

# ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA TRANSIT DISTRICT



## STAFF REPORT

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**MEETING DATE:** 9/13/2023

**Staff Report No.** 23-250c

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**TO:** AC Transit Board of Directors

**FROM:** Michael A. Hursh, General Manager/Chief Executive Officer

**SUBJECT:** Realign Network Plan Update and Revised Guiding Principles Approval

### ACTION ITEM

**AGENDA PLANNING REQUEST:**

**RECOMMENDED ACTION(S):**

Consider receiving an update on progress, next steps, and upcoming engagement opportunities and approve the revised guiding principles associated with Realign, the District's system-wide service effort.

Staff Contact:

Ramakrishna Pochiraju, Executive Director of Planning & Engineering

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**STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE:**

Goal - Convenient and Reliable Service

Initiative - Service Quality

The Realign planning effort combines a comprehensive review of existing service, robust public and stakeholder engagement, and market research and analysis to craft a new service network for the District that responds to the changing travel needs of the communities we serve. Plan alternatives will look at maximizing service within forecasted resource constraints while also providing an additional visionary look at what AC Transit service could be with additional resources.

**BUDGETARY/FISCAL IMPACT:**

There is no fiscal impact associated with approval of the guiding principles or the accompanying informational item.

**BACKGROUND/RATIONALE:**

This report provides an overview of the revised guiding principles recommended for Board adoption, an update on where the plan is today, and critical next steps.

**Overview of Draft Guiding Principles**

Between March and June 2023, staff and the Realign consultant team gathered and analyzed data and community input as part of an in-depth existing conditions analysis. At the July 26th Board Meeting, staff presented key findings from this work and a set of draft guiding principles shaped by the analysis. The draft

guiding principles presented are depicted below, with more context provided in Attachment 11 to Staff Report 23-375:

**Equity:** Provide bus service that prioritizes mobility for communities who need it the most.

*This principle is intended to provide the greatest level of service where concentrations of the greatest mobility need exist, focusing resources on Equity Priority Communities (EPCs) within the AC Transit service area.*

**Reliability:** Provide bus service that is reliable and predictable.

*This principle is intended to provide adequate redundancy in operating resources to ensure that trips that are scheduled are operated.*

**Frequency:** Provide frequent service to the most people. The importance of frequency will vary by location and will be balanced against geographic coverage and community needs.

*This principle is intended to provide the highest frequency service where the greatest demand exists while maintaining a network of high-frequency corridors (15 minutes or better) that includes all subareas.*

The project team intended for the draft guiding principles and engagement around them to spark a wide-ranging dialogue about what the District should value in the planning process and identify any revisions needed to ensure the final guiding principles meet community needs.

### **Community and Board Engagement on Draft Guiding Principles**

To help confirm the guiding principles' alignment with community needs, the team participated in a number of community events/festivals, hosted a virtual community workshop which was conducted in English, Spanish, and Chinese and shared information via the AC Transit website, eNews and social media. The first Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) meeting was held, to discuss the draft guiding principles, and to give an overview of upcoming phases of the project. Two focus groups with two partner Community Based Organizations (CBOs), Community Resources for Independent Living and Black Cultural Zone, were held during this outreach period. Engagement also included a series of pop-up and pop-in event. More details on the specifics of the engagement activities can be found in Attachment 3.

Staff heard feedback from Board members at the July 26th Board meeting, as well as in smaller group follow-up briefings following the August 15 virtual community workshop.

### **Community and Board Feedback Themes**

While specifics varied among community comments, some common themes emerged throughout the feedback heard during the Phase 2 outreach and engagement efforts. The most prominent themes are:

- **Reliability:** Reliable service that arrives when the schedule says so is top of mind for many community members.
- **Frequency:** Frequency was identified as important by many individuals, both in the context of

providing frequent service along corridors where more people tend to ride, as well as the provision of more service in network coverage markets.

- **Recovery:** Comments broached recovery of service to pre-pandemic service levels, both for lines that have only been partially restored and for lines where pre-pandemic lines remain suspended.
- **Equity:** When thinking about equity, comments emphasized that the plan should consider access to service and key destinations, not just service within EPC's. For some seniors and individuals with disabilities, walk distances to service are significant concerns.
- **Safety:** Comments covered improvements to traffic safety on corridors where AC Transit operates, safety for pedestrians crossing arterials, improvements to the wait experience, and safety on the bus.
- **Connectivity:** Comments cited the need for improved connections between routes and with BART, with many comments significantly intertwined with reliability and frequency concerns.

Key feedback heard from Board members at the July 26th board meeting and in smaller group briefings conducted with Board members following the August 15<sup>th</sup> digital community workshop included:

- **Reliability:** In line with community feedback, reliable service that arrives when the schedule says so is also a priority for most board members.
- **Visionary Plan:** A majority of board members emphasized the need for a visionary scenario that shows voters what the transit network could be with more resources.
- **Access to Destinations:** When thinking about equity, staff should consider incorporating peoples' access to opportunity and destinations like employment, grocery stores, medical facilities, and other trip generators to gauge the quality of access.
- **Sustainability:** Staff should consider prioritizing service that gets people out of their cars, in addition to prioritizing service that provides mobility in communities who need it the most.
- **Special Transit Service District 2 (Fremont and Newark):** Given the return-to-source mandate for Special Transit Service District 2 (SD 2), staff should consider how the guiding principles apply, especially since SD 2 revenues must be spent within SD 2, and the demographics and land uses are different from District 1. With regard to an equity guiding principle, for example, SD 2 contains no Plan Bay Area 2050 Equity Priority Communities.
- **Connections:** Staff did not hear consensus when it comes to prioritizing regional connections in this effort.

### **Revised Guiding Principles Approach**

Based on the feedback received from community members and the Board, staff still believes that equity, frequency, and reliability reflect the network design priorities of our communities, and that these principles should inform how we design our future service. However, community and Board feedback has made clear that the framework as initially proposed presents a few challenges.

First, while the community survey results, community conversations, board feedback, and industry best practices underscore that delivering a frequent network of routes focused around where more people ride is important to make transit a viable mobility option for the most people, staff believe Phase 1 and 2 of Realign leave the District without a clear mandate whether or not to focus solely on expanding the frequent network.

Second, while each guiding principle is an item identified as being important to our communities, the

principles are not mutually exclusive, which means that every alternative needs to factor in all guiding principles.

In response, the project team has retooled the draft guiding principles with the structure of the service alternatives phase in mind. Based on what staff has heard, we would show two different scenarios focused on prioritizing access to a frequent network at Fall 2023 resource levels, and one cost unconstrained visionary scenario:

- Stay the Course (Cost Neutral)
- More Frequency, Less Coverage (Cost Neutral)
- Visionary “More Frequency, More Coverage” (Cost Unconstrained)

A “Stay the Course” scenario would presume that AC Transit would balance maximizing ridership and providing coverage at today’s levels. A “More Frequency, Less Coverage” scenario would increase the reach of the frequent network at the cost of network coverage, and a visionary unconstrained “More Frequency, More Coverage” scenario would investigate what transit mobility could be with more resources to deploy service, including an aggressive expansion of our frequent transit network, service coverage (including currently suspended routes), and express services like Transbay.

The team would apply specific metrics for equity, frequency, and reliability to gauge the degree to which each alternative would improve outcomes on all three fronts.

On Equity, the team would consider how well each scenario affects access to destinations for those within an expanded definition of EPCs to help measure equitable plan outcomes. This expanded definition would include census tracts identified as EPCs under Plan Bay Area 2050 as well as tracts identified as EPCs within SD 2 under Plan Bay Area 2040 to account for the SD 2 return-to-source funding agreement.

On Frequency, the team would measure access to the frequent network for people and jobs.

On Reliability, the team would ensure that scheduled service levels are matched to real-world operator availability, even if that means service reductions. In addition, the team proposes using this opportunity to codify standard operating procedures for delay management in the field.

The revised principles are briefly depicted below, with more detail contained in Attachment 2.

**Equity:** Provide bus service that prioritizes mobility for communities who need it the most.

Intent: This principle is intended to provide the greatest level of service where concentrations of the greatest mobility need exist, focusing resources within an expanded list of Equity Priority Communities within the AC Transit service area.

*Evaluation: Service alternatives will be evaluated against the Equity principle through measures that address 1) Equity Priority Communities served; and 2) access to key destinations supporting Equity Priority Communities.*

*For Equity Priority Communities, evaluation measures will address changes to service levels in terms of frequency, span, and coverage. This analysis will be completed at various scales to show differences across the service area.*

*For access to destinations, evaluation measures will address changes to service levels for key destinations that support Equity Priority Communities. This analysis will also address the quality of transit service connecting Equity Priority Communities with key destinations.*

**Reliability:** Provide bus service that is reliable and predictable.

Intent: This principle is intended to provide adequate operating resources to ensure that trips that are scheduled are operated and service delivered is reliable.

*Evaluation: Scale scheduled service levels to real-world operator availability, even if that means service reductions. Budget sufficient time in schedules and in recovery time to account for real-world travel conditions and restroom access needs.*

**Frequency:** Provide frequent service to the most people. The importance of frequency will vary by location and will be balanced against geographic coverage and community needs.

*Intent: This principle is intended to provide the highest frequency service where the greatest demand exists.*

*Evaluation: Service alternatives will be evaluated against the Frequency principle based on access to the high-frequency network.*

*Evaluation measures will address the number of residents and jobs with access to the high-frequency network. This evaluation will also quantify the number of residents and jobs that would experience increased or reduced service compared to existing conditions for different times of day and on weekdays, Saturdays, and Sundays.*

More details on the specific approach can be found in Attachment 2.

### **ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES:**

A key advantage of having the board formally review and approve guiding principles before the project team develops network alternatives is that it sets transparent expectations up-front for the board, staff, and our communities as to how the process will go and a means by which we'll evaluate each alternative and how well it adheres to each of the guiding principles.

This allows community members to track the process and help keep the District accountable for keeping to its priorities in future project phases.

Staff sees no disadvantages for setting guiding principles for a plan of this magnitude. It does take time to develop in an otherwise aggressive overall plan schedule, but it is critical to the planning process.

**ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS:**

In revising the draft guiding principles presented at the July 26<sup>th</sup> Board Workshop, staff considered including additional guiding principles in response to feedback from board members and the community, including access, safety, regional connections, and climate and/or sustainability.

**Access:** The team considered including access as a guiding principle given some board feedback and community feedback, but based on the feedback received, access specifically did not rise to the level of a core guiding principle. The team believes access to destinations and access to frequency are both important parts of measuring how well a network design can get people where they need to go. However, the team has chosen to include access to destinations and access to frequent service in further fleshing out the evaluation of the three guiding principles in a people-centric way.

**Safety:** The team considered including safety as a guiding principle given the community feedback received about traffic safety issues, the safety of the wait experience, the walk environment, and on-bus environment. Safe and secure operations are enshrined in the District's Strategic Plan and Mission Statement. In addition, comments received will help inform collaboration with partner jurisdictions on improving infrastructure and safety District-wide. However, because this initiative focuses primarily on where buses go and when, rather than capital needs or District safety programs for operators and riders, incorporating safety as a guiding principle as part of Realign was not recommended.

**Connections:** The team considered including connections as a guiding principle given board feedback and limited community feedback received about improving timing and connections between individual AC Transit routes and with BART. Ultimately, inclusion of connections was not recommended; the team's analysis of Streetlight Data show that a significant majority of travel starting in the East Bay skews locally rather than regionally. Moreover, the current network serves BART well and the team believes that a renewed focus on reliability and buttressing the District's frequent network of routes would address the concerns raised on this front. Staff also continues to coordinate with regional efforts on the Transit 2050+ initiative with other transit operators and MTC and the project team has deliberately included members of the Transit 2050+ project team on the Realign technical advisory committee.

**Climate and/or Sustainability:** The team considered including climate and/or sustainability as a guiding principle given feedback heard from the Board, with the subtext being that specific types of service would be more geared towards attracting individuals out of single occupancy vehicles. Industry best practices suggest that operating fast, frequent, and reliable service is the key to improving ridership and encouraging mode shift. The team believes that the metrics proposed under the equity and frequency guiding principles will allow us to well capture the impacts of expanded service on peoples' mobility options in the cost neutral and visionary scenarios being proposed, and so this was not recommended.

**PRIOR RELEVANT BOARD ACTION/POLICIES:**

SR 22-502 Network Redesign Timeline Update and Procurement Approval  
SR 23-250 Realign Network Plan Update  
SR 23-250a Realign Network Plan Update  
SR 23-250b Realign Network Plan Update

SR 23-375 AC Transit Workshop on Existing Conditions and Draft Guiding Principles

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Presentation
2. Revised Guiding Principles Memo
3. Outreach and Engagement Summary for Phase 2

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