

# Transit Watch: Public Transit in Crisis



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## CAL MATTERS

### Saving transit in California is key to an equitable recovery

By Michael Pimentel, Executive Director, California Transit Association

California's public transit agencies are facing unprecedented budget deficits due to depressed ridership, reduced sales tax revenues and the high cost of implementing health and safety measures designed to keep transit frontline workers and riders safe.

To remain viable, public transit agencies have been forced to make painful decisions, like [reducing service levels](#), slowing capital projects and furloughing employees. Without further federal and state action, these decisions could become permanent, leaving communities across the state with service that is severely compromised.

Sadly, we know that those hurt most by the pandemic-induced service reductions are low-income people and people of color, the very Californians already suffering disproportionately from the health and economic impacts of the crisis. These Californians, who are essential to our state no matter the time, face longer trip times and less reliable service, making it harder for them to get to work, access medical care and to care for loved ones.

Federal and state governments must take immediate action to support these Californians and lay the foundation for an equitable recovery with transit at its core.

Gov. Gavin Newsom's [January budget](#) acknowledged this and signaled his support for ongoing federal relief for California's transit agencies. His push, which complements our own efforts in Washington, D.C., helped secure relief for transit in President Joe Biden's proposed \$1.9 trillion emergency relief bill. The plan is expected to be debated by Congress soon.

While we wait for Congress to act, the state Legislature must take a series of immediate actions to support transit and those who rely on it. Specifically, we request that the Legislature extend a series of statutory relief measures passed last year that provided transit agencies with short-term relief from the efficiency requirements in various transit funding programs. These requirements, which impose financial penalties on transit agencies for non-compliance, wrongly focus on transit efficiency at a time when transit is operating as a lifeline.

Additionally, the Legislature must continue to provide - and further expand on - flexibility in the use of key transit funding sources, ensuring that funds can be directed to their best use during the pandemic: preserving transit service. The governor's budget acknowledges the importance of such relief.

The state must also ensure that transit frontline workers have priority access to COVID-19 vaccines alongside other essential workers. While funding is vital to transit operations, so too is our workforce.

Throughout the pandemic, transit workers have transported other essential workers to their jobs on the front lines. They have also continued to provide critical services, like paratransit service to elderly and disabled people throughout California, providing lifeline access to grocery stores, doctor's appointments, pharmacies and recreation. These workers will be vital to ensuring equitable access to vaccination sites for countless low-income families, seniors, individuals with disabilities and Californians without vehicles.

As we look to the future, public transit agencies must continue to evolve to deliver service that responds to changing commute patterns, addresses the unfounded skepticism about the safety of transit service and that more fully meets the needs of their core ridership. Already, public transit agencies are making operational improvements that will deliver faster, more reliable, increasingly coordinated and equitable service to communities statewide.

With continued state support, transit agencies are also continuing to work toward the goal of transitioning all transit buses in California to zero-emission vehicle technologies by 2040. These steps demonstrate that even as we grapple with the worst of the pandemic California transit agencies have not lost sight of their California values or the role they play in expanding access to opportunity and improving our environment.

We know that we have a long journey ahead of us to restore transit and to ultimately build back better from the pandemic. We are committed to doing the work, but we need immediate assistance from the federal and state government to overcome today's challenges. Restoring public transit is key to an equitable recovery for all.

For more information, please contact the California Transit Association at [COVID-19@caltransit.org](mailto:COVID-19@caltransit.org).