

ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA TRANSIT DISTRICT



STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: 4/28/2021

Staff Report No. 21-213

TO: AC Transit Board of Directors
FROM: Michael A. Hursh, General Manager
SUBJECT: Pass-up Prevention Efforts

BRIEFING ITEM

RECOMMENDED ACTION(S):

Consider receiving a report on the District's pass-up prevention efforts during the pandemic and service recovery analysis. [Requested by Director Beckles - 1/13/21 and Director Peeples - 4/14/21]

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE:

Goal - Convenient and Reliable Service
Initiative - Service Quality

With the Shelter-in-place orders and capacity limits imposed in March 2020, AC Transit has worked to minimize pass-ups in the system. This report includes information about the scope of the issue, initiatives the District has implemented, and challenges with other approaches. A key sustainable approach to minimizing pass-ups will be to restore service to pre-pandemic levels and reduce social distance requirements.

It is critical to note that the Governor announced on April 6th that it would be possible to remove all COVID-19 restrictions (except the mask mandate) on June 15, 2021 so long as vaccine supply is sufficient that all residents 16 and older can be vaccinated and hospitalization rates remain stable and low.

BUDGETARY/FISCAL IMPACT:

This item has no direct budget impact but references the ongoing cost as a factor in the District's challenges with adding service to address pass-ups. Staff roughly estimates each additional bus added back to the network costs \$500,000 a year - a combination of labor costs, fuel, maintenance, etc. - to operate and any service added using one-time funds means a consistent revenue stream would need to be identified in the future to continue the service, such as the return of pre-pandemic levels of sales tax or farebox revenue.

BACKGROUND/RATIONALE:

Three key issues contributed to an increase in pass-ups beginning in March 2020 as shelter-in-place orders took effect and people continued to rely on AC Transit for essential trips to work, appointments and places of business:

- 1) 6-foot distancing requirements reduced on-board capacity to approximately one-quarter to one-third of pre-COVID capacity (i.e., 10 passengers on a 40-foot bus).

- 2) Fare collection was suspended for seven months, which reduced contact between passengers and operators and resulted in ridership increases.
- 3) Reductions in available funding and workforce due to the direct impacts of the pandemic required reducing service to 65% of pre-COVID levels (subsequent increases increased service to the current 75% level).

This has meant that while system-wide ridership initially dropped to 30% of pre-pandemic levels, many key lines saw capacity diminish even more. The increased demand for transit service caused by the free-fare period caused ridership to climb from March to October, leading to increased crowding.

To address the issue of passenger pass-ups, the District has taken four key actions:

- 1) Identified a way to measure over-crowding and eventually count pass-ups,
- 2) Added back some service in August 2020,
- 3) Resumed Fare Collection, and
- 4) Implemented a Standby Line Management Bus Program.

Overcrowding and Pass-up Data Collection

The physical distancing requirements put in place in March 2020 limited the typical 40-foot bus to 10 passengers (16 for a 60-foot articulated bus and 6 for a 30-foot bus). To ensure compliance with this mandate, the Transportation Department began a program where buses could switch to “drop-off only” service until they fell back below the mandated capacity restriction for their bus type. The Operations Control Center (OCC) began officially recording these incidents in June 2020 and there have been more than 13,000 of these “drop-off-only” events between then and March 2021. Specific details and analysis of those incidents can be found in Attachment 1.

In March 2021 Innovation and Technology (IT) Department implemented a new feature on the Computer Aided Dispatch-Automated Vehicle Locator (CAD-AVL) system Transit Control Head (TCH) in the driver compartment area where operators can report the number of rider pass-ups. Preliminary data from April 1 to April 8 reveals there were 401 incidents between those dates when an operator reported passing up passengers. The IT Department is currently developing a new feature on the District website and mobile app where riders can self-report pass-up they experienced. Only after successful testing and end-to-end data validation, this new feature will be available in the coming software release.

August 2020 Service Adjustments

In August 2020, staff used ridership data and overcrowding reports to identify lines that should have their service levels increased. Overall, the service increases brought the District up to 75-percent of pre-COVID levels. These service increases were focused on all trunk lines and most crosstown serving disadvantaged communities where essential trip ridership had remained strong. AC Transit has brought back more service than all its large bus operator peers in the bay area except for Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) which is 76% of pre-COVID levels vs AC Transit’s 75%.

Fare Collection

The District resumed fare collection on all non-Tempo lines on October 19, 2020, and fare collection began for the first time on Tempo several weeks later, on November 9. This resulted in an immediate 22,000-rider drop on the average weekday and reduced overcrowding pressure on the system. However, as the region begins to

reopen, staff expects ridership to begin climbing once again.

Standby Line Management Bus Program Overview

Each month, the Transportation Department requests a list of bus assignments that are routinely overcrowded. The Operations Control Center (OCC) also collects information each day from operators that call in for permission to express “Drop-off Only” after having reached capacity constraints. In addition, OCC has begun collecting data reported by operators on specific crowding levels inside their buses. After receiving guidance on crowding, OCC, in conjunction with Transportation Division staff, then assigns available operators and buses to “shadow” those blocks to pick up riders who could not be carried due to overcrowding on the primary bus.

As part of the program, the District’s Transportation Department has deployed between 70 and 450 hours per month of extra bus service as small pieces of work between April 2020 and March 2021, with the vast majority deployed on weekdays. This is service that doesn’t appear in the official timetables but is open and available to the public. For context, 450 weekday hours translates into approximately 21 service hours per day, or roughly equivalent to 3 extra full-time operator runs per weekday, making up a small percentage of the District’s overall service on a day-to-day basis.

This program is only possible because the District did not lay-off any employees which afforded an opportunity to have flexibility with scheduled and unscheduled service assignments. As more scheduled service is added, less line management operators will be available.

RECOVERY TARGETS

The District has developed service-level recovery forecasts for the next fiscal year (FY21/22) that would increase at the Operational Sign-ups in August of 2021 and March of 2022 pending resolution of the challenges discussed in the next section. Moving from the current 75% level to 83% would require 1,195 available Bus Operators (approximately 35 more than today). The service level could increase an additional two percent in the March 2022 sign-up if the District had the ability to expand to 1,217 Bus Operators. The initial service increases will focus on the return of Supplementary School Service for the fall. From there, staff hopes to incrementally restore some of the service eliminated due to the pandemic. Specific details of service recovery levels and challenges can be found in Attachment 2.

CHALLENGES

There are four key challenges facing the District with respect to further increasing service to reduce pass-ups: 1) Funding, 2) Service Commitments, 3) Workforce and Training Constraints, and 4) Physical Distancing Requirements.

Funding

The one-time funding received from the CARES Act allowed the District to balance its budget at 75% of pre-COVID service levels through June 2021. The funding allocated as part of the subsequent CRRSA Act will allow the District to restore some service in FY 2021-22. The recently passed American Rescue Plan Act will likely bring some additional one-time funding for the District but it is critical the agency has an additional long-term, reliable source of funding to sustain increased service levels. Staff does not want to plan for increased service levels only to have to reduce them after all the federal operating support runs out.

Service Commitments

AC Transit is operating Supplementary School Service as well as a free shuttle to the Coliseum Vaccination Site using resources that would otherwise be used for Line Management/Standby Bus Service or could be used to increase service on high-ridership lines. In total, these amount to approximately 25-40 operators each day depending on the level of operator unavailability due to absences.

Workforce and Training

The District has 1,183 active bus operators as of March 26, 2021. The number of operators needed for daily service delivery at current service levels is 1,165, with another 20-40 operators for Supplementary Service for the remainder of the school year.

The District recently resumed hiring and training with the goal of increasing service as funding becomes available; however, there is a six-month lead time before operators complete training and are available for regular service. In addition, the District's training program and subsequent availability of new bus operators is limited by Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regulations which limits class sizes to allow for six-foot physical distancing.

Physical Distancing

As discussed in SR 21-205, the District is currently limited to about 25% of pre-COVID seating capacity on buses due to the six-foot physical distancing requirement currently in place. Should public health officials provide guidance that three-foot distancing is possible without posing additional risk to operators or passengers, the capacity of the system could double, going a long way toward resolving pass-ups. The Board of Directors approved a 75-day waiting period from March 24 to implement a reduction to three-foot spacing on revenue vehicles. Should official guidance on physical distancing on transit change, staff may return to the board and the District's labor unions to follow that guidance.

Rough-Order-of-Magnitude Cost for pre-COVID Service Levels with Six-foot Physical Distancing

Staff estimates a need for additional 1,800 buses and 3,600 operators to provide pre-COVID service levels at six-foot physical distance. Staff estimates \$2.4 Billion for additional facilities based on the cost listed in the facility utilization plan for 600 bus capacity facility. The additional bus fleet procurement is estimated to cost \$1.8 Billion. Staff estimates it will cost the District approximately \$4.2 billion in one-time capital costs and an additional \$493 million annually to run the service required to handle pre-COVID demand with six-foot physical distancing limits in place.

ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES:

There are no advantages or disadvantages associated with this Briefing Report.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS:

The primary alternative to the District's course of action to date would have been to increase service beyond 75% of pre-pandemic levels to address pass-ups. The reasons for not doing so are discussed in depth in this report and come down to four key challenges: 1) Funding, 2) Service Commitments, 3) Workforce and Training Constraints, and 4) Physical Distancing Requirements. There was a point at the beginning of the pandemic when the District contemplated planning for the need to cut service to 70% of pre-pandemic levels permanently. Fortunately, the combination of one-time stimulus funds and the prospect of re-opening in the

region means 75% of pre-pandemic service levels with the opportunity to add back service in increments is a more likely future scenario.

PRIOR RELEVANT BOARD ACTION/POLICIES:

SR 20-223 - August 2020 Sign Up Summary

SR 21-129 - Service Recovery Plan Update

SR 21-205 - Vehicle Capacity Limits

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Pass-up Analysis Report
2. Service Recovery Analysis

Prepared by:

Michael Eshleman, Service Planning Manager

In Collaboration with:

Robert Reyes, Senior Transportation Supervisor

Howard Der, Senior Transportation Planner

David Berman, Transportation Planner

Approved/Reviewed by:

Ramakrishna Pochiraju, Executive Director of Planning and Engineering

Derik Calhoun, Director of Transportation

Robert del Rosario, Director of Service Development and Planning

Chris Andrichak, Chief Financial Officer

Claudia Burgos, Director of Legislative Affairs & Community Relations

Salvador Llamas, Chief Operating Officer

Ahsan Baig, Chief Information Officer

Beverly Greene, Executive Director of External Affairs, Marketing & Communications

Manjit K. Sooch, Director of Systems and Software Development

William Tonis, Director of Project Controls & Systems Analysis