

# ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA TRANSIT DISTRICT



## STAFF REPORT

---

**MEETING DATE:** 2/10/2021

**Staff Report No. 21-141**

---

**TO:** AC Transit Board of Directors  
**FROM:** Michael A. Hursh, General Manager  
**SUBJECT:** Rear-Door Boarding

### BRIEFING ITEM

#### **RECOMMENDED ACTION(S):**

Consider whether the District should reinstate fare-free rear-door boarding. [Requested by Director Beckles - 1/13/21]

#### **STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE:**

Goal - Safe and Secure Operations  
Initiative - Service Quality

Providing and sustaining safe and secure operations is of paramount importance for the District. During the pandemic, this priority faced significant challenges with unknown and ever-changing information, tasking staff to develop a comprehensive response strategy with very little resources. Through synergy between District departments and collaboration with the Unions, the District has persevered.

#### **BUDGETARY/FISCAL IMPACT:**

The primary fiscal impact from rear door boarding operation is the loss of farebox revenue. Average farebox revenue for November and December 2020 is about \$1.4 million per month, which would be foregone if rear-door fare free operation is reinstated. Staff expects farebox revenues to slowly increase going forward due to normal seasonal patterns and improved pandemic conditions as vaccine distribution continues.

The District has already incurred significant expense to outfit buses and protect staff so it could resume front door boarding and fare collection starting in October 2020. The installation of operator shields and initial costs to add Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and dispensers for the PPE for riders cost approximately \$470,000 for materials and supplies. In addition, maintenance staff incurred overtime expense for the fabrication and installation of the shields and dispensers.

#### **BACKGROUND/RATIONALE:**

At the onset of the pandemic, the District formed a COVID-19 Taskforce Committee to monitor breaking news that the virus was spreading in the United States and possibly towards California and the Bay Area. Once the first cases were reported near the Bay Area, the District activated the Emergency Operations Control Center (EOCC) on March 13, 2020, to track messaging from federal, state, and local governments regarding increased

efforts to contain the spread and exposure of the virus. EOCC Officers, Section Chiefs and Unit Leads collaborated to develop a comprehensive response strategy with a goal to address all aspects of the pandemic as it relates to District operations and the safety of employees and riders.

As the pandemic developed, District implemented social and physical distancing requirements in compliance with the mandates enforced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and County Health Officials. However, the task force determined that additional measures were needed to further safeguard Operators during the boarding and de-boarding process. Rear door boarding was an immediate and practical solution while more effective control measures were considered.

On March 20, 2020, in accordance with the COVID-19 social distancing mandates, AC Transit implemented free fares and rear door boarding by installing caution tape restricting passengers from moving to the front (except for ADA riders, boarding through the front door) and limited passenger capacity per bus length. This process was used to promote social distancing while reducing the likelihood of close contact gatherings at the front of the coach. Passengers entered and exited the coach through the rear doors and were not required to pay fares. The District also required mandatory use of a face covering by passengers when boarding a bus and while riding the service.

### **Rear Door and Free Fare Concerns**

Shortly after implementing rear door boarding and free fares, the District received multiple complaints and concerns from Operators, Supervision and riders. Many more people were boarding the bus than before, and some would remain on the bus all day and through the night. Many Operators were afraid and reluctant to board some people because they did not have a mask and had visible signs of illness. Some of these passengers refused to exit the bus at the end of the line or at layover points, and at times became aggressive and violent with Operators and Supervisors. Law Enforcement was required to respond to protect employees. Concerns were also raised by Operators and riders that people were boarding the bus with large trash bags and other bulky belongings. These items were blocking seats and the bus aisle, creating a safety hazard. In some cases, passengers or Operators were attacked when requesting passengers whose belongs were blocking aisles to exit the bus.

Operators also struggled with being able to manage how many people boarded the bus from the rear doors, which led to overcrowding well beyond the CDC and County Health Official's limits for social and physical distancing. Consequently, this left many essential workers and others waiting at bus stops because buses filled up quickly and early along the route. Even with deploying additional "line management" shadow buses, the District could not keep up with the overloading of buses. Staff quickly realized a more permanent and manageable solution to this situation was needed and had to be expedited.

In the months that followed, several initiatives were proposed and examined as potential mitigations to control the spread of the virus on District buses. Safeguards implemented include the following:

- Operator compartment protective shield: On May 1, 2020, the process to design and fabricate a polycarbonate virus shield began. Its main purpose was to function as a virus barrier to provide a layer of protection for the operator as passengers pass through the front of the coach. After a thorough design, vetting, and testing process, the Safety Committee comprised of members from Amalgamated Transit Union Local 192 (ATU), Maintenance, and Safety approved a design and application of the virus

shield. Each approved design was put into production by the Central Maintenance Facility (CMF) team and kits were created and distributed to each Division where Senior Body Mechanics installed them. The Safety Committee met several times to design and approve a shield for each type of bus used in service during the pandemic. The virus shield was deemed an effective engineering control to mitigate the spread of the virus.

- On-board air quality: The Safety Committee conducted an airflow test to determine the most effective means of ventilating the coach with the least amount of impact to the occupants on board. The test was successful in determining the most effective procedure to maintain positive airflow. Notices were issued to inform District employees as well as members of the public of the positive air flow procedure on AC Transit buses.
- Daily cleaning and sanitizing: A thorough cleaning and sanitizing process is performed daily on each bus as it returns to the Division at the end of the workday.
- Face coverings and foam sanitizing hand dispensers: Installation of onboard face masks and foam sanitizing dispensers on all buses provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for all and help assure compliance and safety while riding District buses.
- On-board air filtration: Upgraded high-efficiency particulate air filters rated at MERV 13 - the CDC's recommended filter rating - were installed, enabling the heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) units to remove particulate matter to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

The above safeguards created a safer environment and mitigated the previous hazards associated with front door boarding. With the above-mentioned administrative and engineering controls in effect, front door boarding was a viable option to consider. On October 19, 2020 in collaboration with ATU Local 192, the District reinstated front door boarding. This was an appropriate action as effective controls to maintain a safe environment had been implemented.

## **COVID-19 Trends and Comparison**

Looking back at the COVID-19 cases reported in the Bay Area and at the District, the trend lines are almost identical. Attachment 1: COVID-19 Case Comparison illustrates the regional trend on the Bay Area COVID-19 Cases chart which shows a spike in cases during the summer months of June, July and August. Then another surge in cases starting in October and peaking at the end of December. Similarly, the AC Transit COVID-19 Cases chart shows the exact trend pattern representing total cases and Operator cases.

## **Operator Cases**

Provided below is summary of the Operator related cases reported to the District during the most recent surge:

- October 2020, a total of 3 Operators tested positive for COVID-19. Of the 3 cases, all were of unknown origin, meaning that they could not be directly traced to the workplace or to a close contact with someone who had tested positive for COVID-19.
- November 2020, a total of 6 Operators tested positive for COVID-19. Of the 6 cases, 4 were known close contacts with others who tested positive for COVID-19 and 2 were of unknown origin. As the holiday season approached, the nation as well as the local region experienced an increase in COVID-19 positive cases. The District followed this trend. The reason for the increase was holiday travel and

gatherings, both of which are known high risk activities.

- December 2020, a total of 25 Operators tested positive for COVID-19. Of the 25 cases, 6 were known close contacts with others who tested positive for COVID-19 and 19 were of unknown origin. The holiday season trend and positivity rate continued through December and into January.
- In the first half of January 2021, a total of 11 Operators tested positive for COVID-19. Of the 11 cases, 3 were known close contacts with others who tested positive for COVID-19 and 8 were of unknown origin.
- In the second half of January 2021, a total of 6 Operators tested positive for COVID-19. Of the 6 cases, 4 were known close contacts with others who tested positive for COVID-19 and 2 were of unknown origin.

### **Mask Mandate**

A recent Federal Mask Mandate has been issued to include provisions specific to transit operations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued the Order on January 29, 2021, requiring the public to wear face masks while on conveyances and in transportation hubs. The Order emphasizes that the virus that causes COVID-19 spreads easily via respiratory droplets and that wearing masks prevents infected individuals from spreading the disease.

The CDC's Order focuses on transit because it brings people in close contact with one another. Furthermore, the CDC believes that any state or territory without sufficient mask wearing requirements for transportation systems within its jurisdiction has not taken adequate measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. To that end, the CDC is exercising its statutory and regulatory authority to require wearing masks on transit.

Operators of public conveyances and transportation hubs must use best efforts to ensure that any person on the conveyance wears a mask when boarding, disembarking, and for the duration of travel or while entering the premises of a transportation hub. Depending on the circumstances, operators must take the following actions:

- Board/allow entry to only people who wear masks <<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/about-face-coverings.html>>.
- instruct people that wearing a mask on the conveyance/premises is a requirement of federal law and that not complying with the requirement is a violation of federal law.
- monitor the conveyance/premises for any person who is not wearing a mask and seek compliance from such a person.
- at the earliest safe opportunity, disembark/remove from premises any person who refuses to comply; and
- notify people of the federal requirement to ensure they aware of and comply. Examples of such notifications are messaging in apps, on websites or through email; posters in multiple languages with illustrations; and printing the information on tickets.

Trends observed at AC Transit mirror trends that have been observed in Alameda County communities. For example, according to a recent Berkeleyside article, UC Berkeley reported 184 COVID-19 cases in the last week of January, hitting its peak during the pandemic, as cases continue to spread primarily among undergraduate students. Daily cases had mostly been in the single digits leading up to Jan. 26, but they jumped to 42 cases among undergraduates alone on Friday, Jan. 29<sup>th</sup>. There were two other cases among graduate students and

staff, making a total of 44 cases that day. On Sunday, there were another 34 cases and 100% were undergraduates. The total number of cases in the last week amounts to about 25% of cases at the university since April, when Cal reported its first case. It has since had 731 cases of COVID-19 among its community members to date.

The increase in the number of positive COVID-19 test results mirror regional and national statistics as well. Those figures may have been influenced by extracurricular activities and close contacts with others who tested positive for COVID-19. However, in the wake of the “Holiday Season Surge”, the positivity rate has decreased substantially on all levels.

Based upon the information and data review, there are no indications of failure in the mitigation controls implemented to safeguard operators while boarding passengers through the front door of the coach. Furthermore, the recent issuance of the Federal Mask Mandate should have an impact on the safety of those using public transit. Therefore, staff does not recommend reverting to rear door boarding.

#### **ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES:**

Proceeding with front door boarding, with the many enhanced safety measures and Operator protections implemented, facilitates the District’s ability to manage bus passenger load capacity and screen people boarding for face cover compliance. Staff does not recommend reverting back to allowing anyone to board the bus from the rear doors, which creates an increased safety hazard for Operators, as was our experience and clearly voiced by our Operators and Supervision.

#### **ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS:**

No alternative analysis is provided.

#### **PRIOR RELEVANT BOARD ACTION/POLICIES:**

None

#### **ATTACHMENTS:**

1. COVID-19 Case Comparison

#### **Prepared by:**

Tabby Davenport, Safety Manager

#### **Approved/Reviewed by:**

William Tonis, Director of Project Controls & Systems Analysis

Ramakrishna Pochiraju, Executive Director of Planning & Engineering

Salvador Llamas, Chief Operating Officer

Chris Andrichak, Acting Chief Financial Officer

Jill A. Sprague, General Counsel