



Transit Watch: Public Transit in Crisis



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MST's mission: Catching the bus, but not catching coronavirus

By Lisa Crawford Watson

By mid-March, when it was clear that COVID had come to Monterey County, anyone whose work was not considered “essential,” was sent home with the order to shelter in place. Campuses closed, conferences were canceled, events were eliminated, shops were shuttered, and tourists stayed home. The resulting dearth of business warranted a mass furlough throughout the hospitality industry, sending thousands of employees home, where others who kept their jobs were being asked to perform their work.

With so many people keeping their distance or remaining at home, the need for mass transportation became almost an oxymoron in an era when folks can't do anything en masse and fewer people need a ride.

“Our numbers are way down, as more than half our pre-COVID ridership is gone,” said Carl Sedoryk, CEO of Monterey-Salinas Transit. “Hospitality workers traveling from Seaside, Marina, and sometimes the Salinas Valley used MST regularly, making up one of our largest customer segments.”

Ironically, while ridership is down, on some routes, MST must deploy two buses during peak commute times, carrying less than half their capacity, just to keep riders at a safe social distance.

A 45- to 50-passenger bus can house no more than 12 to 14 people at this time. Buses also have Plexiglas barriers between drivers and passengers, hand sanitizer stations installed at the door, and 6-foot distances delineated with stickers on bus aisles and at bus stops.

“We also have staff cleaning buses multiple times per day, with anti-germicidal chemicals used in hospitals. All drivers wear masks and other personal protective equipment,” said Sedoryk, “and all passengers must wear a face covering.”

Another large contingent of riders, outside the hospitality sector, is made up of students and faculty. MST has partnerships with CSU Monterey Bay, Hartnell College, Monterey Peninsula College, the Naval Postgraduate School, and the Defense Language Institute, enabling faculty and students to ride at a subsidized or discounted rate, depending on the program.

“While some campuses are offering certain labs and student services onsite,” said Sedoryk, “not one of these campuses is open for classroom activities, so the vast majority of ridership has disappeared. Thus, those routes have been completely discontinued.”

For now.

Keeping options open

“A year ago, at this time, MST had to reduce our service levels because we didn't have enough employees to meet the demand our community had for public transit,” Sedoryk said. “Now, we are struggling to keep people employed because the ridership demand has dropped off so much.”

Yet Sedoryk has been reluctant to furlough any employees because it takes a long time to get people trained as professional coach operators of a 19-ton vehicle.

“When this is over, and it will be over,” he said, “we don't want to be in the position where we can't respond to renewed ridership and recover. Employees are working fewer hours and are making less money, but they still have honed skills, jobs, and benefits. Our goal is to be ready once the COVID vaccine is in place, because business will come back, and it will come back quickly.”

In the meantime, MST has found ways to keep employees on the job and buses up and running, by “reinventing the wheel.” They have been deploying their drivers and vehicles to deliver 8,000 meals for Meals on Wheels, and have dispatched buses with Wi-Fi capabilities into rural areas of southern Monterey County to enable students in disadvantaged areas to climb aboard and make internet connections for remote learning.

Also, MST has offered surplus vehicles to Clinica de Salud to be converted into mobile COVID testing units that can go right into the ag fields to reach an at-risk population.

“MST is following a path to recovery called the ‘Whole Community Effort,’” said Sedoryk. “In looking through FEMA disaster recovery documentation to learn what we need to be prepared for in a natural disaster or civil emergency requiring massive evacuation we found, buried in those plans, a pandemic response.”

The idea, he says, is not to focus efforts on how to bring MST back to where it was, but to help the community recover, first.

“While waiting for traditional ridership to return,” he said, “we are looking at how we can change our business model to focus on our contribution to the community. How do we help reduce the spread of COVID, making the community healthier so their business and their revenue can come back? Then MST will be needed again for transport. This is our path to recovery.”

In the meantime, says Sedoryk, we can appreciate the reduction in traffic congestion and the cleaner air quality. Everybody take a deep breath.

For more information, please contact the California Transit Association at COVID-19@caltransit.org.