

CITY OF SANTA ROSA
CITY COUNCIL

TO: MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
FROM: RACHEL EDE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR
TRANSPORTATION AND PUBLIC WORKS
SUBJECT: SANTA ROSA CITYBUS COVID-19 RESPONSE AND
RECOVERY STRATEGY (Continued from August 18, 2020,
Regular Meeting)

AGENDA ACTION: STUDY SESSION

RECOMMENDATION

This item is provided for Council's information only and no action will be taken except for possible direction to staff.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this study session, Transit Division staff will review the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Santa Rosa CityBus and Santa Rosa Paratransit and seek Council feedback on the Transit Division's ongoing response to the pandemic, the proposed strategy for financial and operational recovery of the transit system, and priorities for supporting the community's mobility needs and economic recovery.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all facets of funding, planning, and operating public transit services. Over the past five months the priorities and imperatives governing delivery of public transit services have undergone a dramatic shift, with ridership decreasing significantly as a result of shelter-in-place orders, and riders' trip purposes and patterns changing. Operating funds for public transit have been severely impacted by reductions in sales tax and fare revenues. At the same time, many transit riders are facing unprecedented economic challenges as a result of the pandemic.

The pandemic is forcing transit operators and funding agencies to rethink how service is delivered, prioritized, funded, and coordinated, and to identify actions to ensure the safety of riders and employees as well as reorient transit services to support essential travel and the economic recovery of our communities.

This study session will focus on the Santa Rosa CityBus and Santa Rosa Paratransit COVID-19 response and recovery strategy. Staff anticipates that this strategy will continue to evolve in response to the pandemic, impacts to transit operating revenues, and the changing needs and priorities of riders and the larger Santa Rosa community. Despite the potential for several future iterations of the strategy, the goals will remain the same: to lay a solid foundation for recovery of the transit system, to support recovery of our community's most vulnerable residents by offering affordable transportation options, and to restore an effective and financially sustainable service.

PRIOR CITY COUNCIL REVIEW

Not applicable.

ANALYSIS

Current Operational Overview

Operational Status and Ridership

Both Santa Rosa CityBus and Santa Rosa Paratransit continue to operate fare-free and with reduced service levels and ridership. Service levels and ridership reached their lowest point during the most restrictive period of shelter-in-place orders in April and May. Fare-free service continues in keeping with Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations related to rear-door boarding and as a physical distancing measure. Ridership has begun to recover, requiring additional service and vehicle capacity to be added to maintain physical distancing inside vehicles. CityBus is operating at approximately 32% of its pre-pandemic weekday ridership and 58% of its pre-pandemic service hours. Santa Rosa Paratransit has recovered to about 40% of its pre-pandemic ridership.

As shown in the table below and attached map, three CityBus routes are not currently operating, and seven are operating at reduced frequency (e.g., 60-minute weekday service instead of 30-minute frequency). In April, when CityBus transitioned to its lowest service levels during the pandemic to date (including suspension of Route 7 and Route 19, two very low ridership routes), a new "call-ahead" demand responsive service was implemented to enable any riders who were unable to make their essential trips due to reduction in service hours and coverage to schedule a trip with the City's paratransit contractor, MV Transportation. While most riders using this service have transitioned back to regular fixed routes as service has been restored, the call-ahead service continues to be available for any riders needing to make trips that are currently not possible to make on CityBus due to geographic or temporal coverage gaps.

While most of the city has transit service coverage, and the frequencies shown in the table below are sufficient to meet the current level of ridership demand, there is no question that the current service levels present hardships or limit travel for many riders.

Pre-COVID and Current CityBus Route Weekday Frequencies

#	Route	Pre-COVID	Current	#	Route	Pre-COVID	Current
1	Mendocino Ave.	15	15	8	Bennett Valley	30	60
2/2B	Sebastopol Road	30/15	30/15	9	West Ninth St.	30	60
3	Santa Rosa Ave.	30	60	10	Coddington	30	60
4	Rincon Valley	60	60	12	Roseland	30	60
4B	Rincon Valley	60	- *	15	Stony Point Road	60	60
5	Petaluma Hill Rd.	30	60	16	Oakmont Circ.	60	60
6	Fulton Road	30	75	18	East Circulator	60	60
7	Montgomery Vlg.	60	- **	19	North Circulator	75	- **

* Route 4 covers same alignment in opposite direction.

** Free call-ahead service available for areas of lost coverage.

Health and Safety Practices

The Transit Division has been proactive in implementing a wide range of health and safety practices in response to COVID-19, in keeping with CDC, Cal/OSHA, California Public Health Department, and Sonoma County Public Health Officer guidance. Current practices include:

- Provision of comprehensive personal protective equipment (PPE) for all employees
- Nightly disinfecting of all transit vehicles, as well as wipe downs of all high-touch surfaces in vehicles multiple times each service day
- Rear-door boarding and fare suspension to eliminate close contact at the farebox and promote physical distancing onboard vehicles
- Face covering requirement for both employees and riders (face coverings are available for riders who cannot produce one)
- Added frequency and standby vehicles on busy routes to maintain adequate space inside vehicles for physical distancing
- Daily employee symptom checks and temperature screening
- Information for employees and riders on preventing the spread and CityBus safety practices

The City’s paratransit contractor, MV Transportation, has implemented health and safety practices for its employees and riders that mirror those on the fixed-route system as well as measures more specific to paratransit, such as limiting riders to 1-2 per vehicle.

Ridership Outlook

In mid-July the Transit Division conducted an online survey of riders and residents in

order to better understand how the pandemic has affected travel habits, the potential for riders to return to the transit system, and high-level priorities for service restoration. In total 357 responses were received, of which 239 were from existing CityBus riders. While this response is not as robust as staff had hoped for, some themes emerged from the responses:

- Of frequent users of the CityBus system (riding at least 3 times/week) prior to the pandemic, 62% reported that they are currently riding less. For these riders, the primary factor driving reduced use of transit was that the current schedules do not meet their needs. Less frequent users cited safety as the primary reason for riding less often.
- When asked if they planned to return to riding transit when schools and businesses reopen, 84% of frequent riders stated they would return to riding at their previous level. Of less frequent riders, 62% stated they would return to riding at their previous level, while 24% stated they would ride more often than in the past.
- A marked difference was seen in responses related to use of private automobiles. The most frequent riders stated that they did not rely on personal automobiles prior to the pandemic, but 50% of these riders stated that they are now using personal automobiles to help them complete trips.
- When asked to rank their priorities as CityBus restores service, riders ranked service coverage and frequency ahead of span of service and safety measures such as contactless fare payment.

In addition to the rider/resident survey, the Transit Division reached out to representatives of 25 organizations representing or serving large numbers of transit riders. Eleven responses were received. All respondents indicated that they had made major modifications to their programs or services in response to COVID-19. Most stated that their clientele mostly use transit but have other options when necessary, while a few respondents stated that their clients are entirely reliant on public transit. More than half of the respondents indicated that this pattern of ridership has continued during the pandemic, but over a quarter of respondents stated that their clients are not using transit at all during the pandemic. Finally, in response to a question about the improvements needed to address any transportation challenges faced by their clients, most indicated that a return to regular transit schedules is needed.

Given the limited number of responses, care should be taken in drawing conclusions from these responses without additional public engagement work. However, overall the responses point to a strong need for continued restoration of transit services to support riders who look to CityBus as their primary mode of travel, combined with maintaining the highest level of health and safety practices.

Regional Context: Transit Response and Recovery Initiatives

Transit Division staff are currently involved in or supporting several local and regional initiatives and working groups coordinating Bay Area transit operators' response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most notably MTC's Blue Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force.

The Blue Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force is made up of 30 members including elected officials, MTC Commissioners, transit agency general managers, labor representatives, and advocates from around the Bay Area. The Task Force's initial work related to identifying a method for distributing \$1.3 billion in federal CARES Act transit emergency relief funds allocated to the Bay Area. The Task Force continues work on a Bay Area Regional Transit Health and Safety Plan intended to identify a standard set of COVID-19 health and safety practices to be implemented by all Bay Area transit operators. Staff anticipates that implementation of the plan will include a public-facing data dashboard providing information on how agencies are working to maintain a safe environment in public transit vehicles and facilities. Staff expects to bring a related action item to Council in coming weeks.

In addition, the Blue Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force is charged with developing and submitting a Bay Area Public Transit Transformation Action Plan to the MTC Commission by mid-2021. The Transformation Action Plan will make recommendations for restructuring transit service delivery in the Bay Area with the goal of achieving a more connected, efficient, and more user-focused mobility network. Recommendations may be made related to regional transit integration activities, inter-operator connectivity priorities, funding priorities, and governance. Transit Division staff are participating in a multi-operator working group in conjunction with this effort.

Finally, Transit Division staff are working closely with partner transit operators to coordinate response to the pandemic. CityBus, Sonoma County Transit, and Petaluma Transit managers meet every two weeks to discuss coordination activities in addition to participating in regular coordination meetings convened by SCTA and the Bay Area's small transit operators group.

COVID-19 Recovery Strategy

Due to ongoing uncertainties related to the course of the pandemic and impacts on operating funding, staff expects the transit systems recovery and service restoration strategy to be iterative, with updates to reflect changing conditions as needed.

Near-term Financial Outlook

As discussed with the Council at the May 2020 budget study session, transit operating revenues have been significantly impacted due to reduced sales tax and transit fare revenue resulting from the pandemic. Due to a \$2.5 million allocation of transit funding relief from the federal CARES Act (distributed according to a regional methodology developed by MTC), CityBus was able to complete FY 19-20 with capital and operating reserves intact. The Transit Division's operating reserve stands at \$2.25 million (15% of the operating budget).

Entering FY 20-21, the Transit Division projected a 25% decrease in total operating revenues for FY 20-21, equating to a \$4.2 million deficit. In July, MTC allocated the

remaining CARES Act funds to Bay Area transit operators, including an additional \$1.6 million to CityBus, reducing the projected FY 20-21 deficit to \$2.6 million. The Transit Division is developing a financial strategy for addressing this deficit as well as projected deficits in future years given an anticipated multi-year recovery period for sales tax and fare revenues.

Actions already put in place, including a hiring freeze, as well as reduced operating costs resulting from lower service levels (e.g., related to fuel, maintenance, and overtime) are already helping to narrow the gap. That said, based on the information available at present, the Transit Division expects that service restoration in FY 20-21 will need to be limited to 65-75% of pre-pandemic service hours to maintain a financially sustainable operation with sufficient reserves to weather additional downturns in revenue, as well as address deficits in future years in which federal emergency relief (such as CARES Act revenues) may not be available. However, if revenues recover more quickly than projected, or new revenues become available, staff will revise this ceiling of revenue hours accordingly.

Service Restoration Planning

Transit Division proposes the following service restoration framework to guide service planning for COVID-19 recovery:

- **Identify and build towards a sustainable ceiling of revenue hours.** As noted above, based on current funding projections we expect to limit service restoration to 65-75% of pre-pandemic fixed-route revenue hours in FY 20-21.
- **Prioritize service restoration taking into account the following factors:**
 - **Safety**, ensuring the transit system continues to operate within PHO, CPHD, CDC and City safety guidelines for the protection of riders and staff. This includes ensuring adequate space for physical distancing inside buses by continually monitoring the system and adding frequency and capacity to address overcrowding to the maximum extent possible.
 - **City Council goals**, including support of the City's vision for significantly increased residential density in downtown Santa Rosa, affordable housing development, and climate action.
 - **Key milestones for phasing service restoration** including return to on-site learning at middle and high schools and the Santa Rosa Junior College as well as changes in the current public health order that will affect demand for transit services.
 - **Ridership patterns**, including shifts in travel needs and behavior resulting from the pandemic. This factor may also mean that frequency is deployed in a more targeted manner to match ridership peaks on a route, rather than maintaining consistent frequency for the entire service day.
 - **Public input** to be solicited through an ongoing public engagement process.

- **Equity lens**, to ensure that the travel needs of our most vulnerable residents including those most greatly affected by the pandemic are prioritized and met to the greatest extent possible.
- **Consider new service models for areas where fixed-route service has performed significantly below productivity standards.** Given necessary reductions in service levels due to the pandemic, CityBus will evaluate opportunities to provide service coverage using new mobility options such as demand-responsive services in lieu of fixed-route service in some areas of the city.
- **Coordinate closely with partner transit operators serving Santa Rosa** on service restoration planning, COVID-19 and other service policies, and potential integration areas identified in the *Sonoma County Transit Integration and Efficiency Study*.

A timeline of service restoration to date and planned service restoration activities over the next six months is presented below.

Timeline for Service Restoration Planning and Implementation

Timeframe	Action	Notes	
June 1, 2020	Initial service restoration; maintained call-ahead service to fill gaps in route network	Saturday-level service; 49% of pre-pandemic service hours	Ongoing monitoring of physical distancing
August 3, 2020	Second service restoration; restored Route 2 and 15-minute frequency on Mendocino Ave. and Sebastopol Rd.	Weekday frequencies on Route 1 and 2/2B restored to maintain physical distancing; 58% of pre-pandemic service hours	
Fall 2020	Service Restoration Plan	Identify Council and public priorities	
Fall-Winter 2020	Third phase of service restoration	Per Service Restoration Plan; anticipate no more than 65-75% of pre-pandemic service hours	
	<i>Potential milestone:</i> Return to on-site learning at Santa Rosa middle/high schools	Additional school service likely needed even for partial return	
	<i>Potential milestone:</i> Return to on-site learning at Santa Rosa Junior College	May require additional frequency, depending on level of service already implemented	

Future Consideration of Fare Policy

While not a focus of this study session, fare policy will play an integral role in CityBus' COVID-19 recovery strategy. Staff will be returning to Council in the next few weeks with fare policy proposals reflecting the operational realities of the COVID-19 pandemic and responding to the significant economic impacts many Santa Rosa residents are experiencing due to the pandemic. These proposals will address fare-free operations as a physical distancing measure and will include a suite of fare-free, discounted, and

unlimited access programs that can reduce the cost of riding transit once fares are restored.

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 Guideline section 15378.

BOARD/COMMISSION/COMMITTEE REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Not applicable.

NOTIFICATION

Not applicable.

ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment 1: Current COVID-19 Service Frequency Map

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