

Agenda Item #12.5
For Council Meeting of: March 29, 2022

**CITY OF SANTA ROSA
CITY COUNCIL**

TO: MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
FROM: YURI KOSLEN, TRANSIT PLANNER
TRANSPORTATION AND PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT
SUBJECT: PROMOTIONAL FARE-FREE DAYS ON TRANSIT

AGENDA ACTION: RESOLUTION

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended by the Transportation and Public Works Department that the Council, by resolution, authorize the City Manager or designee to approve up to six fare-free service days per year on Santa Rosa CityBus to support community events and promote transit ridership recovery in coordination with county-wide transit operators.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recommended action enables the City Manager or designee to approve a limited number of fare-free service days each year to allow Santa Rosa CityBus to participate in fare-free promotional events in coordination with other transit operators in Sonoma County and the region, as well as to support significant community events with fare-free transit access. On an annual basis, Transit Division staff will propose up to six fare-free service days based on identification of key community events, and coordination with partner transit operators, for approval by the City Manager. It is proposed that the first multi-operator fare-free day occur on April 23, 2022 in observation of Earth Day.

BACKGROUND

Transit Division staff have identified an opportunity to elevate CityBus' community profile, support community initiatives and events, promote transit ridership recovery from the pandemic, and implement an integrated countywide transit initiative by coordinating fare-free service days with partner transit operators. Supporting and partnering with community celebrations and events by providing fare-free service offers CityBus an opportunity to elevate the profile of public transit as an affordable, sustainable public service, as well as improve access to events for Santa Rosa residents and visitors. Fare-free service days have been used in the past to support transit access during events that were expected to cause significant traffic impacts and disruptions, such as those experienced during the IRONMAN events of 2017 and 2018.

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As part of the recent efforts to improve integration of the local bus systems in Sonoma County (Santa Rosa CityBus, Sonoma County Transit, and Petaluma Transit) that began with the 2019 *Transit Integration and Efficiency Study* (TIES), county transit operators are planning to coordinate future fare-free service promotions. CityBus's participation in this countywide coordination effort is an example of recent multi-operator coordination to improve the rider experience and promote ridership growth.

The COVID pandemic continues to impact recovery of transit services and ridership. Fare-free days have historically offered an opportunity for the general public to try using transit. With this in mind, fare-free days can be offered to promote recovery of transit ridership at a low cost to the Transit Division in terms of lost fare revenue.

PRIOR CITY COUNCIL REVIEW

At the July 18, 2017 meeting, Council approved fare-free service on Saturday, July 29, 2017, given anticipated service disruptions due to the IRONMAN Santa Rosa event, and to promote use of transit as a means to reduce traffic congestion associated with the event.

At the May 8, 2018 meeting, Council approved fare-free service on Saturday, May 12, 2018 in anticipation of service disruptions due to the IRONMAN Santa Rosa event, and to promote use of transit as a means to reduce traffic congestion associated with the event.

On October 12, 2021 Transit Division staff provided a study session on efforts to improve integration of the local bus systems in Sonoma County (Santa Rosa CityBus, Sonoma County Transit, and Petaluma Transit) under the auspices of the TIES study in order to improve the customer experience, promote ridership growth, and support recovery from the pandemic.

ANALYSIS

Fare-free days have the potential to demonstrate the importance of transit and increase transit ridership at a minimal cost in terms of lost revenue. Fare-free service days also provide a means for the City to provide tangible support for events promoting mode-shifting and sustainable transportation, as well as support other citywide events that would benefit from enhanced access to public transit.

The proposed action would enable the City Manager to approve up to six fare-free days on Santa Rosa CityBus annually to be implemented in coordination with Sonoma County transit operators in order to provide a multi-operator approach to implementing transit ridership promotions and supporting major community events. Santa Rosa would maintain the option to implement fare-free service on CityBus alone if an event or promotion was limited in scope to the City of Santa Rosa; however, a recommendation of this nature would be made following consultation and coordination with the other transit operators. This proposal would not limit the City's ability to provide additional

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fare-free service days in the case of emergencies or other events warranting fare-free transit service; however, additional fare-free days would be subject to additional Council approval or emergency order.

The Transit Division proposes that Earth Day be the basis for the first multi-operator fare-free day since two significant community events drawing participation from throughout the county are planned around that day and fare-free transit would promote a lower-carbon transportation alternative in keeping with the message of the day. Since both Santa Rosa's Annual Earth Day Festival and Petaluma's Butter and Egg Days celebration are planned for April 23, 2022, the transit operators will seek to implement the first multi-operator fare-free transit day in Sonoma County on that day.

Examples of potential future fare-free transit promotions could include the following, subject to further coordination among the county's transit agencies:

- Rosa Parks Day, commemorating the Civil Rights Movement leader
- Election Day, enabling residents to have a free ride to voting locations
- New Year's Eve, providing a safe free ride
- Bike to Work Day, highlighting bikes on buses and multi-modal commuting options
- Try Transit Day
- Spare the Air Days

Depending on the mix of weekdays, Saturdays, or Sundays when fare-free service is offered and the number of fare-free days ultimately offered each year, the annual cost in lost revenue would range between \$4,000-\$6,000 at current ridership levels.

The Transit Division proposes to forego this revenue as a marketing expense in order to elevate CityBus' community profile, support community initiatives, promote transit ridership recovery from the pandemic, and implement integrated countywide transit promotions.

FISCAL IMPACT

Approval of this action does not have a fiscal impact on the General Fund. The Transit Division estimates that six days of fare-free service per year will result in a total loss of \$4,000-\$6,000 in fare revenue based on the average revenue currently collected. When ridership increases to pre-pandemic levels, annual lost revenue from fare-free days would increase to \$7,000-\$10,000. The Transit Division would consider this lost revenue to be equivalent to a marketing expense given the effectiveness of free-fare days in raising the profile of public transit and encouraging members of the public to try transit.

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

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the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment, pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15378. Therefore, no environmental review is required.

BOARD/COMMISSION/COMMITTEE REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Not applicable

NOTIFICATION

Not applicable

ATTACHMENTS

- Resolution

CONTACT

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