

ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA TRANSIT DISTRICT



STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: 2/24/2021

Staff Report No. 21-129

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

BRIEFING ITEM

RECOMMENDED ACTION(S):

Consider receiving a report and provide feedback on service planning, public engagement activities and revised timeline associated with the Service Recovery Plan.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE:

Goal - Financial Stability and Resiliency
Initiative - Service Quality

Since the onset of the pandemic and ensuing shelter-in-place order in March 2020, a multi-disciplinary team has been working on a plan for service recovery. Providing high-quality, reliable bus service with available resources is the District's core responsibility and this staff report outlines the proposed updated process for recovering service levels District-wide.

BUDGETARY/FISCAL IMPACT:

This item has no direct impact on the budget though some of the planning and public engagement activities will require spending funds already budgeted. Any plan alternatives will also include forecasts of the number of operators, buses, and funding required to provide the service. Ultimately any plans for service recovery will depend on the amount of revenue the District will receive from existing sources and new sources such as the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021 (CRRSA Act).

BACKGROUND/RATIONALE:

Existing Conditions

Following the beginning of the Shelter-in-Place order in March 2020, and subsequent reduction in service levels to manage operator workforce availability and ridership demand, District staff have been charting a path toward eventual service recovery. Many conditions and inputs used to make planning decisions in the past have proven difficult to pin down due to the nature of the pandemic. A combination of forecasts of workforce availability, available budget, fleet, economic growth, and travel/ridership patterns typically form the foundation of any service planning effort. For the past 11 months, there has been no clear picture of how these inputs will trend in the future, primarily due to restrictions implemented by local, state, and federal health experts in response to the pandemic. Until all limitations are lifted and activities resume, it will be very

challenging to forecast the “new normal” service needs of the communities we serve.

During a November 2020 Board Workshop, staff briefed the Board regarding the District’s financial outlook as well as the path forward for service recovery. The forecast for Fiscal Year 2021-22 showed a deficit that would require additional resources to achieve a balanced budget. The CRRSA Act has since been passed and staff has more information on revenues. A separate report will cover what the expectation is for the District’s budget for next fiscal year. Staff will then adjust service recovery planning efforts accordingly.

The November Workshop also included a timeline for a service recovery planning and outreach effort that anticipated the District holding a Public Hearing in May 2021, Board decision in August 2021, and implementation of a new network in December 2021. This timeline would require conducting nearly all public engagement virtually and building the new network solely around data collected about pandemic ridership patterns, which may not translate to the “new normal” that emerges as the pandemic subsides. In other words, staff is concerned that a network plan based on public input and data analysis done during the pandemic may create a network that does not meet the needs of the communities in the service area post-pandemic.

Service Plan Timeline Update

There is more information about new funding sources and the trajectory of the pandemic now that several months have passed. The District is currently operating at 75-percent of pre-pandemic service levels with a reduced budget and ridership at only 40 percent of pre-pandemic levels. With the additional COVID-19 relief package passed in December 2020, staff is optimistic that the current service levels can be maintained through the end of FY 2021-22. This amounts to critical additional months to perform more pertinent public engagement as well as to recruit bus operators and collect the latest data as the region emerges from shelter-in-place. Staff has prepared an updated timeline that calls for the implementation of a system-wide service recovery plan that will be vetted by the public and approved by the Board for implementation in Summer 2022.

Staff expects the service plan implemented in 2022 to have lower overall service levels than the pre-pandemic network; however, this will serve as an opportunity to build a sustainable foundation that can be built upon as more revenues and workforce become available in the future.

Like other transit agencies, The District is moving towards a COVID-19 health and economic recovery - a new normal. As we look beyond current reduced and limited capacity service levels, a community engagement effort is planned as an opportunity for input on the next phase of service recovery that will include virtual events and surveys followed by a formal public hearing process for additional input and decision-making by Spring 2022. Topics will include all aspects of bus service, such as: Transbay service, local (crosstown) service, rider priorities and equitable service delivery. This process will require patience, collaboration, and flexibility as we work to navigate a path forward.

Leading up to implementation of a major service plan in Summer 2022, staff is anticipating small service changes over the course of 2021 in March, June, August, and December to adjust with changing ridership trends, revenue streams, and expenses. Due to the significant financial ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, flexibility in these expected service changes is necessary to keep the District financially stable, with the goal of offering service that meets the riders’ needs. Some key initiatives that may be implemented

between now and Summer 2022 include:

- Adding some service back into Newark and Fremont to ensure service levels in Special District 2 are properly balanced with those in Special District 1.
- Adding back Supplementary Service as schools resume in-person instruction.
- Resolving any reliability issues and adjusting schedules as congestion and dwell times increase.
- Adjusting service levels based on overcrowding and other ridership patterns.
- Exploring an increase in Transbay service levels as offices, restaurants, and hospitality business re-open

Public Engagement

Staff is proposing the following community engagement activities:

Community Update Meetings by Ward (Spring 2021)

These meetings will serve as an opportunity to introduce and re-introduce Board Directors to the community, provide District updates (i.e., COVID impacts, response and path forward; Zero Emissions Bus program, Tempo launch, etc.), and allow time to hear from the community regarding bus service.

Community Engagement - Planning for the New Normal (Fall 2021)

This activity will occur before staff develops any new proposals and will happen over an 8-week period of outreach and communications that will include a survey, online engagement, virtual events, and outreach in the community. The purpose will be to seek input from our riders and community about their travel plans and needs (i.e., do you plan on returning to the workplace/school/other? Will you require public transportation?), and to learn what's important to riders when it comes to their bus ride. This outreach will help the District plan for equitable service and assist with difficult trade-off decisions that go beyond ridership data and trends.

Community Engagement - Public Hearing Process (Winter/Spring 2022)

This activity will be a 6-week public outreach and communications period seeking public response and comment on a formally proposed new service. The Service Planning team will then adjust the plan based on that feedback and bring a final proposal to the Board of Directors for approval.

Implementation of New Service Network (Summer 2022)

Implementation of the network will include new and adjusted routes, schedules and bus stops. It would be supported by ambassador/education outreach and communications to assist riders with service changes.

Timeline Factors

The proposed timeline for doing a comprehensive overhaul of the system is informed by five key factors and constraints:

- **In-person Worksites:** Many companies are putting off a return to in-person work for their employees and are considering keeping their workforce at least partially remote either permanently or for an extended period of time. Employment and commute trends will play a major role in how AC Transit approaches designing its future network and more time is needed to see how the region reopens.
- **Funding:** The funding climate is uncertain and any plan created using the information available now would not be best suited to the conditions in place at implementation.
- **Reliable Data:** Data about travel patterns and demand for transit service available today do not represent the picture of demand once shelter-in-place restrictions are lifted and the region begins to

transition to a new normal.

- **Engagement:** Meaningful public engagement takes time to ensure a diverse range of constituents and stakeholders have access to venues through which they can make their voices heard about how they move around the service area and how any service proposals will impact them.
- **Staffing and Training:** The District currently has 1,190 active operators as of mid-January. With 15-person classes and natural attrition of eight operators per month, the District can expect to net seven operators every month. At that rate (which is above the 3-4 operator/month rate pre-COVID), the District can expect to reach pre-COVID service levels of 1,350 operators in 23 months. A more reasonable ramp-up from current 75-percent service levels to 85-percent service levels would require 9-10 months. The proposed timeline would allow the District time to ramp up staffing to accommodate at least 85-percent of pre-COVID service levels.

ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES:

The longer planning and engagement timeline proposed in this staff report will allow the District adequate time to determine the appropriate revenues that should guide service planning levels. In addition, it will allow additional data and input to be collected that will give the District a firmer picture of how riders will be using the system post-pandemic. This additional time will allow for more engagement around the project, including gathering input about how people are getting around. This information will help guide the development of recommendations and give staff more time to vet any service proposals with the public, stakeholders, and the Board to ensure the network that gets implemented forms a solid foundation for years to come and is flexible enough to adapt to the new normal.

The primary disadvantage to this new proposed timeline is it leaves the current service levels and network in place longer. Although staff will have the ability to make small changes to the service between now and Summer 2022, wholesale changes to individual lines would likely be pushed into the Service Recovery Plan to ensure there is sufficient engagement and adherence to the Board's public hearing policy for major service changes.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS:

Staff evaluated a number of different timeline alternatives, including continuing with a December 2021 implementation date. However, this would severely limit meaningful public engagement opportunities and would require staff to guess future travel patterns and funding levels. With more time to develop a plan, staff is better able to forecast these inputs.

PRIOR RELEVANT BOARD ACTION/POLICIES:

SR 20-262 - New Network Overhaul Preview
SR 20-457 - November Board Workshop Presentation

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Key Milestones

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