

**To:** Board of Directors

**Date:** 10/25/2021

**From:** Melody Reeb, Manager of Planning

**Reviewed by:**



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**SUBJECT:** September Free Rides Promotion

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**Background:**

In May 2021, the Board approved a promotion offering free rides on all County Connection routes and paratransit services for the month of September. This promotion was part of the regional “All Aboard Bay Area Transit” marketing effort that was aimed at encouraging transit use by providing fare discounts as an incentive. Free rides were also being offered on Tri Delta Transit, WestCAT, and Wheels, and BART provided a 50% discount on all Clipper fares. This coordinated effort to make transit more accessible aligned with the goals of the Blue-Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force and the principles adopted by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission for the distribution of federal stimulus funds.

**Promotional Campaign:**

The multi-agency September promotions provided an opportunity for expanded collaboration on the marketing efforts. In addition to marketing the free fares promotion through the County Connection website, social media platforms, and on buses, staff worked with one of BART’s marketing contractors Zero Company to run digital ads helping extend the reach of the campaign, particularly since those who are not currently using transit are less likely to be interacting with the communication channels that are more typically used. Because Zero Company has worked on previous BART campaigns, they were able to leverage their prior experience and target some of the same audiences for County Connection’s campaign.

Ads were run in both English and Spanish from mid-August through September through programmatic advertising, as well as Google, Facebook, and Twitter. A dedicated webpage was created with information on the September free rides promotion, as well as several other fare promotions.

Overall, there were over 41,000 clicks to the website from the digital ads, and during the campaign the fare promotions webpage was the most visited page on County Connection’s website. The campaign was successful in terms of engagement, with high click-through rates and

low cost per click ratios. Also, while the Spanish language campaign had a much more limited audience size, the click-through rates tended to be higher than for the English campaign.

Although this was the first time County Connection pursued digital ads and we are not able to compare the results to previous efforts, Zero Company did provide BART's September campaign performance metrics as a point of comparison. Despite having a much smaller budget than BART for programmatic advertising (\$17,000 vs. \$120,000), County Connection's campaign performed better in terms of cost per click (\$2.28 vs. \$3.00) and click-through rate (0.171% vs. 0.127%). This is particularly significant given that BART's previous experience has allowed them to optimize their target markets.

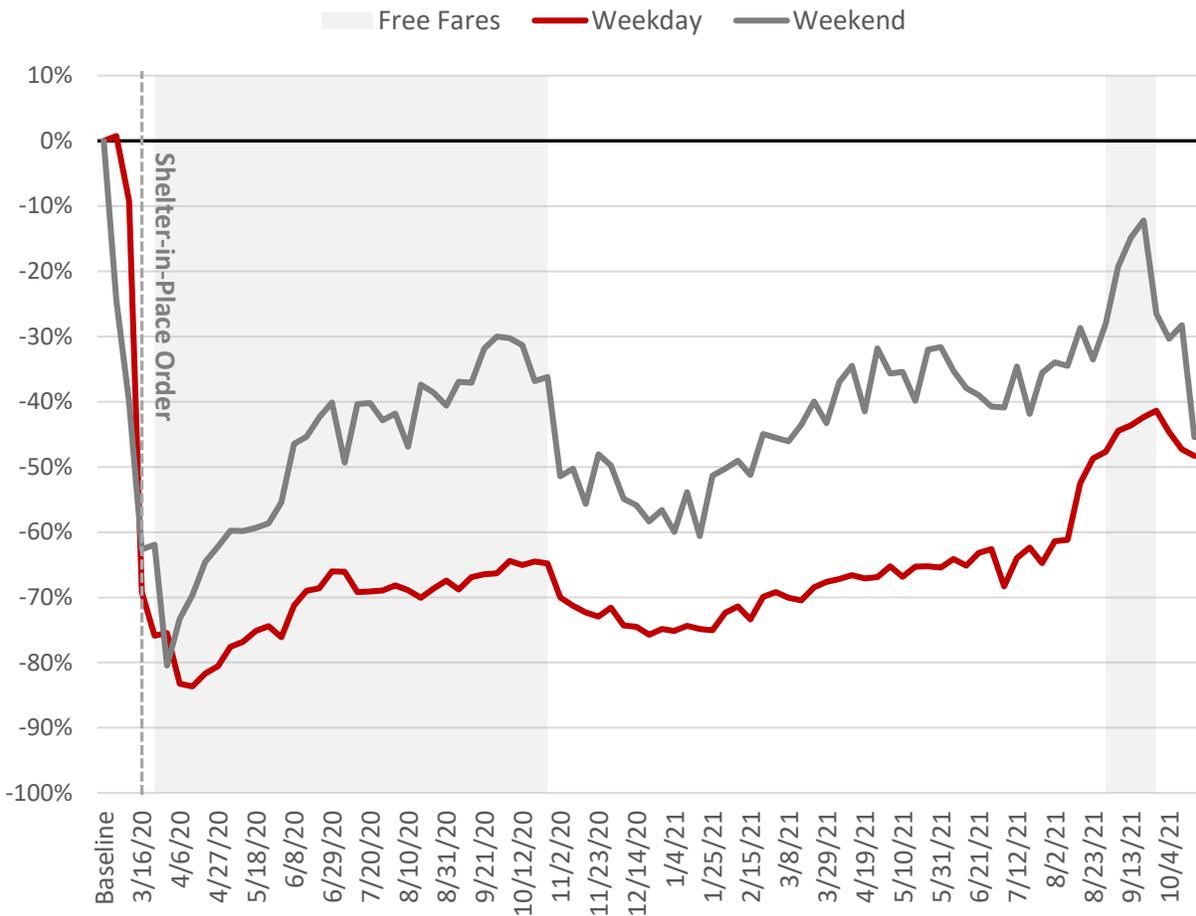
### **Ridership:**

The following chart shows ridership trends since the beginning of the pandemic using February 2020 as a pre-COVID baseline. The chart also highlights the time periods when fares were not being collected, which, in addition to the September promotion, includes the 7 months at the beginning of the pandemic when fare collection was suspended to allow for social distancing.

There was a nearly immediate boost in ridership once the free fares promotion began on September 1<sup>st</sup>. Over the first full week of the promotion, ridership increased about 8% despite the Labor Day holiday. By the end of the month, weekday ridership was averaging about 7,200 daily riders, an increase of about 15% compared to just before the promotion started, and weekend ridership was up 32%. However, most of these ridership gains were lost when fare collection resumed in October, and ridership levels have since returned to those at the end of August. It should be noted that the significant drop in weekend ridership shown at the end of the chart can likely be attributed to severe weather.

There was a similar drop in ridership last November when fare collection was resumed, particularly on weekends. However, there were other factors that likely contributed to the decline in ridership, including a rise in COVID cases and the winter holidays.

## COVID-19 Ridership Trends



### Passenger Survey:

County Connection staff conducted a survey of fixed-route passengers over the last two weeks of September to understand travel patterns and how riders receive information regarding fixed-route service. A total of 252 survey responses were collected, mostly using printed surveys distributed onboard with additional data collected by the Customer Service Mobile Lobby and online via e-mail invitations. The surveys asked riders where their trips began and end, as well as how they learned about the free ride promotion.

Most of the respondents (88%) had heard about the free rides campaign, mostly through signs on the bus (40%) and by word of mouth (32%). While a slight majority of riders (58%) said they would continue to use transit the same amount after the promotion, 35% said they would use it more frequently.

**Financial Implications:**

Costs associated with the marketing campaign including the digital advertising were included in the Promotions budget, and fare revenue losses are being covered by stimulus funds.

**Recommendation:**

None, for information only.

**Action Requested:**

None, for information only.

**Attachments:**

Attachment 1 – Digital Ad Campaign Graphics

Attachment 2 – Survey Instrument

Attachment 1 – Digital Ad Campaign Graphics

*County Connection*

ride  
**FREE**  
on any route

**FREE RIDES IN  
SEPTEMBER**

**LEARN MORE**

*County Connection*

ride  
**FREE**  
on any route

**FREE RIDES IN SEPTEMBER**

**LEARN MORE**

Attachment 2 – Survey Instrument

# County Connection *Survey*

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Name/Nombre:</b>   | <b>Phone #/ # de teléfono:</b>   |
| <b>Email/Correo electrónico:</b>  |  |
| <b>1. Where did you begin your trip today?</b><br>¿Dónde comenzaste tu viaje hoy?   | <b>Route #/ Ruta #:</b><br><b>Stop Name/ Nombre de parada:</b>   |
| <b>2. Where will you end your trip today?</b><br>¿Dónde terminará tu viaje hoy?   | <b>Route #/ Ruta #:</b><br><b>Stop Name/ Nombre de parada:</b>   |
| <b>3. What is the purpose of your trip today?</b><br>¿Cuál es el propósito de tu viaje hoy?   | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Work/ Trabajo</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>School/ Escuela</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Recreation/ Recreación</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Shopping/ Compras</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Medical/ Médico(a)</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Other (specify)/ Otro (especifique):</b>                                      |
| <b>4. How often did you ride County Connection in the past year?</b><br>¿Con qué frecuencia ha viajado en County Connection este último año?  | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Daily/ Diario(a)</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Few times per week/ Algunas veces por semana</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Once per week/ Una vez por semana</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Other (specify)/ Otra (especifique):</b>  |
| <b>5. Had you heard of the Free Rides in September Promotion?</b><br>¿Ya sabía de los viajes gratuitos en septiembre?   | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes/ Sí</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>  |
| <b>6. How did you hear about Free Rides in September?</b><br>¿Cómo se enteró de los viajes gratuitos en septiembre?   | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>County Connection Website/ Sitio web de County Connection</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Social Media (i.e. Facebook/Twitter)</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Signs on Bus/ Informes en el autobús</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Word of mouth/ De boca a boca</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Other (specify)/ Otra (especifique):</b> |
| <b>7. How frequently will you use transit after the September free rides end?</b><br>¿Con qué frecuencia utilizará el transporte público después de que finalicen los viajes gratuitos de septiembre? | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>More frequently/ Más frecuente</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Same/ Igual</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Less frequently/ Menos frecuente</b>  |

