



STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: 1/26/2022

Staff Report No. 22-009

TO: AC Transit Board of Directors
FROM: Michael A. Hursh, General Manager
SUBJECT: Service Recovery Priorities Update

ACTION ITEM

RECOMMENDED ACTION(S):

Consider approving updated methodology for prioritizing lines for service recovery, including both local and Transbay service. [Requested by Director Walsh 11/10/2021]

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE:

Goal - Convenient and Reliable Service
Initiative - Service Quality

AC Transit plays a critical role in the regional mobility network by providing local and Transbay bus service throughout our service area and the Bay Area at large. Service throughout the network was reduced and/or temporarily suspended during the pandemic. In response to Board feedback and evolving pandemic conditions, staff developed an updated methodology for prioritizing lines to recover as more resources become available while beginning conversations about potential strategies for how the District might better use resources to meet current demand patterns.

BUDGETARY/FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no budget impact associated with this item. It is a proposed set of criteria and priorities to guide decisions about what service to restore as budget and workforce become available.

BACKGROUND/RATIONALE:

In July 2021, the Board approved a methodology for recovering local, Transbay, and Supplementary service. The priorities and timeline were planned to bring AC Transit back to full-service levels in the near-term before ultimately implementing a District-wide redesign to match the service network with post-pandemic rider needs. Putting equity at the forefront in line with the District's Strategic Plan, this methodology asked the following questions in prioritizing lines for service recovery:

- Is the line below pre-pandemic service levels?
- Does the line serve a Disadvantaged Community?
- Does the line have high ridership or pass-ups?

- Does the line provide critical coverage in the network?

In response to each of these questions, staff's methodology assigned point values for lines serving disadvantaged communities, lines exhibiting higher pre-pandemic ridership, and lines that provide critical coverage. The methodology listed lines already at full service at the top, followed by Supplementary Service eventually restored in August 2021 with the resumption of in-person learning at schools throughout the East Bay.

Per the methodology, following these top two tiers, each local line operating below full service levels as of July 2021 was grouped into Priority Groups 1, 2, or 3. Peak-only Transbay lines were placed on a parallel track for recovery as efficiencies with Supplementary Service trips made implementation feasible. Shuttle services were to be restored following the resumption of all other lines.

In September 2021, in response to Board direction and concerns from some communities who lacked Transbay service, staff provided additional detail as to how peak-only Transbay lines would be considered for service recovery according to four criteria:

- Equitable Service,
- Ridership,
- Congestion Reduction, and
- Available Alternatives.

The Board received and approved these additional criteria for prioritizing peak-only Transbay service recovery while keeping the framework for Priority Groups 1, 2, and 3 intact for the local network. In November 2021, however, the Board called for a more explicit line-by-line ranked priority list for the entire network.

In response to Board direction, staff has developed an updated framework responsive to the Board's request. In doing so, staff wanted to ensure that any updates were responsive to how riders are using the system today with a keen equity focus.

Responding to the "Present Normal"

At the November 2021 Board meeting, staff outlined its intent to refocus efforts on service restoration of the existing service network rather than setting a date for a wholesale redesign of the transit network responsive to a yet-to-be-determined post-pandemic "new normal."

Staff understands the importance of full service restoration to the communities it serves, and it is encouraging to see overall ridership on AC Transit service gradually trending upward. However, the demand for Transbay service currently lags far behind that of the local network. Exhibit 5 in the attachment shows that in the fall 2021 sign-up, peak-only Transbay service averaged 9.4 passengers per trip as compared to an average of 34.2 passengers per trip in Fall 2019, which represents 27.4 percent of pre-pandemic ridership levels. Meanwhile, as Exhibit 4 in the attachment shows, productivity on the local system in Fall 2021 has rebounded to 69.7 percent of Fall 2019 levels from 27.4 passengers per hour down to 19.1.

AC Transit, like other transit operators nationwide, struggles to maintain the 1,200 operators it needs available daily to fill every run for the current 83% service level. Projections indicate that 1,380 operators are needed to restore service to pre-pandemic levels. Guided by Board Policy 471, which prioritizes coverage of Transbay service over local service, Transbay trips are missed substantially less frequently than local service trips, although Transbay service carries significantly fewer riders on a per-trip and per-hour basis and has historically served markedly fewer people of color and low-income individuals compared to local bus service.

Those riding local bus service to work, school, and essential activities experience more missed trips relative to earlier in the pandemic, even when taking reduced pandemic capacity standards into account. Staff previously reported to the Board that in Q1 of FY 2021-22, the District did not operate over 5 percent of its scheduled service, which represents a significant drop-off from the previous quarter and on a year-over-year basis. In addition, the District failed to operate more than 7 percent of its scheduled service in September. Appendices A and B in the attachment provide detail about what this means for our riders. The maps included show how local riders disproportionately bear the brunt of these issues, experiencing acutely more unreliable service than the small percentage of those riding Transbay services. Most riders using the local system in October 2021 could expect their line to have gaps in service on at least 6 days (or about 20 percent) of the 31 days in October, with riders on some local lines experiencing gaps in the schedule on at least 15 of those days.

With significant capacity available on the BART system for Transbay travel to downtown San Francisco and operator availability issues continuing to plague the local system, the updated service recovery methodology includes staff recommendations for the Board to consider 1) short-term service adjustments that reallocate resources from high cost, low-ridership peak-hour Transbay service to help improve the percentage of service operated on the significantly higher-ridership local network; and 2) a reconsideration of Board Policy 471 (Cancellation of Scheduled Service) to reprioritize the order of service coverage, elevating local service above Transbay service. Staff believes that such temporary structural changes in how the District plans and prioritizes its operations will respond to the operator availability challenges at hand with improved service quality for the greatest number of riders and more equitably allocating resources according to need.

Development of Revised Recovery Priorities

With these considerations in mind, staff has developed an updated framework responsive to the Board's request that provides more consistency and granularity across all service types, robustly aligns with the Core Values in the District's Strategic Plan, and reflects changing pandemic conditions. The detailed methodology and ranked priority lists are provided in Attachment 1. Staff has ranked all local and Transbay service lines yet to be recovered to full-service levels as of the December 2021 sign-up, with Transbay services ranked for recovery below all local lines. Staff is recommending the Board consider approving the updated framework set forth in Attachment 1 that takes a more novel approach to service that could better meet riders' needs in the short term in the face of the changing transit ridership landscape and continuing operator availability issues.

ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES:

The primary advantage to approving this methodology for service recovery would be that it would provide more specificity to riders and stakeholders about the order in which the District would aim to recover service.

A secondary advantage would be that the new methodology would be more responsive to the needs of our communities, with an additional focus on the mobility needs of disadvantaged communities throughout the District.

The primary disadvantage to approving staff's new methodology would be that it would change the priorities for service recovery and riders more eager to return to Transbay service might be particularly impacted by this shift in the District's recovery focus.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS:

The first alternative would be to retain the service recovery priorities adopted by the Board in July and September 2021 and leave questions related to the precise order within the priority groups and overall framework up to staff. Staff expects that some riders and stakeholders would continue to ask questions as to when their own lines would be restored to pre-pandemic service levels. Moreover, the continued use of the SB 535 Disadvantaged Communities data would deprioritize service recovery within some communities with higher transit ridership in favor of areas with high pollution with low populations and fewer transit riders.

The second alternative would be to redirect staff to develop yet another methodology using different criteria.

Staff believes the new set of priorities set forth in Attachment 1 best addresses the needs of our customers and the values of the District.

PRIOR RELEVANT BOARD ACTION/POLICIES:

Staff Report 20-180 2020-21 Service Plans
Staff Report 20-262 Preview of Post COVID Network Redesign
Staff Report 21-129 Service Recovery Plan Update
Staff Report 21-311 Service Recovery Priorities
Staff Report 21-385 Transbay Service Recovery Priorities
Staff Report 21-508 Network Redesign Timeline Update

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Updated Service Recovery Priorities Memo

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