

ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA TRANSIT DISTRICT



STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: 7/8/2020

Staff Report No. 20-262

TO: AC Transit Board of Directors
FROM: Michael A. Hursh, General Manager
SUBJECT: Preview of Post COVID Network Redesign

BRIEFING ITEM

RECOMMENDED ACTION(S):

Consider receiving report and provide input on staff's initial proposals to redesign the route network in light of diminished operating revenue.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE:

Goal - Financial Stability and Resiliency
Initiative - Service Quality

This network redesign process will allow the District to adjust service levels to match available revenues and resources. The initial proposals in this preview mainly discuss how to reduce the network, but the intent is to preserve as much service access and ridership as possible. The proposed new network will also allow the District to evaluate runtimes and layovers systemwide to improve reliability and ensure compliance with the Collective Bargaining Agreement.

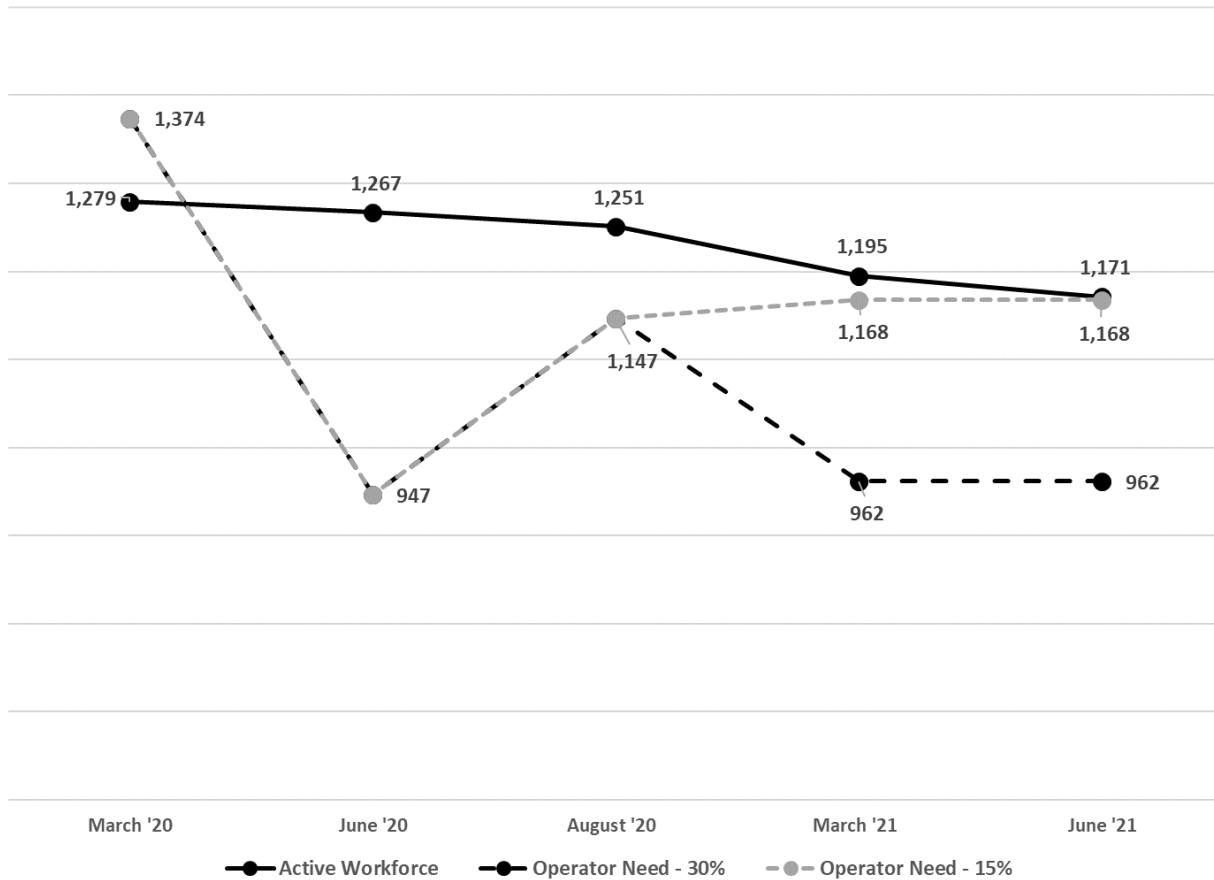
BUDGETARY/FISCAL IMPACT:

This item is informational only and has no direct impact on the budget. The proposed plan will recommend a service network scalable between a reduction of 15 to 30 percent from the service levels included in the original Spring 2020 Sign-up that was interrupted by the implementation of the COVID-19 Emergency Service Plan (ESP). A 15-percent reduction is equivalent to 302,522 annual service hours, which equates to an annual cost reduction of \$42.4 million assuming a \$140/hour marginal operating rate. A 30-percent reduction equates to 605,044 fewer annual service hours and a cost reduction of \$84.7 million at the same rate.

The per hour costing is mainly for reference and scale, as actual reductions in service cost would be significantly less without changes in staffing levels. This has been the case during the ESP, which significantly reduced service but kept the same operator count. Cost reductions have mainly been limited to fuel and overtime reductions. To the extent that the District permanently reduces service, the current plan is to rely on natural operator attrition to eventually match operator count to service level. This also means that if the District's revenues come back stronger than expected, operator hiring could resume to match the increased need or the District could eliminate less service.

Figure 1 illustrates the number of operators expected in the active workforce based on projected attrition of eight operators per month across the next year. It also illustrates the projected number of operators (including a fully staffed 34-percent extra board) required to operate the 15-percent and 30-percent scenarios for the new network. It anticipates an implementation date in Spring or Summer 2021, but staff are looking to implement in Summer 2021 to allow more time for input and clarity on revenues and ridership patterns during the pandemic.

Figure 1 - Projected Operator Workforce vs. Operator Needs by Scenario



Unfortunately, all transit agencies are in the difficult position of not knowing how revenues will return, what level of service will be required, and whether social norms around riding transit will change.

BACKGROUND/RATIONALE:

Barring quicker than forecasted increases in operating funds, staff expects the District will be operating with reduced revenue levels until the economy can recover from the pandemic. Given AC Transit’s extended process to implement a major service change, waiting for more clarity on revenue levels will require more time to make thoughtful, informed decisions about how to allocate constrained resources to maximize ridership with a lens on equity.

Following Board feedback in May regarding a set of initial principles and guidelines for how to scale down service, District staff adjusted from a proposed maximum reduction of 20 percent to a maximum of 30

percent. A reduction of 30 percent is more than twice the service reduction implemented by the District during the Great Recession. Staff also developed a less drastic 15-percent reduction to illustrate what a first phase of implementation would be as the District has more clarity on future revenues.

The proposals included within this plan are draft proposals and reflect an initial attempt to minimize impacts on disadvantaged communities, people of color, and those of low income. The proposals focus the most significant service reductions and eliminations on more affluent areas with lower concentrations of minority populations based on information from the Census American Community Survey. The guidelines approved by the Board in May stressed a focus on major corridors and trunk lines at the expense of service in lower-density areas, which is service in the hills and peak-direction Transbay service. The new network proposed is designed to serve as the foundation for building a productive, equitable, high-frequency network as revenues return over the next several years. As a result of the guiding principles, the 30-percent reduction in service results in a 15-percent loss of ridership as it is focused on cutting service to the least productive areas.

For purposes of this preview, staff is seeking Board input on the most difficult tradeoffs made as part of the proposed plan. The most challenging elements of the plan are highlighted below:

1) Significant reduction in Transbay service.

Transbay riders have a much different demographic profile than the rest of the District's riders. Transbay riders as a whole have higher income levels than local service riders and have much higher car-ownership rates. In addition, staff believes other alternatives will be available to these riders, including taking local service to BART.

2) Maintain the Broadway Shuttle.

There is also a desire to retain the Broadway Shuttle, which required a commensurate reduction in hours elsewhere. The initial draft proposal responding to this is to eliminate Line O and add an overlay of Line 51 in Alameda that operates every 30 minutes between Fruitvale BART and downtown Oakland via the current Line 51A routing.

3) Significant reduction in service to the hills.

Reducing or eliminating lines serving the inner East Bay hills is one of the most difficult tradeoffs within the proposed plan. Only a handful of lines will remain in the hills but the demographic profile shows a much higher concentration of higher income residents and car ownership. Staff is weighing the transportation needs of those in the hills against the loss of service to disadvantaged communities elsewhere in the District that generally have fewer transportation alternatives.

4) Some loss of less productive crosstown service.

Staff is proposing to eliminate some crosstown service. Staff selected routes that already have infrequent, unproductive service. This was done to preserve the utility of more productive crosstown service nearby and avoid a network of purely hourly service running crosstown. Ultimately this means some residents may walk further but will have access to more frequent service than if all crosstown lines were preserved at a lower frequency.

5) Longer and potentially less reliable transit lines which preserve frequency and coverage.

Some lines on major corridors - Lines 51A and B for example - are proposed to be combined to make longer lines to preserve as much frequency as possible. However, longer lines are generally less

reliable. Staff expects some reliability loss to be initially offset with faster runtimes due to reduced congestion on local streets.

6) Supplementary service will remain mostly unchanged.

Some low-ridership lines may be eliminated but in general supplementary service will not be reduced to the same extent as service elsewhere in the District. It makes up approximately 1 percent of overall service hours, receives some outside funding, and generally improves the efficiency of remaining Transbay service using interlining.

It is critical to note that the District may not need to make some of these tradeoffs should revenues return at higher levels than projected in the coming months. Staff is presenting the most drastic set of changes to ensure the District has a sufficient reduction plan in the event revenues are slow to rebound. However, it is more likely the District will implement a less drastic, 15-percent version as a first phase. Should the District only need to implement a 15-percent service cut, priorities for restoring service would focus on the following:

- 1) Minimizing reductions of frequency on major corridors and trunk lines.
- 2) Cross-town service in East Oakland would not be eliminated in order to preserve walkable transit access.
- 3) Some lifeline service would be preserved in the Oakland and Berkeley hills.

Under any scenario, staff will re-evaluate running times and layovers system-wide to improve reliability. This system-wide new network provides an opportunity to solve long-running reliability issues as the ridership and congestion patterns that prevailed prior to March 2020 will not return immediately and as a result, the schedules for all lines will need to be rebuilt. As a result of anticipated attrition rates, staff also expects to have more bus operators than required to operate service for at least the next year, meaning there will be enough extra board to cover absences.

Staff is in the process of vetting these proposals internally with staff across Operations, Marketing & Communications, Legislative Affairs & Community Relations, and others. The Divisions have been briefed as well as the Drivers' Committee. Staff will use the feedback received to make adjustments to the draft plan included in the call for a public hearing later this year.

External Affairs, Marketing and Communications staff is crafting a communications and public engagement plan to engage with the community, riders, stakeholder organizations and our municipal partners. Staff anticipates conducting digital engagement, including interactive maps and outreach tools, as opposed to in-person meetings due to the current shelter in place and social distancing orders.

East Bay Paratransit Implications

Staff is currently working on the potential impacts of the changes proposed above to eligible East Bay Paratransit (EBP) passengers. Staff conducts this analysis with every service change. In this case, staff will estimate impacts to ensure any loss of EBP coverage will be included within the input and decision-making process. As the District moves closer to making a decision on the proposed network changes, staff will perform additional analysis to capture any adjustments made to the plan as a consequence of feedback received on the proposals.

Timeline

Staff is considering implementing these changes in summer 2021 rather than March 2021 to allow enough time to provide for more clarity on future revenues and ridership patterns, as well as ensure sufficient time for input and adjustments to the proposals in the plan. The Federal Transit Administration has provided guidance that the reduced service levels adopted as an emergency measure do not require Title VI analysis. The Board, however, will be asked to waive certain elements of Board Policy 110 when the Public hearing is called in the fall. This will allow the District to delay implementation until the summer 2021, at which time staff will conduct a Title VI analysis on the new service network.

- Fall 2020: Call for Public Hearing and Conduct Public Engagement and Communications
- January 2021: Hold Public Hearing and Adjust Plan Based on Feedback
- February 2021: Request Board Approval
- June 2021: Implement New Network

ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES:

This report is strictly informational and thus there are no advantages or disadvantages associated with it. However, staff is requesting feedback on the direction proposed for the new network ahead of the call for the Public Hearing in the Fall. Once the Board sets the Public Hearing, staff cannot change the plan until after the hearing is held in the Winter. This preview process ensures the plan included in the Public Hearing is in line with Board expectations.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS:

Staff investigated alternatives like waiting longer for more clarity on operating revenues and smaller reduction proposals. Staff do not recommend both of those alternatives but seek the Board direction on the staff proposal to redesign the route network and the tradeoffs discussed in the staff report.

PRIOR RELEVANT BOARD ACTION/POLICIES:

Staff Report 20-180 - 2020-21 Service Plans

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Proposed Network Maps
2. Summary of Proposed Changes

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