



SPUR

San Francisco | San Jose | Oakland

June 28, 2020

MTC Blue Ribbon Task Force on Transit Recovery
Metropolitan Transportation Commission
375 Beale Street
San Francisco, CA 94105

Re: Blue Ribbon Task Force on Transit Recovery Meeting- June 29, 2020

Dear Commissioner Spering and Task Force Members,

SPUR is a member-supported nonprofit organization that promotes good planning and good government through research, education and advocacy. Improving public transportation in the Bay Area is a core priority for our organization, and now is a pivotal moment that will shape the future of transit for decades to come.

The spirit of collaboration and ingenuity that we have seen from Bay Area transit agencies and MTC during the COVID-19 crisis has been remarkable. We must continue to draw on that same spirit of leadership to steer transit's recovery as the region begins to reopen.

We offer the following suggestions to help strengthen our recovery efforts.

1. Item 4a - Transit Public Health and Safety Plan

We appreciate the Task Force's efforts to elevate the importance of minimizing community spread on transit and that operators have coordinated to develop the Bay Area Healthy Transit Plan.

We encourage MTC to play a more proactive role in ensuring a high level of consistency in communications and tactical efforts to reduce community spread. Though we recognize that each agency has its own set of operating and financial constraints, consistency is key to instilling trust back into transit. Inconsistencies will hurt all transit operators--even those that do everything possible to reduce community spread. For instance, riders who use both VTA and Caltrain may not choose transit at all if any part of the journey feels unsafe.

Further, this is a place where greater communication with other sectors and industries can support transit's recovery. For example, as much as the region has been working to "flatten the curve", MTC and transit agencies will need to "flatten the peak" as the economy recovers in order to comply with social distancing requirements on transit. Transport for London (TfL) is doing this by working with specific sectors to shift schedules and reduce peak demand.

2. Item 4b - Near-Term Recovery Efforts

We strongly encourage MTC to work with transit agencies to develop a core, rapid transit network plan that maximizes access, equity and financial sustainability. Network coordination at a regional level is an essential part of recovery planning. Failure to do so is simply a race to the bottom.

The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the ways in which our current system puts modes in competition with each other—with serious consequences for access, equity, and the financial stability of the network. The failure to coordinate service now could leave the Bay Area’s riders with significantly degraded service and access. For example, it could leave the Bay Area without a frequent and rapid backbone transit network as the economy reopens. Caltrain, which is almost completely dependent on fares, is at risk of shutting down in just a few months. Additionally, if BART lets go of operators to reduce costs, it could take up to a year to rehire staff, which means it would be slow to increase service when the region reopens.

As we move into the next phase of recovery, it is critical that we ask: how can near-term service decisions shape the transit network for the better in the long-run? Creating a network focused on high-quality, frequent backbone and feeder services, and supported by coverage routes to reach the rapid network, is one of the primary ways to achieve a more equitable region and an essential part of achieving a “better normal”.

3. Item 5a - CARES Phase II Funding Distribution

We appreciate that MTC has worked quickly with operators to determine a pathway for distributing the remainder of the CARES funds.

This equity adjustment should only be a stop-gap measure, and should be coupled with immediate steps to create a truly more equitable transit network by 1) providing high-quality, frequent service that puts major destinations within easy reach of people of color and low-income people as well as 2) rationalizing fares to make transit more affordable.

SPUR strongly supports policies that create a more equitable region by expanding access to transit and opportunity among low income and vulnerable groups. The proposed equity adjustment provides additional support to agencies that carry higher numbers of very low-income riders, but this method reinforces existing inequities in the Bay Area’s fare policies that perpetuates the myth that buses are for low-income people and trains are for high-income people. In other places around the world with more integrated transit networks and fares, no mode or transit brand is considered to be more equitable than any other. With integrated fares, the affordable choice is *any* choice. People choose what mode to use based on convenience and access—not cost.

As part of the CARES allocation, we strongly recommend giving close consideration to the following strategies to create a more affordable and equitable transit network, while also working to spread riders across modes and “flatten the peak” to comply with social distancing requirements over coming months.

- Eliminating transfer fees between trains and buses.
- Creating a consistent price or honoring local bus fares on rail.

- Expanding the means-based fare discount pilot to 50% across all participating agencies.
- Implementing an accumulator pass, which caps how much people spend on transit on any given day.

4. Continued Funding Needs

We encourage MTC and transit agencies to proactively fill remaining funding gaps and reduce costs. We cannot count on another national emergency package before many of our transit agencies hit their “fiscal cliffs”. We encourage MTC to seek additional state support in order to avoid serious and prolonged consequences for the Bay Area.

We also encourage transit agencies and MTC to take additional measures to reduce financial volatility and make limited funds go further, including:

- Working with cities to manage and reduce congestion to improve transit productivity and reduce operating costs, permanently. The SFMTA has been able to run 10% more bus service than it otherwise would simply because streets are empty. As congestion returns, transit will once again be stuck in traffic. As local elected officials, the MTC Commission has an important role to play in improving transit productivity.
- Integrating some functions and services. The Bay Area’s transit costs are among the highest in the world. Some of this is driven by a duplication in the functions and services that each agency performs. Now is a time to encourage flexibility and experimentation so that transit agencies can deliver more service for less money.
- Diversifying transit’s business model. The Bay Area is not alone in having a system that is highly dependent on fares and locally-generated funds. For instance, Transport for London receives no subsidy from the national government. Consequently, it monetizes its stations and real estate through leases, has developed a consulting branch, and owns its own bike-share platform and uses sponsorship to generate revenue, and more. Though these cannot replace steady fares or an emergency package, non-core revenue generators can provide some level of financial stability.

Thank you for your continued leadership and advocacy to support the Bay Area’s recovery.

Sincerely,



Laura Tolkoff
Regional Planning Policy Director