



# *Transit Watch:* Public Transit in Crisis



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## CAL MATTERS

### Longer waits and fewer buses: Pandemic worsens shortfalls and service cuts

By Elizabeth Castillo

Yonas Paulos, who is visually impaired, relies on Fresno's buses to reach his doctor appointments. But now, during the pandemic, only 10 riders are allowed on each bus to allow for social distancing. That means Paulos, 49, sometimes has to wait an extra half hour at a bus stop. The wait, he said, can be brutal in the heat.

"It's very hard to get on a bus at certain intersections," Paulos said. "I try to target all of my appointments in the morning, so I have a change of life now."

Along with the upheaval in his schedule, he fears catching the virus on a bus or at the bus stop. "It's added to my anxiety, it's intensified," Paulos said.

Across California, transit agencies are simultaneously struggling with unprecedented shortfalls in revenue, steep declines in ridership and increased expenses from new pandemic policies. As a result, riders like Paulos — especially low-income essential workers and people with disabilities — are feeling the squeeze as bus service is cut.

"We've been dealing with depressed transit ridership from the start of the pandemic," said Michael Pimentel, the deputy executive director of the California Transit Association, which represents more than 80 transit agencies. "And now we're dealing with the second wave of impact largely owed to the decline in sales tax revenue."

Bus ridership has dropped 60 to 90% compared to last year, according to the transit association. At the same time, sales tax revenue — a major source of funding for transit agencies — is expected to decline about 30%.

"We're talking billions of dollars in impacts that are happening over the next few years that really will decimate transit operating budgets," Pimentel said.

Transit agencies say they are worried about additional cuts in bus and rail service next year as federal CARES Act funding runs out. California transit agencies were granted \$3.75 billion in March, but for some agencies, that won't be enough as they continue to face budget shortfalls from the losses in fare and tax revenue.

In response, the California Transit Association has asked the [governor and state](#) and [federal](#) lawmakers for \$3.1 billion in additional funding to ensure drops in service don't become permanent.

But state officials, who have been wrestling with multiple emergencies and severe budget shortfalls, say no relief is in sight.

“There is not an existing funding source that the state can increase to fund transit operations,” said Garin Casaleggio, a spokesperson for the California State Transportation Agency, in a written statement to CalMatters.

Despite reduced revenues, transit agencies are spending more during the pandemic for frequent bus cleanings, sneeze guards and other barriers for bus drivers and masks for passengers.

Earning the trust of passengers during the pandemic is essential for the future of mass transit.

“We’ll need to continue to operate at a much higher cost that’s much less efficient in order to keep our employees and passengers safe,” said Carl Sedoryk, chief executive officer of Monterey-Salinas Transit.

In many areas of California, bus riders have experienced cuts in service that increase their waiting times or eliminate routes.

In Sacramento, buses had been running at 75% of pre-pandemic service, said Jessica Gonzalez, a spokesperson for the Sacramento Regional Transit District. There’s been a steady increase in ridership in recent weeks so full service, except to the airport, begins Sunday.

“A lot of people have to wait for another bus — people in wheelchairs, people with walkers, people with disabilities,” said King Harris, who uses a cane. He said he’s waited longer than 30 minutes, sometimes on triple-digit temperature days. “Your food is easy to spoil when you go to the grocery store.”

Aaron Armer, another rider, said that “sometimes there’s not enough space on the bus. So I’ll be passed up, or we’ll pass up other people.”

Ten to 14 passengers are allowed in each Sacramento bus, but drivers can radio for a “shadow” bus. Six to eight back-up buses are dispatched a day depending on the availability of operators, which means wait times can vary.

Angela Tabarez, a bus rider for 18 years, said she relies on buses so she doesn’t mind waiting. “The bus is always there,” she said. “It’s been a lifesaver for me.”

### **LA and San Francisco have unprecedented losses**

California’s largest transit system, LA Metro, expects an unprecedented loss in revenue of \$1.8 billion this fiscal year while its operating costs will rise more than \$200 million over the next fiscal year.

As of mid-August, roughly 550,000 passengers board every day in Los Angeles.

“We normally have 1.2 million boardings a day so it’s roughly half of what we normally have on a daily basis,” said Dave Sotero, a spokesman for LA Metro. “This is the new normal.”

The impact on transit in Los Angeles has far exceeded any other economic downturn.

“With sales tax revenues making up a larger percentage of our budget now than during the Great Recession, this results in a bigger impact to Metro,” he added. “The prolonged effects of the pandemic will further deteriorate our current loss estimate.”

The bus system is currently operating seven days a week on a modified Sunday service schedule, which means 80% of service, and rail has been reduced by 14%.

“Transit agencies have already reduced services, but without additional funding, we don’t want that to become the reality of what we’re able to offer the public as we recover from this,” Sotero said.

Low-income residents of Los Angeles are the hardest hit by the reduced service. The typical LA Metro rider has an annual family income of \$15,000, which is below the federal poverty line for a two-person household. Many white-collar workers can work from home, but many of the people riding Metro can’t, and they do not have cars to get to work.

San Francisco is in even more dire straits. Its transit agency is projected to lose more than half a billion dollars in revenue over the next four years, and it could permanently lose about 40 of its 68 bus lines, said Jeffrey Tumlin, director of transportation for the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, in a June board meeting.

“The cuts that we’re making are terribly painful,” he said.

As of June, transit revenue is down 93%.

“Even back in January, at the peak of a boom economy, we had a substantial and growing structural deficit. So this year our deficit is now \$200 million,” Tumlin said in a board meeting this month.

### **Rural buses at risk, too**

Whether public transportation is in a highly populated urban hub or a more rural part of California, the common thread is that low-income people rely on public transportation and don’t have other options. It costs nearly \$9,300 annually to own a car, according to AAA [estimates](#).

Mariah Thompson, an attorney for the advocacy group California Rural Legal Assistance, said for people without a car, limited access to public transportation has been a longstanding problem. It means planning appointments and errands around bus availability.

“When the bus only comes once a day, you plan your entire day around that one bus time, and life doesn’t work like that,” she said.

In Fresno, service hasn’t been cut during the pandemic, although wait times have increased due to social distancing. The city dispatches one or two “sweeper” buses daily to pick up passengers left behind when buses are full.

Gregory Barfield, director of Fresno’s Department of Transportation, said ridership has dropped by about half compared with last year. The system has incurred about \$2.7 million in coronavirus-related expenses, but has a 37% drop in revenue. Despite more than \$32 million in CARES Act funding, he’s worried about next year.

In Monterey County, most bus riders are farm workers.

“The average passenger is a family with a combined household income of \$20,000 or less. You have generally someone working in the agricultural field and someone working in hospitality,” Sedoryk said. “We can’t telecommute our farm workers...These jobs have to be done in person. The demand is still there.”

Several routes pass through various military facilities in the Monterey area, but the buildings have largely shuttered during the pandemic. Those routes are no longer running even though they served civilians, too.

The San Diego Metropolitan Transit System, which received \$220 million in CARES Act funding, says it has weathered the impact and restored full service despite a 58% drop in fares revenue.

“We were really financially strong coming into this,” said Rob Schupp, a spokesman for the bus system.

“Hopefully we have enough CARES Act money to ride out the entire storm because we don’t think ridership is going to return quickly,” he said. “It’s going to be a long, slow haul to get back to pre-COVID numbers.”

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

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