COVID-19 and Transportation

The COVID-19 crisis has swiftly devastated our region’s transportation system, impacting public transit, aviation, and the revenues collected to help fund the upkeep and expansion of these systems. In the weeks leading up to the March 16, 2020, Bay Area shelter in place orders, the region’s transit agencies were already facing steep declines in ridership and fare revenue as a number of commuters transitioned to remote work to avoid contracting or spreading COVID-19. Since then, Bay Area public transit agencies have had to make difficult decisions to significantly reduce or eliminate service as they face decreases in ridership of 90 percent or more. As a result, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) estimates that the Bay Area transportation network will lose $4.6 billion in revenue through summer 2021.

Similarly, steep declines in air travel have severely affected our region’s airports and the airlines operating flights coming in and out of them. In mid-April, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) reported days with 96 percent drops in passenger screenings compared to the year before. Oxford Economics estimates that US air travel will lose $97 billion in spending in the year 2020.

Policy Interventions and Advocacy

Federal Funding
On March 27, 2020, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) which provides $25 billion to the nation’s public transit agencies. From that pot, $1.3 billion was sent to Bay Area transit agencies. This law also provides over $80 billion to aviation sector businesses and airports to support them through the fallout from this crisis.

The Bay Area Council has sent multiple letters to Congress advocating for funding to support our public transit, airports, airlines, ports, and freight industries, many of which received funding through the CARES Act. You can read the letters to Congressional leadership here, here and here. The Council is continuing to advocate for additional federal funding to support our region’s transportation system, including funding for infrastructure, and is engaging with the Bay Area Congressional Delegation on our priorities for future relief and stimulus packages.

State and Local
The Council is advocating for state stimulus funds to support our region’s recovery as well as policy reforms to streamline project delivery. We have also supported speeding up the timeline of projects that can be completed more quickly and cheaply as a result from reduced traffic and other impediments that typically result in longer project timelines.

The Council also sent this letter to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) encouraging the Commission to develop a more comprehensive regional recovery strategy for transit and transit riders that creates a more sustainable, equitable, efficient, and seamless transit network. The Bay Area has shown how successful it can be when each jurisdiction collaborates to serve the region as a whole. With the funding shortfall we have now, we have no choice but to prioritize investing in improving our transit system and cutting processes that are redundant throughout the regions 27 agencies.

The Future of Bay Area Transportation

How we live, work, and move around the region is certain to be different for years after we recover from this crisis. As we adjust to a new reality, public transit will be key to our economic
recovery, future development, and livelihoods. It is how we see family and friends, enables tourism, and provides those without other modes of transit to access economic opportunity. We cannot abandon that investment, but we do need a better product. We need a regional network that works seamlessly to bring riders to their destination. A network that is sustainable, fast, frequent, and easy to ride. To get here, the Bay Area Council will be advocating to our local, regional, statewide, and national stakeholders for the following:

1. **Protect the health of transit operators.** People who operate and maintain our buses and trains are essential workers. The region must prioritize providing all transit agencies with an adequate supply of personal protective equipment and funding support to enhance industrial hygiene to keep operators and riders safe. Any less puts the health of these workers and the riders they serve at risk and will undermine our collective efforts to flatten the curve.

2. **Restore and grow ridership.** As a result of the lingering public health concerns, many people will default to driving alone and transit is going to have to fight for every single rider. To do that, the region needs to prioritize investments in affordable and integrated fares, consistent wayfinding and customer information, innovation, and coordinated service planning as a regional network.

3. **Prioritize serving people who rely on transit the most, and provide it cost-effectively.** This is also an important time to implement means-based fares and discounted passes. People will need this now, more than ever. Transit is the only option for many essential workers to get to work. And as a result of this crisis, fewer Bay Area families will be able to afford cars and even more will be dependent on transit to get to work and school. In a severely funding constrained environment, the region must prioritize funding the transit service that most cost-effectively serves people who need it most.

4. **Focus on financial sustainability.** Transit agencies will have to do more with less for the foreseeable future. At the same time, the costs of operating transit in the Bay Area are among the highest in the world. This is a time to focus on delivering as much transit as possible with the limited funding we will have available. The region should prioritize funding the transit service that can be provided most cost-effectively, and encourage operators to reduce operating costs. In addition, the region should prioritize funding service that can be financially sustainable through the public health crisis and the economic downturn that will follow. Agencies should be rewarded for finding creative solutions such as consolidating services and functions to add efficiency.

5. **Promote experimentation and data-driven solutions.** As we seek to restore service with a focus on the most transit dependent riders, some routes may be more cost-effectively served using services other than traditional fixed-route transit. Our transit recovery efforts should encourage flexibility and experimentation with new modes, pricing strategies, and service designs. Additionally, the region should encourage transit operators to explore partnering with private sector mobility providers who could provide more cost-effective service where appropriate.