

To: Marketing, Planning, & Legislative Committee

Date: September 24, 2026

From: Andrew M. Smith, Director of Planning & Marketing

Reviewed by: *Ref*

SUBJECT: Year-Round Youth Ride Free (YRF) Program Proposal

Background:

County Connection funded and operated a two-month summer Youth Ride Free (YRF) pilot in June and July 2025, offering fare-free rides to riders aged 5 to 18 systemwide, with Tri Delta Transit and WestCAT participating using their own funding. This program was repeated in June and July 2026, with County Connection's portion funded by Transportation Partnership and Cooperation (TRANSPAC) and the Southwest Area Transportation Committee (SWAT). The success of the pilots demonstrated how a no-pass, no-signup, "get on and go" program like YRF was a very cost-effective method of increasing youth ridership on transit and normalizing transit use for our younger generation.

Program Proposal:

Building on the success of the two YRF pilots, staff recently submitted a request to the TRANSPAC to fund a year-round YRF program. This program would operate in the same manner as the two YRF pilots, with the sole exception of being year-round rather than summer-only. This request will be considered by the TRANSPAC Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and the Board at their October meetings.

Financial Implications:

None. The requested funds would fully offset the costs of not charging a fare for youth passengers, and the resulting increase in ridership can be accommodated within County Connection's existing service and schedules.

Recommendation:

None. Information only.

Action Requested:

None. Information only.

Attachments:

Attachment 1: Proposal for year-round Youth Ride Free program (TRANSPAC funding request)

September 17, 2026

TRANSPAC Committee
c/o Matthew Todd, Managing Director
1320 Mt. Diablo Boulevard, Suite 206
Walnut Creek, CA 94596

Re: Proposal for year-round Youth Ride Free program

Chair Carlson and committee members:

Building on the success of two consecutive summer Youth Ride Free (YRF) programs, County Connection respectfully requests the TRANSPAC Committee's consideration of a proposal to institute a year-round Youth Ride Free program that would serve youth and students ages five to 18 in the TRANSPAC and SWAT regions.

Background:

For young people, freedom of movement is an important part of gaining their independence and a steppingstone to adulthood, and public transit is an ideal way for youth to achieve this freedom without driving or being driven by automobile, and as an added benefit, transit provides freedom to parents who don't need to drive their children to school or their activities. Additionally, people who start riding transit in their youth are more likely to continue riding transit as adults.

The need to pay a fare can be a greater barrier for youths than adults for various reasons including lack of financial resources and/or lost fare products such as Clipper cards and discounted passes. Having to pay a fare can also present a barrier to receiving an education, as described by Vanessa Castillo, LCSW, PPSC, a Social Worker Specialist with the Mt. Diablo Unified School District:

"As a School Social Worker, I work daily with students who are eager to learn but face significant obstacles in simply getting to school. One of the biggest barriers is the rising cost of public transportation, which forces many families to make impossible choices between necessities like food, rent, and bus fare.

The consequences of this are devastating. Chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10% or more of the school year—is a leading predictor of academic failure and school dropout. According to the California Department of Education, students who are chronically absent are significantly less likely to achieve proficiency in reading and math, graduate on time, or pursue higher education. In our district, we see firsthand how transportation insecurity disproportionately affects our most vulnerable students, including low-income families, newcomers, and unaccompanied youth.

Every day a student misses school, they lose access not only to education but also to critical resources such as free meals, mental health support, and safe learning environments. Absences don't just impact the students themselves—our schools and community suffer as well. When students aren't in class, school funding is reduced, learning gaps widen, and future opportunities diminish."

Summer Youth Ride Free Pilot:

The summer Youth Ride Free (YRF) pilot program was designed to boost ridership over the summer months while helping young people build familiarity and confidence in riding transit. In June and July 2025, County Connection launched and funded the YRF program, a two-month pilot that allowed riders 18 and under to travel fare-free on all routes. Tri Delta Transit and WestCAT also participated in the regional effort, paid for with their own funding. Designed to remove barriers to access, the program required no application, special passes, or ID.

The 2025 summer YRF pilot was a huge success, with approximately 25,400 recorded youth trips across County Connection over the two-month period – a 1,600% increase in participation compared to the previous summer's youth program. Building on this success, County Connection, Tri Delta Transit, and WestCAT brought back Youth Ride Free for summer 2026. Funding for County Connection's 2026 Youth Ride Free program was provided by Measure J contributions from TRANSPAC and SWAT, with CCTA providing help with countywide promotional support, including engagement with school districts, city and county offices, and libraries.

The combination of free fares and the removal of barriers to entry (i.e. no need to sign up for a program to obtain a special pass) saw continued success in 2026 with the summer YRF program resulting in a further increase in ridership of approximately 4.5% over the previous summer. The following is a summary of County Connection's YRF ridership for the summer 2026 program:

- Total YRF Ridership: Approximately 26,500 (up from approximately 25,400 in 2025)
- YRF ridership as a percentage of all rides: 6.7% (up from 6.4% in Summer 2025)
- YRF ridership as a percentage of all rides, when excluding free routes: 15.3% (up from 14.8% in Summer 2025)

Proposed Year-Round YRF Program:

As requested, County Connection is submitting a proposal to requesting funding for a continuous year-round YRF program to provide free fares on all County Connection buses to youths aged six to 18. This year-round YRF program would operate in the same manner as the two previous summer YRF programs by allowing all passengers 18 and under to just get on the bus and. County Connection would invoice the cost for reimbursement of YRF fares (\$1.00 per trip) on a quarterly basis, using passenger data collected by bus operators for each boarding.

As shown in the tables below, County Connection estimates the cost of a year-round YRF program to be approximately \$423,000 to \$545,000 per year, depending on whether or not existing free routes continue to be funded. LCTOP funding that currently pays for all fares on Routes 11, 14,

16, 99X, 311, 314, and 316, as is anticipated to be discontinued beginning in July 2027. These estimates also assume a 15% long-term increase in youth ridership systemwide over fiscal year (FY) 2026 resulting from induced demand, though youth ridership levels will need to be closely monitored as the growth rate during the school year may be different than during the summer, and a year-round program may be more effective in attracting new riders than a time-limited program. Below are the calculations, in 6-month increments and annually. The start/end time period is flexible and can be adjusted based on the Committee's implementation preference.

January - June (6 months)

RTPC	Rides	Fare Loss w/LCTOP	Fare Loss w/o LCTOP
TRANSPAC	118,000	\$118,000	\$152,000
SWAT	84,000	\$84,000	\$108,000
Total	202,000	\$202,000	\$260,000

July - December (6 months)

RTPC	Rides	Fare Loss w/LCTOP	Fare Loss w/o LCTOP
TRANSPAC	129,000	\$129,000	\$166,000
SWAT	92,000	\$92,000	\$119,000
Total	221,000	\$221,000	\$285,000

Annual (12 months)

RTPC	Rides	Fare Loss w/LCTOP	Fare Loss w/o LCTOP
TRANSPAC	247,000	\$247,000	\$318,000
SWAT	176,000	\$176,000	\$227,000
Total	423,000	\$423,000	\$545,000

The proposed year-round YRF program will effectively and efficiently provide mobility to all youth throughout the County Connection service area at low cost, and with no overhead or administrative expenses. It builds upon a proven formula with strong local support, and with TRANSPAC funding can begin as soon as January 2027.

Sincerely,



Bill Churchill
General Manager