

Introduction to Strategic Plan Addendum

Context of the Strategic Plan

The AC Transit Board of Directors passed the AC Transit Strategic Plan in April 2019. It was the first strategic plan approved by the District in decades. As the introduction to the Strategic Plan notes, “a strategic plan can be defined as a management tool that ‘is used to define an organization’s vision, mission, core values, challenges and opportunities, establish long and short range goals, guide business processes and measure performance.’” As such, agencies typically expect strategic plans to be in effect for a medium term, such as five years, before being revised.

AC Transit’s Strategic Plan was passed at a more expansive time. The Bay Area, and the country, was enjoying its longest period of economic expansion. AC Transit service levels had almost recovered from reductions made in the 2008-10 Great Recession period, though ridership continued to decline (except on Transbay service). Transit-oriented development, which could support AC Transit, was finally becoming more of a reality than a hope. It was happening in most cities of the district. Downtown Oakland gained more housing units than any other locale in the Bay Area. Meanwhile, the threats of rideshare growth and the roll-out of automated vehicles loomed over the viability of the nation’s public transit systems in its current form and these threats were particularly acute in the Bay Area.

Why Undertake this Addendum at this time?

Some have asked why undertake this addendum at this time. Why not wait until the path of recovery from the pandemic is more certain? Yet while future conditions are never certain, the District appears to be gradually emerging from its low point during the pandemic. This addendum provides an opportunity to review and refine strategic approaches. While not all issues can be handled in this addendum, it can provide an important refresh for the District.

Less than three years after passage of the Strategic Plan, much has changed. Therefore, staff is proposing an addendum. It seems premature to undertake a full-fledged revision of the Plan. A full revision would also require considerable staff resources and an extensive and comprehensive process involving staff and the Board of Directors. Yet it is important to modify the Strategic Plan to recognize the significant changes of the last two years.

What Has Changed that Requires a Strategic Plan Addendum?

The Impacts of COVID-19: The COVID-19 pandemic greatly depressed transit operations, ridership and finances around the country, for many reasons. Economic activity was greatly reduced in 2020, early in the pandemic, so fewer people needed to ride the bus, particularly during typical commute periods (economic activity has been recovering in 2021, but not yet to pre-pandemic levels). Many schools and colleges closed their campuses. Many office workers began working from home. Nationally it was estimated that up to 35% of total jobs were being done from home.

Others were fearful of riding in the enclosed space of a bus or train, even though transit vehicles were never shown to be significant COVID vectors. A New York University study of 121 metropolitan areas found no correlation between the level of transit ridership and the level of COVID infection. Nevertheless, the fear was real, even if the danger was not.

Ridership to downtown office districts in the region, such as the San Francisco Financial District, dropped precipitously. While total AC Transit ridership has been gradually recovering from its pandemic low, it is still well below pre-pandemic levels, especially on Transbay routes, which hover around 10% of pre-pandemic ridership as of December 2021. Ridership has re-focused on “essential trips,” the people who have to go to a job site to do their jobs or have to use transit to get to meet critical needs. Despite federal funding assistance, service has also declined. It is at 85% of the pre-pandemic levels, although the goal is to ultimately reach 100%. This is the equivalent of deleting one of every seven trips from the previous schedule.

Climate Change: Other conditions, or the public perceptions of them, have changed as well. While the threat of climate change was certainly evident in 2019, catastrophic fires and floods in recent years have dramatized that threat. Smoke from massive wildfires has drifted over the East Bay and warmer temperatures for longer periods of time have affected the safety of our employees and the experience of our riders. Climate change is no longer a future concern but an imminent hazard.

Systemic Racism and Equity: Systemic racism, unfortunately, is hardly new either. A majority of both the passengers and the workers of AC Transit are people of color, putting racial issues at the forefront. Yet the murder of George Floyd—and the unprecedented national reaction to it—brought a new focus to this issue. It also spotlighted the not yet answered questions of what else AC Transit should do for racial equity and what equity means in our context, both in the service we provide and as a place of employment.

Housing Affordability: Long-standing housing problems have also intensified. Housing is unaffordable to low and moderate wage workers in much of the AC Transit District and surrounding area, making commutes to AC Transit jobs more difficult and unattractive. While infill and transit-oriented housing has increased, some low density, hard to serve “sprawl” houses continue to be built at the edges of the district. Residents in these locations (and more distant suburban ones) tend to drive a great deal, contributing to high traffic volumes and emissions. Yet, there can be pressure for bus service in these areas. The high and inflexible cost of housing may also be contributing to pressure to reduce costs elsewhere and make transit more affordable to the user. The lack of affordable housing in the district has dispersed low-income families to the outskirts of the Bay Area making service more difficult and expensive to provide to those that may need it the most.

Worker Shortage: A shortage of workers, especially bus operators, is also a longstanding problem for AC Transit and many other American transit agencies. This means that there is often an insufficient amount of workers to provide the scheduled service, and scheduled trips are missed. The District has struggled to hire and retain enough operators to provide all scheduled service and coverage is often fulfilled through overtime and day-off work. In addition, much of the workforce is nearing retirement age. Mid-2021 has also been marked by the “Great Resignation”, when an unusually high percentage of American workers have quit their jobs. It is not yet clear to what extent this will affect AC Transit. Jobs at AC Transit are generally unionized and well-paid, with better health benefits and time off provisions than in much of the American labor market.

Given all these changes AC Transit has been through, it is appropriate to review and update the Strategic Plan. Staff has created an addendum to the Plan, rather than undertake the major project of an entire new Plan. In addition, much of the Plan remains valid.

Elements of the Strategic Plan Proposed for Change

The existing Strategic Plan is built around an integrated flow of analysis, direction and goal setting, depicted from left to right in the Strategic Plan diagram. The proposed addendum would maintain the elements of that flow but update some of them as shown below. Some, such as Core Values, would remain unchanged.

Updated Elements of the Strategic Plan



*Updated elements are outlined in red

A Revised Future Scenario

The 2019 Strategic Plan was based on the development of a future scenario selected by the Board of Directors to help shape the Strategic Goals for the District. As part of the original planning process, staff developed four potential future scenarios with varying degrees of operational growth and the Board ultimately landed on “Focused Improvements”, a scenario where success would be based on investment in AC Transit’s trunk-line network.

With the emergence of significant external factors summarized in the introduction to this addendum, AC Transit has developed a new future scenario that is more realistic and responsive to these factors, and will serve as the basis for revised Strategic Goals and Strategic Initiatives that allow the agency to successfully carry out its mission and vision as the primary bus transit provider in the East Bay.

“Revive & Thrive”

While the selected future scenario in the 2019 plan was “Focused Improvements,” AC Transit anticipates a major pivot in future conditions and developed a new scenario for the 2022 addendum called “Revive & Thrive.” The Revive & Thrive future scenario projects a business environment beyond the pandemic that AC Transit will need to navigate. It anticipates strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the District and its operations that will help determine our strategy for success going forward. Much of that strategy will be a focus on the experience of all of our customers.

Future Scenario Characteristics Comparison

Characteristic	Future Scenario	
	Focused Improvements (2019)	Revive & Thrive (2022)
Vision Statement	AC Transit has embraced a collaborative model by deploying its buses in major corridors and offering Flex service in low-performing areas	The pandemic has given AC Transit an opportunity to recover service and ridership through improvements to the customer experience and a focus on all riders

The vision statement for the selected 2019 future scenario focused on investment along corridors with the highest ridership with demand-response service as a potential solution for low-ridership areas. Since 2019, the District has realized that demand-response service as operated by AC Transit is not a cost-efficient form of public transit and has limited applications due to passenger load constraints and low productivity. In 2022, the vision statement for the future scenario has pivoted to improving the customer experience for all of our riders rather than a specific rider type such as commuters.

Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SRTP financial projections have prevailed • There is a renegotiated agreement for regional funding of AC Transit’s Transbay operations • Added revenue and improved productivity have 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + New revenue sources — Farebox and other operating revenues trend below pre-pandemic levels — Increased costs to deliver service — Labor shortage
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	resulted from redeployment of bus hours and on-street priority measures	
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In 2019, based on the economic climate around public transit, the scenario projected a promising financial future with a balanced budget, regional funding for Transbay operations and increased revenue through increased ridership and more efficient service. The 2022 future scenario is less rosy with the potential for new funding sources at all levels of government, but less farebox revenue, increased costs and a labor shortage affecting AC Transit's bottom line.

Service Quality/Customer Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buses have been shifted from low performing routes to major corridors • School service has been deployed to maximum efficiency • Improved operation in regional corridors has resulted from increased collaboration with cities • Transbay service has expanded to fill greater demands, financed by additional regional funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Invest in historically underserved communities + Improve the entire customer experience for all riders + Regionally coordinated service + More Transit-oriented Development (TOD) + New understanding of customer and public's transportation needs — Ridership does not reach pre-pandemic levels — Less ridership demand results in less service, particularly during commute periods
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In 2019, the future scenario assumed that the already over-crowded Transbay service would continue to expand to meet growing demand. This will not be the case in 2022 with the pandemic significantly changing commute patterns, especially into Downtown San Francisco. With regard to service, the 2022 future scenario has investment in all riders with a focus on underserved communities and the challenge of less ridership demand, at least in the near future. Both scenarios emphasize regional service and coordination, whether it was through the FASTER Bay Area proposal in 2019 or the Blue Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force in 2021. The focus on Transit-oriented Development in the region potentially provides new service markets and a source of more ridership.

Shared Mobility/Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TNCs continue to erode off-peak and perhaps peak) ridership • AC Transit operates its own version of TNCs in several areas (Flex) • Better collaboration with cities has resulted in better 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Advanced customer interfaces + Multi-modal collaboration + Transit priority + Electronic and contactless fare payment
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	curb management and enforcement of bus stop restrictions, reducing negative impact of TNCs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Focus of regional agencies on mobility rather than mode + Technology tools to improve productivity and communication but also change commute patterns — Vehicle automation (trucking, rideshare, private cars) — Rideshare growth — Increased auto ownership
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A major impetus for the 2019 Strategic Plan was the emerging threat of a “transportation revolution” involving rideshare, zero-emission vehicles and automation. In 2022, rideshare and automation have not met expectations and are less of an immediate threat to public transit, though long-term impacts are still possible. Therefore, the 2022 future scenario broadens the shared mobility projection to include all transportation-related innovation including customer-facing interfaces and technological improvements to transit service.

Public and Political Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More collaboration with cities has improved transit operations in major corridors • An expanded constituency has resulted from offering better service and more amenities to riders • There is more collaboration with cities to provide better service to new development along major corridors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Renewed focus on public transit and TOD + Mandated regional transit coordination + Increased focus on all riders and an improved customer experience — Challenging coordination with local jurisdictions’ priorities and budgets
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Optimism for collaboration with AC Transit’s local and regional partners is projected in both the 2019 and 2022 scenarios, though there is now greater concern over local jurisdiction coordination as the external factors identified in this addendum affect all jurisdictions and agencies, creating different priorities for our local partners during pandemic recovery and beyond. To gain support of the public, AC Transit would focus on the customer and public needs to drive improvements going forward.

Health and Safety	None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Health and safety of riders and operators + Environmentally friendly fleet + Decrease in Vehicle Miles Traveled
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Sustainable business practices to reduce carbon footprint— Accelerated Climate Change exacerbates inequity— Lingering pandemic— Aging population
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Health and Safety was not a future consideration in the 2019 scenario but has come to the forefront in 2022 due to the emerging environmental factors. This includes the protection of AC Transit's riders and operators from infectious diseases, assault and harassment, and impacts from climate change. While AC Transit will do its best to protect its customers, employees and the public, the ongoing threats of climate change and the pandemic still remain. Finally, the rapidly aging population remains and needs to be addressed through improved and expanded accessible services and paratransit, though these services are expensive to provide.

Updated District Goals

Despite the external factors upon us, the District's Strategic Goals are very much still relevant and this section describes the changes in emphasis for the goals in response to those external factors and the resulting future scenario. In addition, a new goal is proposed that would focus exclusively on addressing racism, bias, and equity.

Safe & Secure Operations

AC Transit should ensure that the traveling public has complete confidence in the safety procedures and personnel policies implemented in response to the pandemic, extreme weather conditions and an uptick in harassment and assaults against operators and riders to keep them safe.

Convenient & Reliable Service

Attracting and retaining bus riders is key to pandemic recovery and a crucial contribution AC Transit can make to addressing the climate crisis. Transportation accounts for a large portion of greenhouse gas emissions and reducing reliance on private motor vehicles is a key step in reducing those emissions. For transit to attract and retain riders, it must be fast, frequent, and reliable. Efforts should be made to boost frequency of service on major bus lines, address delays due to congestion and generally improve the travel times experienced by our riders. Service should be expanded in areas with high ridership and possibly reduced in areas of low ridership if resources are limited.

To help mitigate the effects of systemic racism in our community, AC Transit should ensure that underserved communities continue to receive high quality transit service and are given high priority for investment in improved service and in transit-supportive infrastructure.

Financial Stability & Resiliency

Financial stability and resiliency refers to the revenue structure of the agency that enables it to weather the fluctuations of the economy. In the context of the climate crisis, resiliency should be expanded to include the ability to protect our employees and District assets, and to recover or adapt to the costly impacts of climate change such as extreme weather or sea level rise.

In addition, in order to fully recover from the pandemic, AC Transit must focus on obtaining sustainable resources at all levels of government funding in order to maintain and grow service.

High Performing Workforce

A high performing workforce is characterized by its ability bring people of diverse backgrounds together to work as a team towards higher objectives. Systemic racism undermines the ability of people to work together by allowing bigotry, hostility, bias and microaggressions to exist unchallenged. Eliminating racism and bias from the workplace is a necessary step in creating a high performing workforce.

AC Transit must also hire more quality operators to facilitate service recovery in order to increase ridership.

Strong Public & Policy Maker Support

Coordination, support and partnership with local jurisdictions, elected officials and community-based organizations are key to the success of AC Transit's recovery, the fight against climate change and the reach to disadvantaged communities. This coordination is particularly important since AC Transit operates on the right-of-way of the local jurisdictions that have final authority over permissions and infrastructure improvements that can both help and hinder AC Transit operations.

Environmental Improvement

The Environmental Improvement goal was intended to guide actions that influence the environmental impacts of District operations. The goal was written to be general in nature and applicable to most activities. In 2020 and 2021, events around the world and in California, such as rising temperatures and more extreme weather occurrences, illustrated the urgent need to reduce atmospheric greenhouse gases to prevent irreversible damage to the climate.

Public transit should contribute to the fight against climate change and other environmental degradation. AC Transit is a large consumer of energy, primarily fossil fuels, to run buses and operate our facilities. Consequently, changes that we make in our sources of energy, the types of vehicle propulsion we use, and the conservation measures we adopt, can have a transformative impact to our carbon footprint. AC Transit's environmental improvement goal should have as its primary focus be the reduction of our carbon emissions from our vehicles and facilities, which will also directly benefit the neighborhoods we operate in.

(NEW STRATEGIC GOAL) Prioritize Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA)

AC Transit is a diverse organization that provides a critical service to a diverse community. To become a better engaged organization, we must first have zero tolerance for racist actions and discrimination, and address prejudices, microaggressions and unconscious biases in the workplace. We must also acknowledge, celebrate and provide opportunity to persons of color, women, LGBTQ+, and those with disabilities within AC Transit, and create a safe and welcoming work environment. For the community we serve, we must provide equitable transportation solutions and opportunity to all, especially black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) populations that have historically been, and continue to be, marginalized and negatively impacted. In the larger transportation landscape, AC Transit's riders are more diverse and lower income than the area we serve. Therefore, we must provide our riders with high-quality transportation solutions above those who have other means.

AC Transit must also provide accessible services to the growing elderly population and those with disabilities. Improved accessibility to fixed-route service will keep paratransit costs from rapidly growing.

Updated Strategic Initiatives

As stated in the original Strategic Plan, the Strategic Initiatives are a mechanism for the District to achieve the updated goals highlighted by advancing concept into action. The Initiatives have the following features:

Like the updated goals, the updated Strategic Initiatives reflect AC Transit's response to the external factors and the resulting future scenario. In addition, a new initiative is proposed that would focus exclusively on *how* AC Transit will address racism, bias, accessibility and equity.

Service Quality

Attracting and retaining bus riders is a crucial contribution AC Transit can make to addressing the climate crisis. Transit that is not fast, frequent, and reliable will not be attractive to travelers that have better options available. Improving speed and reliability should be a District-wide effort that includes a focus on management of the bus system and upgrading technology and infrastructure that supports this effort.

The District will ensure that programs or projects designed to improve service quality are deployed equitably. Projects should be given priority that serve areas of low-income residents, low car ownership, and areas with high BIPOC concentration

The pandemic has caused a precipitous drop in transit riders and required the District to suspend service on under-used bus lines. As riders slowly return to the system, bus service must be restored in an equitable manner in terms of both race and income.

Infrastructure Modernization

This initiative should consider infrastructure improvements that address climate change as well as the District's functional needs. Priority should be given to projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions over projects that don't. All new or renovated infrastructure should be designed with energy efficiency and waste reduction in mind. The design and construction of fully zero-emission operating divisions should be accelerated.

Efforts should be made to ensure that contracts associated with infrastructure modernization provide ample opportunities to minority and women-owned businesses.

Employee Recruitment, Training & Retention

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted labor markets and left many employers scrambling to fill jobs. Public transit was already facing a shortage of bus operators with the pandemic exacerbating the difficulty in recruitment.

Although disrupted by the current labor market conditions, the District should still strive to recruit workers from diverse backgrounds and make AC Transit an attractive place to work by providing opportunities for training and career advancement among other benefits.

Zero Emission Program

This strategic initiative focuses on advancing the transition to a 100% zero-emission bus fleet by 2040. To ensure an equitable distribution of benefits from this initiative, the deployment of zero-emission buses should be prioritized for areas of low-income residents and areas with high BIPOC concentrations that also suffer from high air-pollution burdens. This approach is described in the board-approved Clean Corridors Plan.

Avoiding the worst impacts of climate change requires early and substantive actions to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide. This means that we need to take steps immediately to reduce our emissions and develop a plan to reach carbon neutrality. We should strive to purchase the lowest carbon options available for the diesel, hydrogen and electricity that powers our buses. We also need to ensure that we are purchasing the most energy-efficient vehicles available on the market, regardless of fuel.

Financial Efficiency & Revenue Maximization

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused transit ridership to drop at every public transit agency in the country including AC Transit, causing a precipitous drop in fare revenue. We must seek adequate funding from all layers of government to cover the loss of fare revenue. Federal recovery dollars have provided temporary financial relief to the district, but in order to be fiscally sustainable in the long term, AC Transit must raise revenues or decrease expenses. An increase in revenues can come in many forms including a ballot tax measure in the coming years. A decrease in expenses would likely impact the level of service provided by the district either directly (service reductions) or indirectly (other expenses that would affect service quality).

(NEW STRATEGIC INITIATIVE) Internal and External Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility

Programs and Priorities

Systemic racism and other forms of bias are complex problems that require multi-department and agency-wide actions to uproot or to mitigate. This new strategic initiative has two parts: an internal component which seeks to further diversify the AC Transit workforce and address bias in the workplace, and an external component which seeks to ensure that the district provides high-quality service in areas of greatest need.

AC Transit is a diverse organization that provides a critical service to an equally diverse community. The internal component of the initiative would create a comprehensive internal program to celebrate diversity, address biases, prejudices, and microaggressions, instill cultural competence in all employees, be inclusive, and grow a diverse work force at all levels of the organization with an emphasis on equal employment opportunities. The program would include a wide breadth of activities such as events, training, and creation of new policies. To become a better engaged organization, we must first have zero tolerance for racist actions and discrimination, and address prejudices, microaggressions and unconscious biases in the workplace. We must also acknowledge, celebrate, and provide opportunity to persons of color, women, LGBTQ+, and those with disabilities within AC Transit, and create a safe and welcoming work environment.

AC Transit's riders are more diverse and lower income than average for our service area. Equity principles should lead us to prioritize our riders above those who have other means of transportation. Our service and public facing activities would meet Title VI and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) policies and provide access to everyone with an emphasis on improvements to these two aspects of our core business in communities where residents and workers are dependent on our service. In addition, the District would seek opportunities to work with businesses owned by persons of color and women. This initiative would be closely tied with the Employee Recruitment, Training and Retention initiative and with fulfilling the core values of *Equity* and *Trust*. For the community we serve, we must provide equitable transportation solutions and opportunity to all, especially BIPOC populations that have

historically been, and continue to be marginalized. Fixed route service must be as accessible as possible to help minimize a potential rapid growth in paratransit expenses.

Additional Proposed Issues Recommended for Board Workshops

At a September 29, 2021 Board of Directors Retreat, Board Members brought up additional potential issues to address in this addendum. These included the role of Transportation Network Companies (TNCs or “ridesharing”) as a competitor to transit, the situation of automated vehicles, and the prospects for microtransit service. Though of concern for the District and reflected in the **Strategic Plan**, these are issues which have not greatly changed in the last two years. Therefore, they are not included in the addendum, which focuses on key recent external events impacting AC Transit.

Over the course of the pandemic, TNC ridership has not greatly changed and major TNCs continue to lose billions. The expected date of widespread automated vehicle usage has been postponed by most experts, and some major companies have exited the vehicle automation field. Similarly, the District’s microtransit program has not produced the anticipated results and is indefinitely suspended.

These issues should not be ignored, however. Staff recommends that each be considered in its own in-depth Board workshop. These workshops would allow the Board and the District to more fully assess its current status and future prospects as it leads up to a new strategic plan development process in 2024, five years after the original Strategic Plan.

Multiple members of the Board of Directors also asked about the future of AC Transit’s service network and how it will meet the needs of the post-pandemic community. Some questioned the viability of Transbay service and the focus on the commute. Once the effects of the pandemic stabilize, the District intends to enter into a network design planning process to answer these questions. The process will start with robust public outreach to truly understand the transportation needs of AC Transit customers and the public as a whole.