

To: Marketing, Planning, & Legislative Committee

Date: May 1, 2026

From: Ryan Jones, Manager of Marketing & Communications

Reviewed by: AMS

SUBJECT: Youth Ride Free Rollout Plan

Background:

The Youth Ride Free program is 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 Youth Ride Free program, a two-month pilot that allowed riders 18 and under to travel fare-free on all fixed-route buses. Tri Delta Transit and WestCAT also participated in the regional effort. Designed to remove barriers to access, the program required no application, special passes, or ID.

In the program's first year, Youth Ride Free generated approximately 25,000 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, Contra Costa Transportation Authority's (CCTA) Summer Youth Pass, which they discontinued later that year. Building on this success, County Connection, Tri Delta Transit, and WestCAT will bring back Youth Ride Free for summer 2026. Funding for County Connection's 2026 Youth Ride Free program is being provided by Measure J contributions from TRANSPAC and SWAT. CCTA has also offered to help provide countywide promotional support.

Additional Information:

County Connection staff has developed a marketing plan to roll out Youth Ride Free, building on last year's strategy, while fine tuning successful engagement approaches such as the Youth Ride Free Leaderboard that allowed students to track their rides and compete for weekly prizes. Staff is also coordinating with Tri Delta Transit and WestCAT to ensure consistent, broad countywide messaging for the shared program. CCTA will provide general promotional support of all the agency's programs.

Identifying Audience:

While all youth and families in central Contra Costa are part of the target audience, staff has identified two primary groups most likely to respond to Youth Ride Free messaging:

- **Youth ages 13–16**, who are beginning to gain independence and are more likely to travel on their own. Many do not yet have driver's licenses or are seeking alternatives to relying on others for rides.
- **Parents and guardians of children ages 6–12**, who are key decision-makers and typically manage their children's activities and schedules.

Key Pillars of Campaign Messaging:

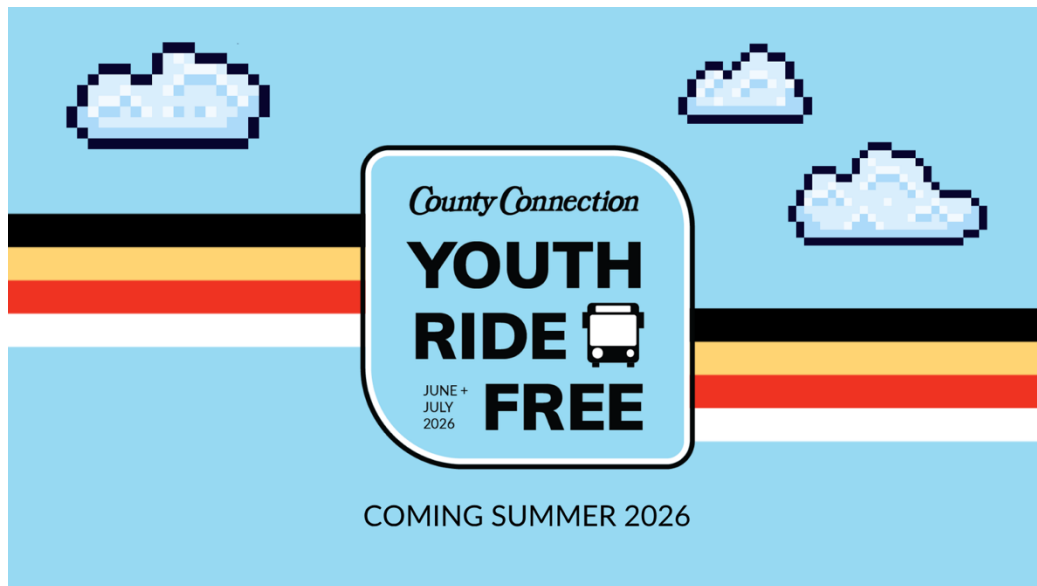
- **Freedom** – No cost, no barriers, no asking for rides
- **Independence** – Youth moving on their own terms
- **Discovery** – New places accessible by transit
- **Social** – Riding with friends

Marketing Timeline:

DATE	ACTION	NOTES
April 20-24	Preparation, Soft Launch	Prepare assets for distribution. Set launch dates, work on assembling media packets and other partner marketing toolkits. Marketing staff work with County Connection leadership and other transit agency stakeholders on approving final details and establishing connections with school districts to get information out to parents and students before summer starts.
April 27-May 1	Public Marketing, Phase 1	Work with partnering agencies and CCTA to begin distributing digital marketing toolkits and working with area school districts.
May 4-22	Public Marketing, Phase 2	Distribute marketing toolkits, continue with social media push ads, and work with area school districts. Create buzz, share first look of program and broader details with the public. Begin promotion of leaderboard.
May 25-29	Public Marketing, Phase 3	Final push of program launch messaging to public and community stakeholders.
June 1	Program Launch	Program begins. Leaderboard goes live.
June 1-30	First Assessment Period	Marketing campaign continues, Planning staff to report on weekly boardings, tracking hot spots.
July 1-31*	Second Assessment	Marketing campaign continues, Planning staff to report on weekly boardings, tracking hot spots. Marketing staff to start sharing survey, facilitated by CCTA.
*July 13-31	CCTA survey push	Coordinate with CCTA to push out Youth Ride Free survey.

Additional Engagement Strategies:

- **Adding to Visual Identity:** The Youth Ride Free visual identity is intentionally simple and uncluttered, reinforcing the ease of the program—no fares, no application, no ID required. Additional 8-bit/video gaming, pixel-inspired graphics are being incorporated as a core visual motif. This stylistic direction taps into current youth trends—such as games like Minecraft, GIF/emoji messaging, and retro-inspired design—while also evoking a sense of nostalgia for parents who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s. The result is a visual identity that feels both contemporary and familiar, appealing across generations.



- **Youth Ride Free Leaderboard:** The Leaderboard is an engagement tool where youth ages 13-18 can log rides and receive weekly prizes for completed tasks, such as riding an express route or transferring between buses. The Leaderboard will also have a newsletter component, The Leaderboard Loop, which will be sent weekly to participating riders, letting them know about upcoming challenges and activities such as movies-in-the-park or farmer’s markets in their areas (and the County Connection routes that will get them there).
- **School and Community Engagement:** Marketing toolkits with printed assets (posters, flyers, stickers) will be sent to area schools, local business, and community organizations, asking them to please help us spread the word about Youth Ride Free. In 2025, this community engagement proved to be very important, as schools and parents began to share the news of the program, our marketing reach compounded.
- **Digital Ad, Push Notifications:** A goal of staff is to reach new audiences that may not otherwise connect with County Connection messaging through our standard social media channels. Last year’s strategy focused on before-the-movie Youth Ride Free ads in area movie theaters; however, it was difficult to track the impact of those ads. This year’s focus will be to use location-targeted advertising that displays our messaging to cell phone users who have travelled in select areas around central Contra Costa County (primarily shopping centers in Concord, Walnut Creek, Pleasant Hill, and Martinez that are served by County Connection bus routes).

Additional Visual Treatments:

Staff have been working with Tri Delta Transit, WestCAT, and CCTA to coordinate their individual marketing plans and create a shared countywide marketing plan. Because of time constraints, the participating agencies decided to use the same color palettes and logos as last year (below, middle and right), however, all parties agreed there should be a unified look for countywide marketing, so County Connection staff created an additional, agency-free visual treatment (below, left).



The look for countywide use has a YRF “lemon” lockup, free of any agency wordmarks. Additionally, the stripes through the lockup are different, encompassing all the key agency brand colors (or references to them).

The logo for Tri Delta Transit (TDT) has a YRF “lemon” lockup with the TDT wordmark as a header. The color palette aligns with the agency brand.

The logo for WestCAT has a YRF “lemon” lockup with the WestCAT wordmark as a header. The color palette aligns with the agency brand.

Data Collection:

Staff will coordinate with CCTA to distribute a Youth Ride Free survey.

Financial Implications:

Any costs associated with events are included in the Promotions Budget.

Recommendation:

None, for information only.

Action Requested:

None, for information only.

Attachments:

None.