redesigned network including:

- **Finances:** With the infusion of federal aid, the District has the ability to restore 85-90% of pre-pandemic service on the current network for at least the next two years. The District has been restoring service incrementally, as feasible, following a set of District-approved guidelines. However, the Finance Department is projecting significant deficits starting in FY2023-24, assuming emergency federal aid does not continue.
- **Operator Availability:** The District is short of pre-pandemic operator workforce by approximately 200 operators due to attrition and challenges to recruit, certify, and retain operators fast enough for the desired restoration of service. This reflects a national trend affecting many employers. Service reliability is also affected by employees with run assignments who are out on leave, reducing the ability to restore service at a faster pace.
- **Ridership Levels and Patterns:** Ridership is currently at approximately 50% of pre-pandemic levels and mobility patterns are still unsettled as riders continue to navigate the pandemic. With the current timeline of a new network in August 2022, staff will be analyzing data that do not reflect how people will use transit following the pandemic. Additionally, with a disproportionate number of people continuing to work from home and limiting their in-person activities, the District is faced with an unprecedented challenge in reaching and obtaining viable data from a representative population-including hard-to-reach and historically underserved populations.
- **Community Preferences:** Though waning, the COVID-19 Delta variant has caused public health officials and employers to reevaluate the timeline and nature of reopening, and establishing a more predictable “new normal.” As things remain in flux, community input on service-related preferences cannot reflect post-pandemic life as the community does not yet know what their own post-pandemic life will look like.
- **Learning from Examples:** Staff has been monitoring other transit agencies in the region as they navigate concurrent recovery and redesign efforts. In concurrent efforts, the distinction between *restoring service levels (span, frequency, etc.)* to pre-pandemic levels is being conflated with *redesigning the network (revising where the lines actually go)*. At this juncture, redesign plans at other agencies are often proposing service levels below pre-pandemic levels (because of budget or operator shortfalls) causing confusion, frustration, and concern from the community who is evaluating these plans from a recovery lens. Having more time and space between the restoration process and the redesign process would decrease confusion and allow for more productive service recovery efforts and engagement with the community.

To allow the District to remain nimble during an unprecedented time, staff recommends the District continues to restore service following the Board-approved recovery guidelines and move forward with a

network redesign at an undetermined time in the future when there is greater clarity on: the financial health of the District, the future of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health crisis, and ridership levels, patterns, and community preferences. The community has expressed the desire for service to be restored as quickly as possible. Moving forward with this path will ensure the District can do that and focus its resources on recovery without creating confusion with a concurrent service redesign effort.

Market Research

A cornerstone of informing the service recovery effort and improving the District's understanding of customer needs, regional recovery status, and ridership trends, is to provide a comprehensive research component to the District's planning, marketing, and transportation activities. As such, staff will be launching a new market research initiative in the coming weeks that will provide a new framework to incorporate a market research foundation within the District. This multi-departmental effort will compile and analyze primary and secondary data with the goal of enabling the District to make deeper data-driven decisions based on market trends and the needs of our community. This ongoing initiative is designed to be an agile, iterative process, incorporating a variety of feedback channels, including web panels, focus groups, social media surveying and increased investment in data warehouses, along with ongoing outreach and visibility to ensure desired audiences are encouraged to respond and provide feedback. By continually reassessing and implementing focus, methodology, and process improvements, staff will continue to strengthen the effectiveness in this effort, and ensure insights remain relevant and impactful for the District through service recovery and beyond.

ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES:

The primary advantage of staff's recommended approach is to allow the District to focus on service recovery while gathering regular data on customer preferences and regional recovery. Riders and community stakeholders are primarily focused on getting their pre-pandemic service back as soon as possible, and this approach will allow the District to do that without creating confusion about a redesign effort versus a recovery effort.

The primary disadvantage with this approach is the old network may include lines or services that are not as well-tailored to the future of mobility in the network. However, as discussed in this report, it is impossible to know what those future mobility patterns will look like within a timeline that allows for implementing a new network in 2022.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS:

Staff evaluated several alternatives to the recommendation above. The first would be to continue on the current path towards an August 2022 new network implementation. Plans for the network redesign would be based on data which will reflect current low ridership and uncertain travel preferences. Staff expects these conditions to change dramatically over the coming months and years, making this data an unreliable foundation for a new network design that will likely remain in place for the next decade. Additionally, due to the District's current financial uncertainty, implementing these changes would require committing future resources which staff cannot accurately predict at this time. Finally, the District does not currently have resources to move forward with data collection and implementation as outside vendors have declined to offer the necessary services for this project given the tight timeline needed to do so in the current pandemic environment.

The second alternative is to restore service following the District-approved guidelines and proceed with a new network redesign implementation in August 2023. Plans for the network redesign would be based on data collected in Spring 2022 which may be a better picture of long-term ridership and travel patterns. However, given the ongoing uncertainty of the pandemic, staff does not believe that this data will truly offer a clear picture of ridership, patterns, and community preferences. Additionally, due to uncertainty about the District's financial resources, implementing proposals may require committing future resources which cannot accurately be predicted at this time.

PRIOR RELEVANT BOARD ACTION/POLICIES:

Staff Report 20-180 COVID Service Plans
Staff Report 20-262 Post COVID Network Redesign Preview
Staff Report 21-129 ReNew Service Plan Update
Staff Report 21-311 District's plan to prioritize lines for service recovery
Staff Report 21-385 Staff's methodology and priorities for Transbay service recovery

ATTACHMENTS:

None

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