

CITY OF SANTA ROSA
CITY COUNCIL

TO: MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
FROM: YURI KOSLEN, TRANSIT PLANNER
TRANSPORTATION AND PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT
SUBJECT: EXTENSION OF CITYBUS UNLIMITED RIDES FOR YOUTH
PILOT PROGRAM AND PARTICIPATION IN A COUNTYWIDE
PROGRAM

AGENDA ACTION: RESOLUTION

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended by the Transportation and Public Works Department that the Council, by resolution: 1) extend the Unlimited Rides –Youth (UR Free) pilot program for TK-12th grade youth through June 30, 2023; and 2) approve City participation in a countywide unlimited rides for youth program for a two-year period, beginning July 1, 2023, if awarded funding from the Sonoma County Climate Resiliency Fund.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Given the success of the Unlimited Rides–Youth (UR Free) pilot program for TK-12th grade youth since July 2021, the Transit Division seeks Council approval to extend the program through June 30, 2023, using a grant from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's Transportation Fund for Clean Air (TFCA). The Transit Division additionally seeks Council approval to participate in an application for funding from the Sonoma County Climate Resiliency Fund for a two-year pilot program to provide countywide fare-free transit for youth on CityBus, Sonoma County Transit, and Petaluma Transit beginning July 1, 2023.

BACKGROUND

Fare-free programs for youth have proliferated in recent years through partnerships among transit agencies, cities, and school districts, with positive outcomes including increased transit ridership, reduced household expenses for families, improved school attendance and increasing transit's profile within the community. Over the past several years the Council had expressed interest in establishing a fare-free transit program for youth 12th grade and under, including those still seeking certificate of completion from high school or youth not currently affiliated with the school system.

EXTENSION OF CITYBUS UNLIMITED RIDES FOR YOUTH PILOT PROGRAM PAGE 2 OF 5

In June 2021 Council approved the establishment of an Unlimited Pass Program that included a pilot program providing fare-free access to CityBus for TK-12th grade youth. The UR Free program began on July 1, 2021, with Council authorization through December 2022, as a component of fare policy strategies to support community economic recovery and transit system recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the UR Free program Santa Rosa CityBus currently provides fare-free access to SRJC students, Paratransit Registrants, Veterans, City employees and children 4 and under.

The UR Free Program has been funded by a grant from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's Transportation Fund for Clean Air, so there is no impact to the Transit Fund from lost fare revenue as a result of the program. Youth ridership is tracked by bus operators using a designated farebox key.

The Transit Division conducted a promotional campaign for the UR Free program through social media and ads on the exterior of the CityBus fleet as well as distributing information and promotional materials through schools, school districts and community partners. Transit staff have networked and collaborated extensively with school sites and the seven school districts serving Santa Rosa and continue to build on partnerships to promote the program and evaluate outcomes. Transit Division staff have also worked with the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) and Social Advocates for Youth (SAY) to ensure that youth 12th grade and under who are not currently affiliated with the school system have a mechanism for participating in the program.

PRIOR CITY COUNCIL REVIEW

On October 13, 2020, at a City Council Study Session on Santa Rosa CityBus' COVID-19 Recovery Strategy, Council directed staff to return with implementation options including unlimited access pass (fare-free) and discount programs.

On June 8, 2021, Council approved the establishment of an Unlimited Pass Program pilot to provided fare-free access to TK-12th grade youth starting July 1, 2021, though December 31, 2022.

On October 12, 2021, at a City Council Study Session on Santa Rosa CityBus' effort to coordinate Sonoma County transit operators, Council directed staff to continue work to integrate services with Sonoma County Transit and Petaluma Transit.

ANALYSIS

UR Free Program Performance

Based on ridership, data from a survey conducted in May 2021 and feedback from school sites and youth programs, the UR Free program has been a success in meeting its goals of promoting increased transit ridership, reducing car trips, and supporting the

EXTENSION OF CITYBUS UNLIMITED RIDES FOR YOUTH PILOT PROGRAM PAGE 3 OF 5

economic recovery of our community. The program also appears to be positively impacting school attendance.

Youth ridership on CityBus has significantly increased since the start of the UR Free program. Prior to the UR Free program, youth ridership accounted for about 10% of CityBus ridership with about 198,000 rides per year (pre-pandemic).

Following initiation of the UR Free Program in July 2021, youth ridership exceeded pre-pandemic levels within three months. During the first year of the program, youth took about 50,000 more trips on CityBus than before the program began, for a total of about 250,000 trips. Over the past six months, youth ridership has averaged over 150% of the pre-pandemic youth ridership level. Ridership has continued to increase in the second year of the UR Free Program, with August 2022 youth ridership hitting a new high of 28,400 rides.

Transit Division staff administered a survey of youth and families in May 2022 to evaluate the outcomes of the program. Outreach for the survey was conducted in person, online, and via email in coordination with schools, school districts, youth advocacy organizations, and Sonoma County Libraries. This outreach resulted in the completion of 747 surveys (159 surveys in Spanish and the remainder in English). Of the respondents, 73% were high school students and 20% were middle school students. Among the findings were the following:

- 26% of respondents never used the bus before it was free.
- 34% of respondents now use the bus daily (5 or more days a week), whereas 19% used CityBus daily before the program started.
- 73% of respondents stated that their school attendance has improved with free access to CityBus.
- 78% of respondents stated that their family makes fewer car trips now that youth can ride free on CityBus.

Beyond these outcomes, the program has also enabled several youth-oriented school and community programs to more easily build transit use into their activities. During Summer 2022 Doyle Adventure Camp participants as well as other City of Santa Rosa summer camps were easily able to take youth around the community on CityBus. The Santa Rosa City Schools also trained 60 staff and volunteers on how to take their students on CityBus, a program that included taking over 200 students on both City and County buses to a special event. Additionally, the Sonoma County Office of Education Transitional Program uses CityBus to train students on independent living skills.

Proposed Program Extension

Given the continued success of the program, the Transit Division seeks to extend UR Free for six additional months, from January 1, 2023 through June 30, 2023, using approximately 135,000 in TFCA grant funds. This program extension will enable CityBus to continue the program through the entire FY 22-23 academic year and position the program to potentially transition into a countywide program proposed for funding from the Sonoma County Climate Resiliency Fund, as discussed below.

Future Funding Opportunities

Working through the SCTA Transit Integration and Efficiency Study (TIES) process, CityBus, Sonoma County Transit, and Petaluma Transit have collaborated on a proposal to the Sonoma County Climate Resiliency Fund to fund countywide fare-free transit for youth for a two-year period beginning July 1, 2023. The Climate Resiliency Fund (CRF) was established by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors in 2021 using PG&E Settlement Funds to support projects addressing climate change. If funded, this program would allow CityBus to continue its UR Free program past June 2023 without a lapse, while merging UR Free into a countywide program.

Under this proposal, all youth within Sonoma County, including those still seeking a certificate of completion from high school and youth not currently affiliated with the school system, will be able to use transit services provided by the three bus operators at no cost. As part of this proposal an adult chaperone will be permitted to ride with youth at no charge for the first three weeks of each semester.

The multi-operator proposal seeks \$907,000 from the CRF to support the two-year program. CityBus has proposed \$150,000 from its Transportation Fund for Clean Air grant, in addition to marketing costs, as its share of match for CRF funds. The program is expected to fund nearly 1.3 million youth rides on the three bus systems over the two-year period.

The proposal to the CRF is envisioned as a “bridge” to Measure DD/Go Sonoma, the reauthorized local sales tax for transportation in Sonoma County. The proposed CRF project would provide free transit for youth in FY 24 and FY 25, with Go Sonoma potentially providing an ongoing funding source for the program beginning in FY 26. The Go Sonoma expenditure plan includes a set-aside of 2% of funds for fare-free transit programs.

FISCAL IMPACT

Extension of the UR Free Program will have no impact on the General Fund. The program has been funded and will continue to be funded by Transportation Fund for Clean Air (TFCA) grant funds during the proposed extension of the program through June 2023. Matching funds for the proposed application to the Sonoma County Climate Resiliency Fund will also be drawn from TFCA funds.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

This action is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because it is not a project which has a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment, pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15378.

BOARD/COMMISSION/COMMITTEE REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Not applicable.

NOTIFICATION

Not applicable.

ATTACHMENTS

- Resolution

CONTACT

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