



Transit Watch: Public Transit in Crisis



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Ridership Recovery: Bringing Back More Riders Depends on Restoring and Improving Service

By Jacob Herson, *Transit California*

California has restored 91 percent of its pre-pandemic transit service and 65 percent of its ridership, according to transitrecovery.com, a site that draws Federal Transit Administration (FTA) data self-reported by agencies nationwide. The two numbers are of course related: many agencies face something of a "catch 22" in which, to fully restore pre-pandemic ridership, they need to fully restore pre-pandemic service levels, yet they lack either the funding or the mandate to do so without the missing ridership.

While the California Transit Association and others advocate for the state budget to add transit operations funding, agencies across the state are doing everything they can to attract more riders with the resources already at their disposal.

"We need to position ourselves as the best choice for travel within the region by focusing on the customer experience," said James Allison, Media Relations Manager for San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART). "We have more service than before the pandemic, we've enhanced safety and security by adding more uniformed safety personnel in our system than ever before, and we are working with other transit partners to make transfers and connections easier and more viable."

A presentation made to the BART Board on February 9 highlighted further actions the agency is considering taking. A variety of campaigns, communications, events, and programs could boost rider awareness and pride in using the system. A pilot program offering free BART rides for school field trips is currently paused after the \$150,000 provided by outside sponsors has been expended. The program has provided rides for 24,000 students and chaperones. The agency hopes to continue the program with new funding and is conducting outreach to potential donors.

"The most important thing for SamTrans to do to recover its ridership is to restore all of our pre-pandemic services," said the San Mateo County Transit District's Acting Planning Director, Millie Tolleson. "Like many agencies, we are still operating fewer service hours and routes than we were in February 2020." Tolleson said the agency is also focused on recruiting and retaining its bus operator workforce in alignment with the service plan outlined in its [Reimagine SamTrans](#) system redesign project.

"Over the course of 2020 and 2021, Reimagine SamTrans was able to use ridership trends in real time to pinpoint the travel needs of essential workers and to establish new equity priority areas to prioritize our service changes," explained Tolleson. "As a result, Reimagine SamTrans called for increased frequencies, more service to local destinations, and expanded midday and weekend service. Post pandemic, our peak periods are less distinct and our Sunday ridership continues to be about 90 percent of pre-pandemic levels. Our riders want to go places all day, seven days a week," said the Acting Planning Director.

SamTrans sees that more of its riders are commuting Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, rather than across the traditional workweek. "Does the future of express bus schedules include the same level of service five days a week?" questioned Tolleson. "We think that's a question worth considering."

Launched in 2022, the [Youth Unlimited](#) program provides free bus passes to qualifying students that can be used year-round on all SamTrans routes. "We hope the passes will help youth and families make even more trips on SamTrans, and we especially love how many use them on the weekends and over the summer," said Tolleson.

"Growing a transit system is a critical step for ridership recovery," said San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) CEO and Association Executive Committee Vice Chair Sharon Cooney. "Adding new service and modernizing an outdated fare collection system are two ways MTS has done that." The agency has seen ridership recovery to 81 percent of pre-pandemic levels. "But continuing on this recovery path demands we do more," added Cooney. "MTS is finding more ways to recover ridership that are grounded in research."

A recent customer satisfaction survey and Social Equity Listening Tour identified system cleanliness and safety as the top rider experience factors the agency needs to address. "MTS will invest more money from its capital budget in new cleaning equipment, expand our bus shelter program to offer better amenities, examine ways to streamline the communication process for reporting untidiness on board, boost pay for security officers to limit turnover, and much more," said Cooney. "Our goal is to strengthen trust with our riders by demonstrating that we are listening to their needs and concerns, and being transparent about the changes that we're making at MTS to improve their experience." The CEO added: "Our hope is that, as we do these things, more riders will not only get on board, but stay on board."

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) is making similar efforts. "Muni ridership has been growing but isn't yet close to reaching pre-pandemic levels," said Monique Webster, Regional Government Affairs Manager. "Crosstown routes where we've made speed and reliability improvement have seen the best recovery. Ridership on lines focused on downtown San Francisco have seen the slowest recovery, because so many workers are no longer commuting downtown," she said.

The agency has implemented a number of transit priority lanes, which are making bus travel faster and more reliable and generating increased ridership on these routes. Quarterly "Fix It! Weeks" have enabled SFMTA to reduce major delays on its Muni Metro underground service by 81 percent through repair and maintenance conducted during early-morning closures.

"We're installing new LCD digital displays with real-time transit vehicle arrival information at Muni transit shelters," said Webster. "We're repairing and upgrading our transit shelters and cleaning them more frequently. Now every transit shelter in San Francisco is being cleaned at least three times a week and all Muni boarding platforms are cleaned five days a week," she said.

For San Joaquin Regional Transit District (RTD), "the changes in how people commute for some transit systems, due to a shift in peak and hybrid work-from-home schedules, have very little effect on RTD's ridership," according to RTD CEO Alex Clifford. "RTD customers are predominantly hard-working people who must go to work daily, run errands, or go to doctor appointments." Clifford continued: "We recognize that the pandemic has forced many transit users to find alternative ways to get around. Our responsibility is to find ways to attract them back to our system, especially the economically and socially disadvantaged."

Clifford said that 75 percent of the population of Stockton lives in areas identified by census tracts as disadvantaged communities, 82 percent of residents are classified as minorities, and 50 percent live below the low-income threshold. He said that 60 percent of RTD's customers earn less than \$30,000 annually. "This data points to investing heavily on bus routes that serve our disadvantaged neighborhoods," said Clifford. "In the past, RTD had some budget challenges which caused the agency to cut span and frequency in these neighborhoods. In the coming months and years, RTD will invest in the routes serving disadvantaged neighborhoods by increasing service frequency and span of service." Clifford continued: "In some cases, RTD will introduce service where service does not exist today. RTD's goal is to give Stockton residents greater access - it's a win-win for everyone," said the CEO.

Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District (MTD) Planning and Marketing Manager Hillary Blackerby commented: "The pandemic has been a good reminder that 'commutes' aren't just for people with nine-to-five office jobs. In the heart of the lockdown in 2020 and 2021, we proudly carried tens of thousands of essential workers to their jobs at hospitals, restaurants, and grocery stores. While some in our community could stay home and work, we provided a reliable commute for the people who keep our communities running," said Blackerby.

The return of students to campus, from K-12 to university, along with the return of people to work and resumption of recreational travel has fueled strong ridership recovery for MTD. "As MTD developed a new Short Range Transit Plan over the past year, we heard from riders and non-riders alike that access to midday and late-night service might be more attractive than the traditional peak weekday service," said Blackerby. "This is a good reminder that when it comes to trip making, commute trips are not a majority of trips. If transit provides convenient access to what people need when they need it, they will ride," she said.

Transit agencies are doing everything they can to restore service, improve the quality of service, and adapt to changing ridership patterns. With a critical infusion of state operations funding, as requested by the Association, they will be positioned to provide excellent service, whether for office workers commuting downtown on a traditional schedule, essential workers riding transit in off-peak hours, or people getting around for non-work-related trips. Without that funding, this essential service will be in jeopardy.

For more information, please contact the California Transit Association at info@caltransit.org.

