



## TRANSIT RECOVERY TASK FORCE

### TRANSIT NETWORK MANAGEMENT PROBLEM STATEMENT

Adopted March 22, 2021

#### Context

By June 2021, the **Blue Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force (BRTF)** is expected to submit a Transit Transformation Action Plan (Plan) that identifies actions needed to re-shape the region's transit system into a more connected, more efficient, and more user-focused mobility network across the entire Bay Area megaregion. In November 2020, the BRTF adopted four Plan goals, including Goal 3A, which states: *"Develop a clear Problem Statement that addresses what issues or problems Network Management reforms seek to resolve."*

#### Working toward this result is not a new idea.

- MTC's Resolution 3866 incorporates nearly 50 years of legislated transit coordination mandates, including administering fare revenue-sharing, governing inter-operator transfers, and deciding discretionary fund sources and amounts to achieve coordination and connectivity.
- In 2012, MTC adopted the Transit Sustainability Project, which identified specific goals and objectives related to ridership, customer-focus, and regional coordination.<sup>1</sup>
- In 2019-2020, FASTER, a multi-stakeholder effort, developed a strategy and funding plan to achieve more coordinated transit planning, effective project delivery, and more integrated fares and schedules.
- In 2019, Assemblymember Chiu introduced AB2057, state legislation that prioritized institutional reforms that would support a more seamless public transportation network, including ensuring core levels for transit-dependent populations.
- In 2021, MTC's Plan Bay Area 2050 Blueprint identified several beneficial transit program enhancements needed to create an expanded, fast, frequent, efficient, and safe multi-modal transportation system that includes efficient intercity trips complemented by a suite of local transportation options.

Despite these efforts, significant barriers to the BRTF's vision still exist and must be addressed in a region where physical geography, jurisdictional boundaries, urban settlement patterns and travel patterns overlap and intersect in complicated ways, while also considering how megaregional and interregional travel services will interface with the Bay Area system. Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an acute, existential crisis for transit, with an average reduction in ridership of 77% by the end of 2020<sup>2</sup>, and it is unclear when, and to what extent, ridership will return.

Prior to the pandemic, UCLA completed a study for MTC<sup>3</sup> that determined that in 2017 and 2018, the Bay Area lost over 5% of its annual riders, despite a booming economy and service increases. The decline occurred even as most major operators increased service in terms of both mileage and hours of

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<sup>1</sup> MTC – Transit Sustainability Project, May 2012

<sup>2</sup> Operator provided information; from BRTF meeting/ December 14, 2020

<sup>3</sup> "What's Behind Recent Transit Ridership Trends in the Bay Area?" February 2020

operation. The steepest ridership losses came on buses, at off-peak times, on weekends, in non-commute directions, on outlying lines, and on lines that did not serve the region's core employment clusters. It also cited ridesharing as a possible cause of declining transit ridership.

Transit also faces substantial financial challenges. Operating expenses are subject to intense inflationary pressures and capital construction costs have escalated precipitously over the past decades. Locally-generated sales or property taxes have restrictions limiting an agency's ability to serve areas outside their county and local return on services is critical to retain public support. In world-wide systems cited as comparison, there is significantly greater funding dedicated to public transit.

Some of the factors contributing to transit's ridership decline and equitable access cannot be solved by transit operators alone. Bay Area governments and the planning profession at large have played a central role in systematically denying opportunities to communities of color through practices like redlining, the clearance of neighborhoods for construction of urban highways, exclusionary zoning, redevelopment, policing bias and outright discrimination and segregation. Low gasoline prices also affect public transit ridership in the Bay Area.

If sustained, this decline in ridership threatens to plunge the region's transit system into a downward spiral, jeopardizing both the near- and long-term financial viability of individual transit operators, negatively impacting riders, and fundamentally undermining the value of the public's past and future investments in transit as a public good. In addition, the region's roadway system has insufficient capacity to absorb the traffic increase that would occur with the collapse of transit systems, creating greater travel delay and greenhouse gas emissions.

**Problem Statement Summary:** Public transit services in the San Francisco Bay Area are operated by 27 agencies, each with its own unique policies, procedures, and operating practices best suited for their immediate service areas and local priorities; and not organized to support customer-friendly, inter-agency travel. Strong collaborative action is needed to restore and grow transit ridership to reach the ambitious targets<sup>4</sup> associated with Plan Bay Area 2050's vision of a more affordable, connected, diverse, healthy, and vibrant Bay Area for all.

**The COVID-19 Pandemic** has dramatically reduced the ridership of the Bay Area's transit system – and it is unclear when, and to what extent, ridership will return. In the near-term, the pandemic has created an acute, existential crisis for transit, however this only underscores and deepens the pre-existing problem of declining demand for transit in the region as a whole. If sustained, this decline in ridership threatens to plunge the region's transit system into a downward spiral, jeopardizing both the near- and long-term financial viability of individual transit operators and negatively impacting riders.

**Restoring and growing transit ridership** will require an ongoing multi-front effort that addresses the challenges that transit faces across multiple geographies and levels of government. Much of this work is and will be focused at the local and sub-regional level – where the vast majority of transit trips currently occur. As the pandemic subsides, however, there is also a significant opportunity at the regional scale to create a more efficient, coordinated and customer-friendly system that better serves existing riders and attracts new ones.

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<sup>4</sup> "What's Behind Recent Transit Ridership Trends in the Bay Area?" February 2020

*Below are key problems identified by the Ad Hoc Problem Statement Working Group.*

### **Organizational/Institutional Challenges**

- There is a lack of transit priority on surface roads.<sup>5</sup> Transportation institutions and decision-making procedures are not developing and managing rights-of-way in a coordinated manner, both regionally and in many cases locally, to optimize transit speed, service investments and the region's efforts to grow transit mode share and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- Network management resources and authority are insufficient to ensure frequent, reliable service to key destinations across boundaries of multiple agencies, with efficient connections at multimodal hubs.
- Cooperation on coordinated approaches across multiple agencies is time-consuming and unpredictable.
- There is a need to improve local school access and inter-agency paratransit service in an effective and efficient manner.<sup>6</sup>
- A lack of unified, robust data collection and management impedes nimble, equivalent service planning and performance evaluation.

### **Customer Experience**

- Bus travel is slow and unreliable because of vehicles getting stuck in traffic, inefficient stop spacing and transfer facilities, and where schedules create long wait times.
- While being studied now, fares remain confusing, vary by agency, create penalties for using more than one operator, have inconsistent discount policies and are unaffordable for low-income riders.<sup>7</sup>
- While being studied now, a lack of unified services for trip planning, real-time information, mobile payment technologies and wayfinding maps and signage confuses existing riders and impedes opportunities to grow ridership.<sup>8</sup>
- Large operators' customers are expressing greater rider health and safety concerns.<sup>9</sup>

### **Past and Current Disparities**

- Failed regional housing and development policies have resulted in the displacement of low income and people of color to car-dependent communities, reducing full access to economic opportunities due to longer, less convenient, and more expensive mobility options.<sup>10</sup>
- There is no centralized plan to address the legacy of disenfranchisement and marginalization of these communities. Those most harmed by past and current exclusion are not centered throughout the development and implementation of future solutions.

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<sup>5</sup> MTC – Plan Bay Area 2050: A Blueprint for the Bay Area's Future, December 2020

<sup>6</sup> MTC – Coordinated Public Transit–Human Services Transportation Plan Update, March 2018

<sup>7</sup> MTC Fare Integration Task Force is currently developing a business case and phased implementation recommendation.

<sup>8</sup> MTC – Bay Area Core Capacity Study, September 2017

<sup>9</sup> BART, Caltrain Rider Surveys

<sup>10</sup> MTC – Plan Bay Area 2040 Equity Analysis, July 2017 / MTC – Plan Bay Area 2050 Equity and Performance Outcomes, December 2020

### **Transit Costs and Funding**

- Bay Area transit agencies are not uniformly funded, creating disparate challenges among operators. Current and future service coordination efforts can only offer limited benefits without additional funding, which has not yet been identified.<sup>11</sup>
- The potential to raise additional needed revenues to advance the transit system and levels of service will be more difficult until an integrated, aligned and coordinated system is in place.
- Integrated local, state, and federal transit revenue strategies need to be developed in a regionally supported forum.
- Opportunities for administrative and operational efficiencies such as centralization of business functions and systems, unified data collection, procurement and delivery of capital investments varies greatly among transit operators depending on the type of service each provides.<sup>12</sup>
- Changing current funding levels or priorities cannot be done without understanding difficult tradeoffs.

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<sup>11</sup> MTC – Transit Sustainability Project, May 2012

<sup>12</sup> MTC – Transit Sustainability Project, May 2012