



Transit Watch: Public Transit in Crisis



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[Sacramento buses and light rail are up and running. Is it safe to hop on transit again?](#)

By Tony Bizjak

Rosalie Rashid had had it with sheltering in place. The 81-year-old Sacramento resident wanted a road trip.

She put on her mask and rode one bus to downtown Sacramento, then another to Winters in Yolo County. She lunched outdoors at the Putah Creek Cafe, window-shopped Main Street, had a sidewalk coffee and bused home.

"Oh my god, it was just the sweetest day," she said. "The sun was shining. Everybody was out, like me. They needed a break."

Rashid, a midtown resident who gave up her car 15 years ago, has relied on buses for grocery shopping, medical appointments and recreation. "It's my wheels. I go everywhere."

Until [the COVID-19 pandemic](#), Rashid still rides public transit some, but not like before. The pandemic has put the brakes on transit riding nationally. The last six months have been calamitous for public transit nationwide, and downright frightening for people who rely on buses and light rail.

In Sacramento, 75% of [Sacramento Regional Transit's](#) riders vanished in March, prompting the agency to cut its bus and train operations to minimal levels. Some commuters disappeared because they began working from home as a health precaution during the pandemic. Others lost their job when society shut down.

And some simply have been reluctant to step onto a bus or light rail train with strangers who may be infected with the virus.

Rashid is worried, but says, "I am not going to be a couch potato." Others, including transit advocate Russell Rawlings, however, say they likely will mainly sit it out until there is a vaccine.

It's created a pivotal moment for a troubled industry.

In the short-term, how can transit agencies persuade riders that buses can be safe as long as transit agencies and riders follow proper protocols? Will some transit agencies die? And, after a COVID vaccine arrives, can agencies find the financing to regrow and perhaps reform their services so that they can help transit-reliant riders and play a role in growing local economies?

TRANSIT RIDERSHIP LOSSES

The ridership loss for transit agencies is not entirely shocking, given the profound economic impact COVID has had and the fear many have of being in an enclosed space with others.

All mobility has declined during the pandemic, in fact. As more people work from home, Sacramento-area residents have reduced the number of miles they drive per day by 40%, according to Caltrans. Uber use has dropped. [Rideshare e-bikes only recently returned](#) after being pulled off the streets for months.

But transit ridership may have taken the biggest tumble.

Sacramento Regional Transit ridership has recently risen back to about 40% of pre-COVID levels in recent weeks. Some state workers are still riding light rail to downtown jobs. In suburban areas, ridership is even increasing on the agency's new SmaRT Ride on-call shuttle buses, often older riders like Rashid going shopping or to medical appointments.

In contrast, AC Transit in Oakland currently is down 72%. The Bay Area Rapid Transit has lost 88% of its riders. Caltrain, the commuter rail line that runs from one end of Silicon Valley in San Jose to the other in San Francisco, has lost 90%. The Capital Corridor train line running from Sacramento to the Bay Area has lost 95%.

Michael Pimentel, who has been monitoring the health status of transit agencies around the state for the California Transit Association, says some transit agencies may not survive the pandemic.

"The near-term pain could be so severe it results in agencies shutting down service entirely, with no relief on the horizon," Pimentel said. "The other potential we are concerned about is as transit agencies cut back on service, that leads to further declines in fare box revenues, which leads to more reductions, and quickly becomes a race to the bottom."

Some may ask: Is that so bad? Overall, transit handles only a small share of daily trips Sacramento residents take. But the COVID crisis has driven home the significance of the role transit plays in the economic health and well being of segments of the population.

Studies and anecdotal evidence indicate the people who have continued to ride buses during the epidemic are lower-income workers, as well as people who don't own cars, people who are older and people who have disabilities. When schools reopen classrooms, SacRT expects to be flush as well with student riders. (The agency, with local city government financial support, lets [students ride for free](#). The goal is to help struggling families and to create new transit riders who will pay for the service as adults.)

University of California Davis environmental science professor Jesus Barajas argues that transit serves a moral imperative, especially in COVID times, as a social and economic safety net for low-income wage earners.

"Think of it as important as social security, food stamps, affordable housing," he said. "People have a fundamental right to security, fair housing, to mobility, to movement."

NEED FOR COVID FEDERAL EMERGENCY FUNDS

At the moment, most transit agencies are surviving thanks to a federal government COVID emergency fund [called the CARES Act](#), which has allocated billions of dollars to local governments to keep them afloat amid plummeting sales tax and other revenues, including the Sacramento city and county governments

Sacramento Regional Transit received a \$100 million allocation from the CARES Act, enough to keep buses and trains running through June of next year. But SacRT and other agencies believe the economic and ridership fallout from COVID will last a year beyond that, well into 2022, even if a vaccine arrives next year.

Transit agencies nationally are asking the federal government to include them again in what they hope will be a second round of federal emergency funding approvals this month. Congress, however, is fighting over how big a second funding package should be and what should be in it. Democrats have proposed more help for transit agencies. Republicans are saying no.

If Congress and the Trump administration don't provide more money now, it is unlikely to happen until early next year, post election.

Despite the uncertainty, SacRT took a major step last week, choosing to bring its bus and rail service back to near 100% level. Not all routes are back. The [downtown-to-airport bus](#) launched last year remains shut down because so few people are going to the airport.

SacRT General Manager Henry Li said the agency expects to serve only about 50% of its pre-COVID passenger numbers this fall and winter, but needs to deploy a full complement of buses and light rail trains so that riders can maintain social distancing by spreading out.

The agency is limiting bus capacity to just 10 to 14 riders, and requires them to wear masks. The agency has taped off seats to keep passengers from sitting next to each other.

So far, Li says, SacRT is not aware of any riders who have caught or shared the virus while on a bus or light rail train. [Six bus drivers](#), however, have tested positive.

Some recent early analyses suggest transit has not proven to be a major spreader of COVID, possibly because agencies around the world are not allowing crowded buses and trains and because riders are taking precautions, including wearing masks.

The federal [Centers for Disease Control suggests riders use hand sanitizer](#). Glenda Marsh of Sacramento, who rides light rail, says she'll hit the train door button with her sleeve instead of bare finger.

Locally, SacRT has implemented a handful of safety changes. Since COVID began, SacRT drivers no longer are in contact with riders. SacRT installed plastic screens between the driver and passengers, and requires passengers to enter buses via the back door. They pay via smart phone app or by dropping money in a farebox that sits on the passenger side of the driver screen.

James Corless, head of the [Sacramento Area Council of Governments](#), said he applauds SacRT's decision to go all-in this month by bringing service back to near pre-COVID levels.

"RT is betting on building on a base of riders that need it," he said. "That's the kind of foresight we need to get through the pandemic and to get out the other side with a robust system of transportation choices."

"Any transit agency is on the ropes. You have to figure out what you are going to do. Henry (Li) is saying, 'We are going to fight.'"

FINANCIAL FAILURE OR REINVENTION?

If SacRT does not secure more federal COVID emergency funding, the agency likely will have to cut service next year back to 70% of pre-COVID levels, agency general manager Li said.

That would risk marginalizing the transit agency as regional leaders want to make it easier for people to use means other than the family car to get to work or the store.

Bridgette Jones, who is 62 and lives in a low-income housing area off Broadway, has already stopped riding the bus because of service cuts a year ago. SacRT eliminated the bus closest to her apartment. "It was too far for me to walk" to the bus stop, she said. "It was over a mile. That's not fair. They used to be right there."

She doesn't own a car. So she will call friends or pay her son to drive her. "But lots of times people don't want to give you a ride."

Transit agencies were struggling financially even before COVID. Transportation analysts say COVID makes it just that much more important for those agencies to redefine themselves.

Corless of SACOG says transit agencies can no longer simply run buses back and forth on fixed routes. "These agencies (need to) become mobility managers and brokers for all kinds of services. It's not one size fits all. A 40-foot bus does not fit all."

He said he can envision SacRT [teaming up with private companies](#), such as Uber, to provide an smartphone app that can offer people a variety of options to get from point A to point B, which may include buses, light rail, shuttles, personal cars, rideshare bikes and walking.

Some of that has started. SacRT has teamed with a private company, Via, to create what it calls SmaRT Ride, essentially a bus that riders can summon by cell phone to pick them up at a corner near their residence and drop them off in front of where they want to go.

SacRT is trying that now on a test basis in nine communities. Ridership has been climbing during COVID. However, the costs are high per rider per mile, and the special funding for the pilot program is limited and temporary.

In order to keep it going, Li of SacRT said, his agency likely will need voters to approve an additional local sales tax, something they won't be in position to do until the 2022 voting season.

That brings SacRT back to current COVID reality. The agency, like others, must spend the next year regaining its financial footing while easing rider fears.

Rider Rashid, at age 82, is among the intrepid group who continues to ride the buses. "I gotta have a life," she said.

Russell Rawlings, a motorized wheelchair user who has been a longtime bus rider, may represent the real litmus test for SacRT. Rawlings lives in Oak Park and has an office downtown, but is working from home now and hasn't ridden a bus for months, in part because he is concerned for his health.

But he swears by transit, saying it saved his life years ago when he realized he could live independently thanks to the bus network. Rawlings, who once ran for mayor on a platform of social and economic justice, wants the buses back, safe and robust.

"Ideally, we see a vaccine and I start riding public transit again," Rawlings said. "Personally, if it were to go away, I'd be devastated. I don't know how it will be replaced."

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