

CITY OF SANTA ROSA
CITY COUNCIL

TO: MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
FROM: RACHEL EDE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR - TRANSIT
TRANSPORTATION AND PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT
SUBJECT: SONOMA COUNTY TRANSIT INTEGRATION AND EFFICIENCY
STUDY/FUTURE OF TRANSIT PROCESS

AGENDA ACTION: STUDY SESSION

RECOMMENDATION

This item is provided for Council's information only and no action will be requested.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this study session, Transit Division staff will provide an overview of recent efforts to improve integration of the local bus systems in Sonoma County (Santa Rosa CityBus, Sonoma County Transit, and Petaluma Transit) in order to improve the customer experience, promote ridership growth, and support recovery from the pandemic. Staff will discuss accomplishments to date as well as planned upcoming integration activities to be conducted under the auspices of the Sonoma County Transportation Authority's Future of Transit Ad Hoc Committee in coordination with regional transit integration efforts led by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC).

BACKGROUND

Sonoma County's transit operators have a long history of collaboration and meet regularly to share information and coordinate activities. However, over the past several years there has been a growing recognition at both the local and regional levels that additional measures are needed to create a more seamless and efficient multi-operator transit network to improve the rider experience, support service quality, and promote ridership growth. MTC's Transit Sustainability Project (2012) highlighted the opportunity for increased multi-operator coordination in Sonoma County, with additional opportunities for bus-rail coordination identified in 2016's SMART Integration Plan.

In 2018, MTC and the City of Santa Rosa jointly funded a study led by the Sonoma County Transportation Authority (SCTA) with participation by Santa Rosa CityBus, Sonoma County Transit, and Petaluma Transit to identify specific recommendations for achieving higher levels of integration among the three local bus systems serving

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Sonoma County. The study was limited to the local bus operators as a starting point, with a goal of extending integration activities to the regional transit operators serving Sonoma County (SMART and Golden Gate Transit) in the future. The Sonoma County Transit Integration and Efficiency Study (TIES) was completed in 2019 and built on long-standing coordination among the operators to set forth a wide range of recommendations for additional actions in several functional areas.

The three transit operators had begun to move forward with implementing several of the TIES recommendations when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived and dramatically reshaped the financial and operating realities for public transit agencies nationwide. While the impacts of the pandemic on public transit ridership, operations, and finances have been significant, the pandemic has also created an opportunity to re-evaluate how services are planned and delivered as agencies work to recover from the pandemic. The urgency of restoring a high-quality transit network to win back riders and position public transit for success in the future has accelerated work on transit integration at both the local and regional levels.

PRIOR CITY COUNCIL REVIEW

On October 22, 2019, staff provided a Staff Briefing on the Sonoma County Transit Integration and Efficiency Study.

ANALYSIS

In the past year and a half, the importance of making strides in the area of transit integration has come to the forefront in Sonoma County and the Bay Area as a result of the significant financial and operational impacts on public transit systems from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In May 2020, MTC established the Blue Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force to advise the Commission on distribution of federal emergency relief for transit agencies and to develop a Transit Transformation Action Plan to identify actions to deliver a more connected, integrated, and customer-focused transit network in the Bay Area. The recently-completed action plan identifies recommendations in the areas of fare integration, customer information, transit priority on roadways, bus and rail network management changes, service planning, and accessibility. Local transit agency staff have participated actively in the Blue Ribbon Task Force process and will continue to do so as MTC works to implement Task Force recommendations.

At the local level, the Sonoma County Transportation Authority established a Future of Transit Ad Hoc Committee in October 2020 to revisit and prioritize TIES recommendations given changing conditions resulting from the pandemic and to coordinate efforts with the MTC Blue Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force process. The Ad Hoc is chaired by Mayor Rogers (representing Santa Rosa), with membership including Petaluma City Council Member D'Lynda Fischer, Sonoma County Supervisor

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Susan Gorin, Sebastopol Vice Mayor Sarah Gurney, and Sonoma County Supervisor David Rabbitt. The Ad Hoc meets monthly with Sonoma County transit managers and staff.

Working with staff from the three local transit systems, the Ad Hoc developed the following goals for the Future of Transit process:

1. Increase transit ridership as a mechanism to reduce GHG emissions, improve access to low-cost transportation, and reduce congestion.
2. Simplify and enhance the transit customer experience, while maximizing resources available to transit and improving operational efficiency and service quality (reliability, frequency, and span of service).
3. Meet these outcomes through a “unified brand” for local bus transit in Sonoma County.

Unified transit branding can take many forms, but typically the agencies involved remain administratively separate and integrate or consolidate key functional areas to present a uniform brand and user experience for the rider. These actions can simplify inter-jurisdictional travel, reduce rider confusion, make transit more user-friendly, and create opportunities for increased service quality. Areas that can be integrated to support unified branding include service planning; public information and marketing; fare policy, media, and payment; customer service; technology; and paratransit service delivery.

To advance the Ad Hoc’s goals, transit agency and SCTA staff developed three phases of activities building integration in these functional areas to provide the foundation for a future unified brand. Several Phase 1 activities have been completed and the transit operators are now moving into implementation of Phase 2 activities, with supporting funding expected from MTC this fall/winter. During the study session, staff will review progress to date as well as seek Council feedback on planned upcoming integration activities and the unified brand concept as whole. Staff will also discuss how efforts in Sonoma County relate to MTC’s Transit Transformation Action Plan and can be supported by MTC in the future.

FISCAL IMPACT

This study session does not have a fiscal impact on the General Fund or the Transit Enterprise.

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

None.

CONTACT

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