

To: Board of Directors

Date: 4/22/2020

From: Melody Reeb, Manager of Planning

Reviewed by: *Ref*

SUBJECT: Fixed-Route Operations COVID-19 Update

Background:

In February, County Connection staff began closely monitoring the developments around COVID-19, or Coronavirus. On Tuesday, March 17, a shelter-at-home order took effect in Contra Costa County, as well as in five other Bay Area counties. The order designates public transit an essential activity in support of essential business, and the County has advised County Connection to continue operating service to the extent possible.

Social distancing has been in effect for over a month, and face coverings are now required, both throughout the administrative offices and maintenance buildings, as well as on all County Connection buses and at bus stops.

According to the order of the health officer of the County of Contra Costa, dated April 17, 2020:

“...requires that people wear Face Coverings, when waiting for or riding on public transportation and other types of shared transportation.”

Fares are currently not being collected to allow for rear door boarding. However, driver shields continue to be installed for the protection of our bus operators and to potentially allow for fare collection to resume in the future.

As we prepare for the upcoming months, we must continue to evaluate how to address social distancing on buses as the State stages the reopening of businesses and additional passengers return to public transit. We do not anticipate this to happen overnight. However, we must establish some guiding principles.

Service Impacts:

Starting Monday, March 16, schools were temporarily closed, and 600-series routes were suspended. Service on Routes 250 and 260, which serve Saint Mary's College and Cal State East Bay, was also discontinued as those campuses suspended in-person classes.

In anticipation of reduced operator availability, staff developed a service hierarchy that ranks runs based on ridership and meeting essential needs. Staff began making service reductions using this hierarchy on March 24th. Additional cuts were made starting April 8th. Staff has aimed to maintain as much local coverage as possible, with a focus on preserving service to transit-dependent populations, major medical facilities, and grocery stores. Most express routes have been eliminated due to low ridership. However, local service to those destinations has been retained and prioritized.

Since April 8th, BART has been running trains every half hour on weekdays, which has broken some coordinated transfers and generally resulted in longer transfer times. Staff have responded to customer complaints about missed transfers by adding holds on specific trips, which instruct the driver to wait up to 3 minutes for an incoming BART train.

As operators return to work, staff has managed to deploy service on routes with the greatest demand. We are optimistic that the Summer bid will proceed as originally planned and that service over the summer will suffice to meet the social distancing requirements.

Ridership Trends:

Following the shelter-at-home order, ridership initially fell about 70%. Since then it has continued to decline as County Connection and other transit operators including BART and ACE have had to reduce service. Weekday ridership is now down around 80-85%, or about 2,000 average daily passengers. The following chart shows the weekly change in ridership since March 2nd using the prior 4 weeks as a baseline.

Routes 14 and 16 are currently the most utilized routes, carrying an average of 8 passengers per trip. Both routes serve the Monument Corridor in Concord, which has a relatively high percentage of transit-dependent residents, as well as a number of essential businesses such as grocery stores and pharmacies. Route 16 also serves the county hospital in Martinez. Routes 1, 17, and 28 are also continuing to carry a fair amount of riders and are down only around 50-60% in ridership. These routes serve a number of medical facilities, including the John Muir Medical Centers in Walnut Creek and Concord and the VA clinic in Martinez.

Staff has been monitoring vehicle loads to ensure that passengers are able to maintain social distancing. Despite reductions in service frequency, crowding has not been an issue, and buses are carrying around 4 passengers per trip on average.

COVID-19 Ridership Trends



Future Service Changes:

Due to the absence of union leadership, County Connection was not able to implement the Summer bid ahead of schedule. It is expected that the Summer bid will proceed as previously scheduled, for implementation on June 7, 2020. As we plan for the Fall bid, the Board should be aware of some limitations that staff is anticipating. The financial uncertainty will be exacerbated by any social distancing requirements, particularly on the 600 series and express service. In the past, some of these trips have carried more than 40 passengers. It would be impossible to allocate five buses to complete a trip previously fulfilled with one bus. We do not have the capital, nor the labor required to meet this level of demand. Therefore, staff is currently evaluating new service levels to hopefully align the new financial picture as well as health guidelines. There is a great degree of uncertainty, and staff will keep the Board apprised of potential service realignments.

Financial Implications:

Although service has been reduced, this does not represent a cost-savings to County Connection given the various types of COVID-19 related absences. Additionally, County Connection stopped collecting fares on March 23rd. The revenue loss is expected to be covered under the CARES Act, which was signed into law on March 27, 2020. Future financial implications are yet to be determined and will be largely based on new levels of service.

Recommendation:

None, for information only.

Action Requested:

None, for information only.