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Effectiveness of Public Transit for Lower Income Communities in the Bay Area

A Case Study of AC Transit in the Bay Area

By Idyl Farah

Executive Summary

Public transit is a key essential for metropolitan populations, supporting essential daily activities and providing an affordable mode of mobility, especially for low-income residents. However, concerns persist regarding the accessibility and effectiveness of public transit systems, particularly bus services, within Alameda and Contra Costa Counties in the Bay Area, California. Particularly, in the East Bay, questions of bus services are called into question. Darell Owens, an advocate with the East Bay Transit Riders Union, highlights disparities in funding allocation, noting that counties like Alameda and Contra Costa receive less funding compared to other Bay Area regions and have witnessed cuts in bus lines, especially in certain neighborhoods¹. This is alarming as prior research shows that reduced access to public transit heavily impacts low-income communities than any other groups². It is urgent for our Californian decision makers to reinvest back into the public through public transit systems and advocate for the needs of all Californians. Not only would public transit solve our current issues of reducing carbon emission but increasing investments in public transit reduces the reliance on personal vehicles thus aligning itself with the State of California Governor Newsom's Executive Orders goals to reduce carbon emissions by 2045.³

Background

With rising global temperatures, public transportation has garnered worldwide attention and has recently seen a resurgence due to its capacity to reduce carbon emissions⁴. However, the advantages of public transportation extend beyond environmental benefits.

¹ Owens, Darrell. "How California Is Killing Public Transit in the East Bay." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 Dec. 2023, www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/ac-transit-bus-oakland-18566529.php.

² Ramey, Corinne. "How America's Transportation System Discriminates against the Most Vulnerable." *Slate Magazine*, Slate, 27 Feb. 2015, [slate.com/news-and-politics/2015/02/americas-transportation-system-discriminates-against-minorities-and-poor-federal-funding-for-roads-buses-and-mass-transit-still-segregates-americans.html](https://www.slate.com/news-and-politics/2015/02/americas-transportation-system-discriminates-against-minorities-and-poor-federal-funding-for-roads-buses-and-mass-transit-still-segregates-americans.html). & Nzegwu, Marybelle. "Transportation and Social Justice in the Bay Area." *Public Advocates*, 10 Mar. 2015, publicadvocates.org/resources/blog/transportation-social-justice-bay-area/. Accessed 26 Jan. 2024.

³ Matouka, Neil. "Carbon Neutrality by 2045 ." *Opr.ca.gov*, Office of Planning and Research, 2024, opr.ca.gov/climate/carbon-neutrality.html#:~:text=Supporting%20California.

⁴ Litman, Todd. "Evaluating Rail Transit Benefits: A Comment." *Transport Policy*, vol. 14, no. 1, Jan. 2007, pp. 94–97, www.vtppi.org/tranben.pdf, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2006.09.003>.

Studies have shown that it can have positive social, economic, and public health impacts for riders, bus operators, and governmental entities alike⁵.

Public transportation offers cost-effective alternatives to taxis, alleviates traffic congestion, and promotes healthier lifestyles by encouraging walking⁶. There are detrimental effects of insufficient funding for public transportation, particularly for transportation-disadvantaged individuals, like those from lower income brackets, disabled persons, and the young or elderly. For example, these disadvantaged communities makeup more of the ridership on public transportation as they do not have the adequate means to financially support themselves in getting an automobile. Thus without access to reliable and accessible transportation, these communities are most affected and cut from essential services such as access to healthcare, better income jobs and educational facilities⁷. This phenomenon is sometimes dubbed as "transportation apartheid"⁸ as those of the lower class are disadvantaged when public transit services are reduced. More importantly, the working class is impacted by how we shape our transportation policies. Individuals who wish to work are becoming more reliant on forms of mobility, which typically requires vehicles as jobs are less concentrated in one area of the city⁹. Therefore, those without vehicles are disfavored for traveling to areas with concentration of employment. Findings have shown that that more individuals rely on personal vehicles to get to work since public transportation is ineffective at providing access to job-rich locations¹⁰. This reinforces socioeconomic inequities, supporting Crain et al's argument that transportation service reductions disproportionately harm low-income communities, limiting their access to opportunities for employment. This

⁵ Zhang, Chunqin, et al. "Evaluating the Comprehensive Benefit of Public Transport Service – the Perspective of Three Stakeholders." *Promet-Traffic & Transportation*, vol. 34, no. 2, 31 Mar. 2022, pp. 179–193, <https://doi.org/10.7307/ptt.v34i2.3855>. & Litman, Todd. "Evaluating Rail Transit Benefits: A Comment." *Transport Policy*, vol. 14, no. 1, Jan. 2007, pp. 94–97, www.vtpi.org/tranben.pdf, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2006.09.003>.

⁶ Litman, Todd. "Evaluating Rail Transit Benefits: A Comment." *Transport Policy*, vol. 14, no. 1, Jan. 2007, pp. 94–97, www.vtpi.org/tranben.pdf, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2006.09.003>.

⁷ Sharma, Anisha. *The Effect of Public Transportation Policy on Low-Income and Minority Communities*. 2021.

⁸ Bullard, Robert D. , et al. "Dismantling Transportation Apartheid in the United States before and after Disasters Strike." American Bar Association, 1 July 2007, www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/human_rights_vol34_2007/summer2007/hr_summer07_bujoto/.

⁹ Blumenberg, Evelyn, and Gregory Pierce. "The Drive to Work: The Relationship between Transportation Access, Housing Assistance, and Employment among Participants in the Welfare to Work Voucher Program." *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, vol. 37, no. 1, 9 July 2016, pp. 66–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456x16633501>.

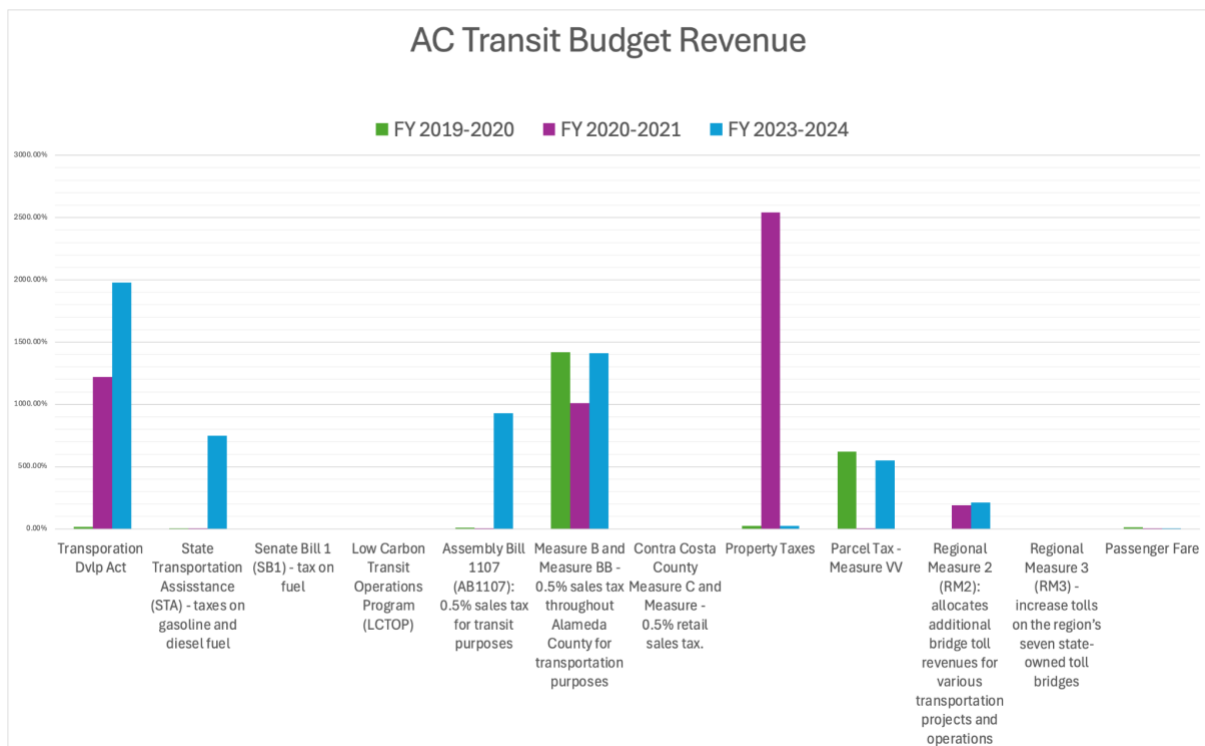
¹⁰ Blumenberg, Evelyn, and Gregory Pierce. "The Drive to Work: The Relationship between Transportation Access, Housing Assistance, and Employment among Participants in the Welfare to Work Voucher Program." *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, vol. 37, no. 1, 9 July 2016, pp. 66–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456x16633501>.

underscores the need for sustainable strategies to ensure continued access to public transit for marginalized communities as their economic circumstances evolve.

Data Findings

To be able to know how effective public transportation is, we need to understand where the money is being used in terms of public transportation in the East Bay, looking more specifically at one of the biggest operators, Alameda-Contra Costa Transit, also known as AC Transit. One avenue to push for better public transit policies is to understand where the money is being spent and ways to advocate for better and accessible transportation.

Through an overview of publicly accessible records from AC Transit, a huge part of their revenue is from local sources such as: taxes revenues as transit receives certain percentages of property taxes, parcel taxes, fuel and diesel taxes, Bay Area bridges tolls and more as seen from the following graph. Other parts of the funding is from the state through these different acts and bills: the Transportation Development Act, State Transportation Assistance (STA), Senate Bill 1 (SB1) and Low Carbon Transit Operations Program (LCTOP). And lastly part of the revenue is generated through bus fares by riders.



Data collected by analyzing AC Transit Streams of Revenue¹¹

¹¹ AC Transit. "Budget | Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District." *Www.actransit.org*, www.actransit.org/budget.

The story through data tells us that transportation is heavily funded by these top 3 sources: Measure B and BB (a 0.5% sales tax throughout Alameda County for transportation purposes), the Transportation Development Act and Assembly Bill 1107 (0.5% sales tax for transit purposes). Intuitively, if we are thinking of making public transportation more accessible and increasing routes, the current would be to increase aspects of the revenue that make up the bigger part which are the Measure B and BB, the transportation Development Act and the Assembly Bill which are mostly telling to increase tax revenues. However, tax revenues might not be a smart move for California voters as cost of living has increased due to the increased level of inflation.

On the flip side, the AC Transit data shows that there could be other ways to increase their revenue in sources that are less, such as the Contra Costa County Measure C and the Regional Measure 3 (taxes on the region's 7 state owned bridges). Perhaps these could be other avenues of funding that the AC transit can levy on to increase revenue to create more accessible routes for the East Bay community.

As noted, analyzing data only highlights one side of the story on how we can improve public transit in the East Bay. More research is needed to find other ways, either through interviews with AC transit officials to understand ways to make sure our public transit system is supporting all our communities. I believe that more extensive research, data analysis and interviews can help us better understand in what ways perhaps revenue has an impact in allowing more money to be spent to respond to public needs. Nevertheless, through better education of our local transit systems and more collective action we can be more aware of community needs.

Policy Recommendations

1. Opening Listening Sessions and Public Comments

To better understand community needs, AC Transit should increase local participation through listening sessions and public comments. This approach ensures that public needs are addressed in transit planning. The ongoing AC Transit realignment plan, aimed at reassessing routes post-COVID to better serve the community, is a step in the right direction ¹².

¹² AC Transit "AC Transit Realign | Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District." *Www.ac transit.org*, 2024, www.actransit.org/realign#Realign.

Additional data analysis and community interviews are recommended to enhance this process.

Advantages

- Promoting Local Participation: Ensures the transit system reflects community needs by giving East Bay communities a platform to be heard.
- New Ideas: Open public hearings can generate innovative solutions and alternative perspectives that the agency might not have considered.

Disadvantages/Challenges

- Inability to fully target transit-disadvantaged communities: As mentioned earlier, transit-disadvantaged communities particularly comprising lower-income communities, the elderly and the youth are sometimes often face barriers due to work, school, or transportation issues. Usually those who are able to make it to public hearings are those that are fortunate enough and well off to attend those listening sessions.
 - Potential Solutions: A potential solution is perhaps to collaborate with local community leaders who already have trusted connections to transit-disadvantaged communities to ensure that the voices of all are heard.
- Issue of Conflict: Diverse opinions can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts during public hearings. The coordinator leading these public hearings should be able to manage and mediate the conversation ensuring that all sides and concerns are heard.
 - Potential Solution: Train coordinators to mediate conversations effectively, ensuring all sides are heard and concerns are addressed constructively.

2. Cross-Sector Collaboration to Expand Transit Routes to Disadvantaged Communities

In 2004, the voter-approved FasTracks¹³ initiative led to the expansion of various modes of transportation, including bus transit, light rail, and commuter rail tracks, with a focus on

¹³ Regional Transportation District. "FasTracks." *Rtd-Denver.vercel.app*, 2022, www.rtd-denver.com/open-records/reports-and-policies/facts-and-figures/fastracks.

assisting lower-income communities. This success was achieved through collaboration between government entities, nonprofits, and funders. A similar initiative could significantly enhance the effectiveness of the East Bay transit system for all residents.

Advantages

- Resources Sharing Leading to Better Outcomes: A cross-sector collaboration between government, non profit and private funders can lead to a more comprehensive and inclusive transit system. Not only can there be a more holistic approach, but expertise from each sector can be combined, and the division of work becomes easier when done together rather than alone.
- Diversify Sources of Funding: Denver's FasTracks project is funded through a combination of local tax revenue, private contributions, and federal support. This approach helps distribute the financial burden and alleviates the strain on government budgets, which is particularly important given the current budget shortfall in California.

Disadvantages/Challenges

- Planning and finding partnerships: A lot of planning and research will need to be done to analyze which communities don't have access to public transit and to secure partnerships with other local organizations that want to help with these initiatives. This requires long-term planning and funding. Just like the FasTracks initiative, which has been making progress every year since it started in 2004.
- Coordination Problems: Working with cross-sector initiatives can sometimes lead to slower progress due to differences in each sector's workflow and organizational structure. As with any partnership, coordination issues are likely to arise.
 - Potential Solution: Therefore, it is crucial to collaborate with partners who are genuinely committed to helping local communities.
- Increase Funding: This initiative will be costly and will require substantial contracts, which might be a challenge to consider. However, investing in our future generations now will help ensure they benefit from a more equitable public transit system.

Recommendations

Making public transit more accessible for lower-income communities involves a few key steps. These policy recommendations offer a lot to consider as we think about what we want the future of public transit in California to look like. Investing in better public transit now will create a more equitable system for future generations. By following these recommendations, we can work towards a transit system that serves everyone better and helps build a more connected and fair community. The conversation doesn't end here, more research and continued effort are needed to ensure we're creating truly equitable public transit policies.