Agenda Item #15.1
For Council Meeting of: May 13, 2025

CITY OF SANTA ROSA
CITY COUNCIL

TO: MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
FROM: RACHEL EDE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR – TRANSIT DIVISION
TRANSPORTATION AND PUBLIC WORKS
SUBJECT: EXTENSION OF SANTA ROSA CITYBUS UNLIMITED RIDES FOR YOUTH PROGRAM

AGENDA ACTION: RESOLUTION

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended by the Transportation and Public Works Department that the Council, by resolution, extend the Santa Rosa CityBus Unlimited Rides for Youth (UR Free) program for TK-12th grade youth through June 30, 2030, subject to continued funding availability.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Given the continued success of the Unlimited Rides for Youth (UR Free) program for TK-12th grade youth, the Transit Division seeks Council approval to extend the program through June 30, 2030, subject to continued funding availability. The Transit Division currently plans to fund this extension using local sales tax revenue from Go Sonoma and state Low Carbon Transit Operations Program (LCTOP) grant funds.

BACKGROUND

In July 2021 the City initiated a pilot fare-free program for TK-12th grade youth, enabling all children and youth to ride free on Santa Rosa CityBus. The program was initially funded for an 18-month pilot period, though December 2022, using the grant funds from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's Transportation Fund for Clean Air (TFCA). Following the initiation of the program youth ridership grew to exceed pre-pandemic levels within three months. During the first year of the program youth took 50,000 more trips on CityBus than before the program began, and youth ridership grew to consistently exceed 150% of the pre-pandemic ridership level.

Transit Division staff administered a survey of high school and middle school youth and families in May 2022 to evaluate the outcomes of the program. Among the findings were the following:

- 26% of respondents never used the bus before it was free.

- 34% of respondents now used 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 improved with free access to CityBus.
- 78% of respondents stated that their family made fewer car trips now that youth could ride free on CityBus.

Given the success of the program, staff returned to Council in October 2022 to seek an initial extension of the pilot program through June 2023, and permission to extend the program to June 2025 pending approval of an application to the Sonoma County Climate Resilience Fund to fund countywide fare-free transit for youth on local bus services. This project was funded by the County of Sonoma and Sonoma County Transit and Petaluma Transit joined CityBus in offering free fares for youth. Beginning in April 2024 SMART also began offering free fares for youth on the commuter rail system.

With the Sonoma County Climate Resilience Fund support ending by June 2025, Transit Division staff have developed a funding program to support extension of the program for up to five years.

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 provide free access to TK-12th grade youth starting July 1, 2021, though December 31, 2022.

On October 25, 2022, Council approved an initial extension of the pilot program through June 2023, and authorized extension of the program through June 2025 should funding be awarded from the Sonoma County Climate Resilience Fund for a countywide fare-free program for youth.

ANALYSIS

The UR Free program continues to be very successful in increasing youth ridership and providing additional benefits to the community, including improved youth access to school and opportunities in the community and reduced household transportation expenses. Ridership has continued to grow during the two years of the County-funded program with youth ridership on CityBus alone averaging 36,000 rides per month. Total youth ridership on Santa Rosa CityBus has increased from 198,000 in FY19 to 427,000 in FY24.

The 2022 application to the Sonoma County Climate Resilience Fund was intended to provide a bridge to potential future funding of the program beginning in FY26 using funds from Go Sonoma, Sonoma County's reauthorized sales tax increment for

transportation. The Go Sonoma expenditure plan includes a set-aside of 2% of funds that must be applied towards fare-free transit programs. This 2% set-aside is distributed among Sonoma County Transit, Petaluma Transit, and Santa Rosa CityBus based on population. CityBus expects an allocation of approximately $220,000 for fare-free transit in FY26.

The funding from Go Sonoma is not sufficient to fully cover the UR Free program cost (i.e., reimbursement of the lost fare revenue attributable to free youth trips), which is estimated at $525,000 for FY26. With the TFCA funding CityBus initially relied on to support the UR Free Program transitioning to a competitive versus formula program in FY25, Transit staff sought to identify a stable multi-year source of funds to complement GoSonoma funds. At this time staff plan to draw funds from the City's annual state Low Carbon Transit Operations Program (LCTOP) allocation to complete the funding program for the proposed UR Free extension. LCTOP is unique among state transit funding programs in that free-fare or fare discount programs are eligible activities. It is estimated that the City will receive $405,685 in LCTOP funding for use in FY26.

The Transit Division expects that both Go Sonoma and LCTOP funds will continue to be available to support the UR Free Program through FY30. Should funding availability change or the Council seek to fund additional or different fare-free programs, staff will return to the Council for further direction. Staff will program the specific funds for the proposed UR Free Program extension through separate Council actions.

FISCAL IMPACT

Approval of this action does not have a fiscal impact on the General Fund. The UR Free Program will continue to be fully funded using state and local transit grants, including funding from Santa Rosa CityBus' Go Sonoma allocation for fare-free transit and state LCTOP funding distributed to the City through a combination of population-based and locally-negotiated formulas.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15378, the proposed action is not a "project" subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because it does not have a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment. In the alternative, the proposed action is exempt from CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3) because it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the project may have a significant effect on the environment.

BOARD/COMMISSION/COMMITTEE REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Not applicable.

NOTIFICATION

Not applicable.

ATTACHMENTS

- Resolution

PRESENTER

Rachel Ede, Deputy Director - Transit