

To: Administration and Finance Committee

Date: 4/23/2024

From: Pranjal Dixit, Manager of Planning

Reviewed by: *W.C.*

SUBJECT: Midday Free Policy

Background:

In March 2019, County Connection implemented changes to its fare structure, including the elimination of the Midday Free Program (10am-2pm) for most riders. However, recognizing the specific needs of young adults with disabilities transitioning to adulthood, County Connection partnered with the Bridge Program in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District to continue Midday Free Program.

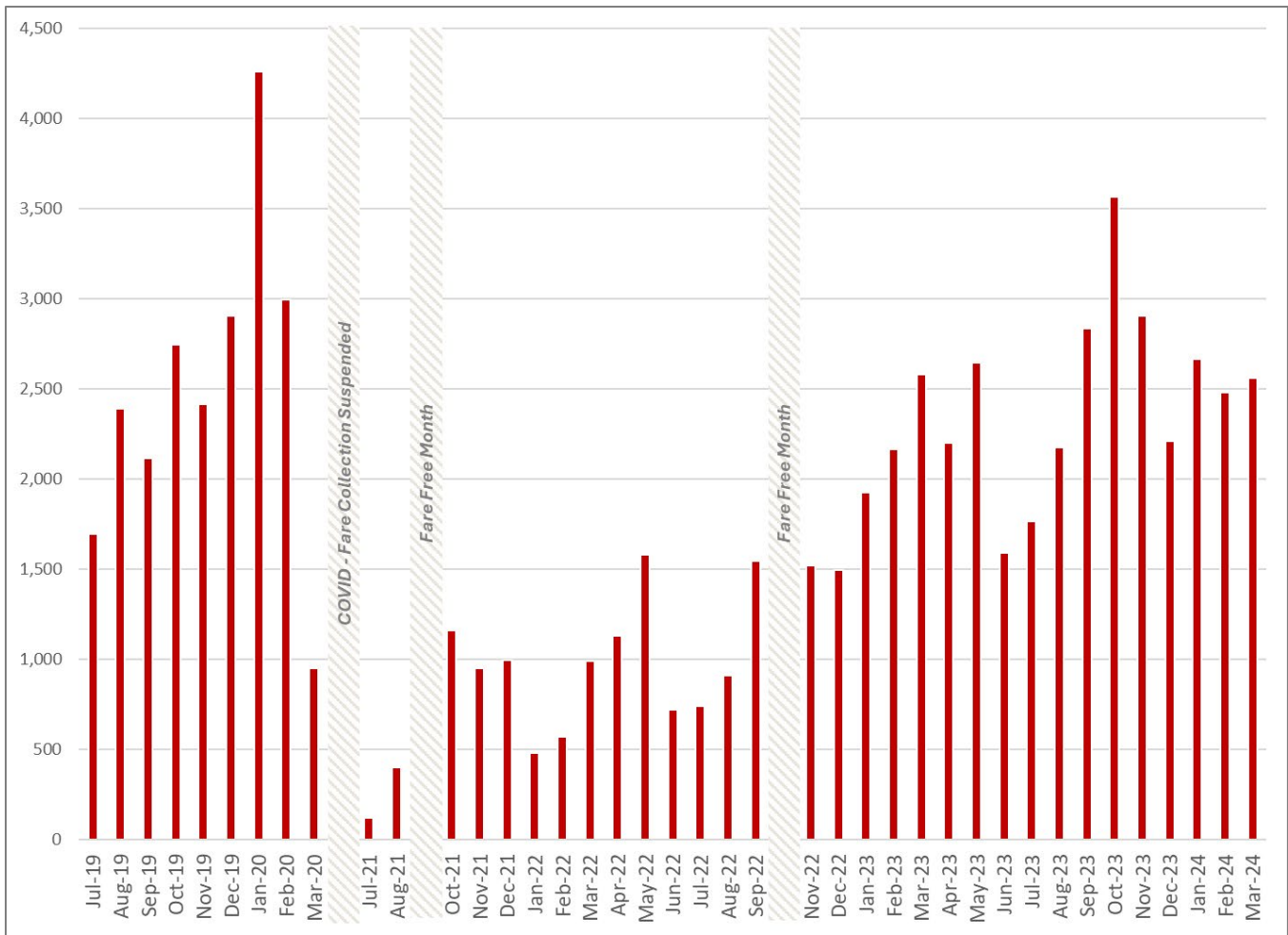
The Bridge Program serves individuals aged 18-22 with disabilities who have finished high school. Their program equips participants with the knowledge and skills necessary for independent living. To ensure Bridge Program participants could continue utilizing public transportation during the midday fare period, County Connection worked with program staff to establish a proper identification system for boarding buses. The program's success is evident by the lack of reported complaints from Bridge Program staff.

County Connection later expanded the Midday Free Program access to participants at RES Success in Pleasant Hill and Martinez in April 2019. Similar to the Bridge Program, RES Success provides adults with developmental disabilities a comprehensive range of services, including academics, social skills development, and vocational training.

County Connection again expanded the program in December 2019 to San Ramon Valley USD Transition Program located at Del Amigo High School. Given the recurring requests for the Midday Free Program, A&F Committee had directed staff to analyze the sustainability of a Midday Free Program given the ongoing requests from school districts and nonprofit organizations.

Usage:

The program has 190 participants across the two programs (Bridge Program and RES Success Program) with a total of 51,559 rides provided between July 2021 to March 2024. There has been a steady increase in ridership and currently averages about 2,500 rides a month which is slightly under the pre-pandemic level of 2,700 rides a month. The fare revenue loss of \$1.10 is currently being offset through Measure J Line 20a grant administered by TRANSPAC.



Policy:

Currently the Midday Free Program is funded through the Measure J Line 20a funds that is aimed for support of transportation services and related capital expenditures for seniors and people with disabilities provided by TRANSPAC jurisdictions and public and private non-profit agencies operating in the TRANSPAC area. Given the competitive landscape for limited Measure J funding within the TRANSPAC region, along with potential requests for program inclusion in our Midday Free program, establishing a clear policy for evaluating these proposals is essential. A policy would ensure the program's long-term sustainability while also address the following:

- **Setup Evaluation Processes:** Developing an evaluation process for new requests for expansion from similar programs in the region.
- **Improved Tracking Mechanisms:** Developing a more robust system to track interest, program usage and measure its impact.
- **Standardized Identification System:** Implementing a uniform design for participant identification to streamline program administration.

By addressing these areas, we can ensure the program's continued success and make informed decisions about future expansion opportunities based on the funding available.

Financial Implications:

Measure J Line 20a funds is being used to offset lost fare revenue (\$1.00 per ride plus 10% administrative costs) through FY 2024. County Connection has applied for \$79,200 in Measure J Line 20a funds for FY 2025-27 and continuation of the program is contingent upon the funding available.

Recommendation:

By implementing a formal Midday Free Policy, staff can effectively track program interest and usage data. This data will be instrumental in strengthening the program for the next funding cycle. Therefore, staff strongly recommends that the A&F Committee approve the adoption of the new policy.

Action Requested:

Staff requests that the A&F Committee forward the recommendation to adopt the Midday Free Policy to the Board for approval.

Attachments:

Attachment 1: Midday Free Policy

Midday Free Program Policy

Program Overview

The Midday Free Program (“Program”) allows participants to ride any County Connection bus for free from 10 am to 2 pm. The Program is intended for organizations that serve people with disabilities—particularly transitional age youth—to provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to make a successful transition to an independent, adult life. A key part of this is learning how to navigate and use public transit, which also helps to reduce future dependency on paratransit services.

The Midday Free Program allows participating students and their instructors to ride County Connection buses for free to facilitate this type of training. The Program is limited to off-peak hours when capacity is available on existing fixed-route services.

Program Participation Guidelines

Participation in the Program is contingent upon funding being identified to offset lost fare revenue (\$1.00 per ride plus 10% administrative costs). To be considered for the Program, interested organizations must complete a Participant Interest Form in Appendix A. County Connection staff will first determine if there is additional capacity within existing funding. If none is available, staff will work with the organization to identify and apply for additional grant funding.

Participating organizations are expected to assist with the grant application (and re-application) process by completing/updating their Participant Interest Form and providing any additional information as needed. In cases where multiple organizations qualify for a limited pool of grant funds, priority will be given to organizations that have been part of the Program the longest.

Once approved to participate in the Program, organizations are responsible for providing identification cards to their enrolled students and staff. These cards will be used to verify eligibility for program benefits.

Identification Card Requirements

All participating organizations must provide their students and staff with ID cards that meet the following criteria:

- Clearly indicate whether the holder is a student or staff member.
- Include a recent photograph of the holder.

- For organizations within a larger entity (e.g., school district), specify the program or group affiliation.
- Prominently display the latest Midday Free Sticker (offered by County Connection at the fiscal year's start in July) on the front of the card.

Staff members are eligible for free program benefits only when accompanying one (or more) students. Staff cannot utilize the program independently.

Reporting Requirements

Participating organizations must submit an annual report on program usage by July 31st each year. This report should cover usage data from the prior fiscal year (July 1 to June 30) and include details of trips taken, such as origin and destination. Participants may also attach supporting documents such as spreadsheets with details of trips taken including dates, number of participants, trip origin and destination. Timely submission of this report is mandatory for continued participation in the Program. Failure to submit the report by the deadline may result in disqualification.

Appendix A: Midday Free Program – Participant Interest Form

Organization: _____

Address, City, State, Zip: _____

Contact Name: _____

Email Address: _____ Phone: _____

1. Provide a brief overview of your organization, mission, and overall services provided:

2. Do your participants currently use County Connection buses? If so, which route(s)?

3. Do your participants currently use any other transit services? If so, which ones?

4. Please provide the following information:

a. Total number of participants: _____

b. Total number of staff: _____

c. Current average bus use (if any): _____ boardings per day / week / month (circle one)

d. Estimated increase in bus use with Midday Free Program: _____ boardings per day / week / month (circle one)

e. Estimated percentage of participants who cannot afford to pay fares: _____%

5. Where will trips be taken to and from?

6. Please describe the types of activities that the Midday Free Program would support:

7. What benefit(s) would the Midday Free Program provide to your organization?

I certify that the information contained in this application is true and complete to the best of my knowledge.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Title: _____

Appendix C: Midday Free Program – Participant Annual Report

Organization: _____

Address, City, State, Zip: _____

Contact Name: _____

Email Address: _____ Phone: _____

Program Usage

County Connection route(s) used: _____

Total number of participants	
Total number of staff	
Average boardings per day / week / month (circle one)	

Please describe the types of activities and trips that have been taken using the Midday Free Program along with specific examples of trip origin/destination by city/zip code:

What would the impact be if the Midday Free Program were no longer available?

I certify that the information contained in this report is true and complete to the best of my knowledge.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Title: _____