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# What Can Be Done About Falling Transit Ridership in the Bay Area?

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## Introduction

Since 2017, the San Francisco Bay Area has seen both a significant loss of transit patronage overall and a concentration of peak-period commute trips, leading to overcrowding that upsets passengers and strains agency resources. At the same time, ridership at off-peak times, on weekends, and in non-central parts of the region has dropped, in some cases dramatically. Researchers at the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies have examined these recent Bay Area transit ridership trends in a report for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, in order to identify possible causes of falling transit use and potential policy responses. Key policy recommendations from this study are summarized below and in the accompanying table. For details on the extent of ridership loss and possible explanations, see our policy briefs entitled “The Bay Area Is Losing Transit Ridership — But Transit Commute Trips are Growing” and “Why Is Bay Area Transit Ridership Falling?”

## Policy Framework

**The more expensive path to expanding ridership — currently being pursued in the Bay Area — is increasing peak capacity on systems and routes struggling with peak-period crush loads.** Examples include: lengthening trains at rush hour, adding more service in commute directions, creating more transit-only lanes, adding more core capacity at the center of the BART and Muni Metro networks, and eventually constructing a second Transbay Tube.

*Regional policymakers should consider broader changes to transportation networks and housing patterns that affect transit use.*

Such strategies will help retain or even grow peak-period and peak-direction ridership, although they may do as much or more to improve trip satisfaction and speed for existing riders as to attract new ones. However, in light of our findings that transit services in outlying parts of the region today have, on average, experienced proportionally larger ridership losses than services in denser areas, performance analyses of transit capital projects like these should 1) include specific evaluations of how effectively the project connects *concentrations* of housing to workplaces and 2) consider the development of more housing in job-rich areas as either an alternative or complement to the project.

**Transit agencies should change fare and service policies to help reverse the decline in off-peak and non-commuter trips.** These policies could include: reducing or eliminating fares at off-peak times, shortening midday, evening, and weekend headways, adding more service in counter-commute directions, and making ridehail companies

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better complements to transit. These strategies will both relieve crowding at rush hour and fill underutilized capacity during the off peak. However, while off-peak, off-direction services are where ridership losses have been greatest, they also may be where transit operators have the least control over the factors behind those losses.

**Local agencies should collaborate to integrate regional transit services to provide seamless mobility.** These efforts should include:

- Technology platforms that integrate trip planning and fare payment across jurisdictions and service providers
- Innovative public and private sector mobility services to improve first/last-mile access to and from transit, to help revive transit ridership in areas outside of the region's core
- Robust data from private new mobility and micromobility operators, shared on an ongoing basis for public policymaking and planning purposes.

**Land use policies should encourage concentrations of housing and jobs in transit-friendly districts** accompanied by well-designed affordability and anti-displacement policies. These policies should include:

- Transit-oriented development (TOD) along rail lines but also in areas currently served by, or suitable for, bus service
- A broadened concept of TOD to include land-use planning strategies that increase employment and housing densities near one another
- Increased housing and employment thresholds as a funding requirement for transit projects to receive a variety of regional funding sources.

**Regional policymakers should consider broader changes to transportation networks and housing patterns that affect transit use:** parking policy, road pricing, housing affordability, regional land use policy, and changes in the socioeconomic characteristics of transit-friendly neighborhoods. In particular, these broader strategies should include:

- Road- and parking-pricing programs that can manage traffic congestion and generate needed revenues for transportation improvements. These policies benefit transit by encouraging drivers to consider less costly alternatives and by making transit more attractive, particularly for short trips, by reducing street traffic and cruising for parking that slow down buses and streetcars
- Increasing the supply of housing in already built-up areas, which can increase affordability and create dense, transit-friendly environments. Reducing minimum parking requirements can lower land development costs to ensure that low-income households can continue to live in and move into these neighborhoods.

Increasing affordable housing in dense areas is challenging politically, but it will help restore and grow transit ridership, particularly if it enables people, and low-income families in particular, to live closer to jobs. It may also indirectly improve rider satisfaction by helping to house at least some of those now experiencing homelessness, many of whom are literally forced underground into transit stations and onto transit vehicles in search of shelter.

**Table 1.**

Policy Framework

POLICY CATEGORY	RELATED FINDINGS AND EVIDENCE	CURRENT POLICIES AND PROPOSALS	RECOMMENDATION
<b>TRANSIT OPERATOR POLICIES</b>			
Transit service improvements	<i>Report Volume II:</i> Transit ridership has fallen most at off-peak times, in counter-commute directions, and in outlying areas; the most significant determinants of ridership are beyond the control of transit operators	Transit Performance Initiative, Muni Forward, East Bay Bus Rapid Transit, service and network realignment at other operators	Invest in rapid bus/rail services in dense areas with exclusive or semi-exclusive rights-of-way; invest in fleet and operational improvements to increase effective service capacity, reduce crowding, and enhance customer experience; look for ways to improve off-peak services to attract new riders; carefully evaluate proposed transit capital projects on their ability to effectively generate ridership by connecting concentrations of housing and employment, considering land use and development changes as both complements and alternatives
Demand-based fares	<i>Report Volume I and other research:</i> Fares increases are not driving recent ridership changes; peak capacity constraints limit the ability of some systems to accommodate increased peak demand; off-peak ridership is declining on many systems	Only a few Bay Area transit systems, notably BART and Caltrain, vary fares by distance	Investigate off-peak incentives to reduce peak crowding, shift some riders to the “shoulders” of peaks, and encourage off-peak ridership

POLICY CATEGORY	RELATED FINDINGS AND EVIDENCE	CURRENT POLICIES AND PROPOSALS	RECOMMENDATION
<b>REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION POLICIES</b>			
Regional integration and seamless mobility	<i>Other research:</i> Research shows that better information, easier transfers, and more seamless fare payment systems reduce the burdens of transit travel	MTC Connected Transportation/Seamless Mobility effort	Better integrate trip planning and fare payment across jurisdictions and service providers; investigate new mobility pilots to improve first-last mile access to transit and transportation services in areas and times of day with limited transit service
Data on private-sector transportation	<i>Report Volume I:</i> General lack of systematic data on private-sector shared mobility, especially ridehail; suggestive evidence of ridehail substitution for public transit	Bay Area Shuttle Census, data-sharing agreements with micromobility companies, Mobility Data Specification	Establish systems to obtain and maintain robust data from private new mobility and micromobility operators on an ongoing basis for public policymaking and planning purposes
Management of private vehicle travel	<i>Report Volumes I and II and other research:</i> Auto access and use is strongly and negatively associated with transit use	Express lane network expansion, congestion pricing studies, local performance-priced parking programs	Investigate and pilot-test road- and parking-pricing programs and projects to reduce congestion and increase the relative attractiveness of transit because traffic congestion makes transit less time-competitive and increases operating costs
<b>REGIONAL LAND USE AND HOUSING POLICIES WITH TRANSIT IMPLICATIONS</b>			
Land use near transit	<i>Report Volume I:</i> Three out of five Bay Area workers live <i>and</i> work in neighborhoods with poor transit access to employment	<i>Plan Bay Area 2040, Plan Bay Area 2050</i> development, MTC Resolution 3434	Broaden the focus of TOD to include land-use planning strategies that increase employment and housing densities near one another; consider financial incentives to promote such strategies
Affordable housing and transit	<i>Report Volume I:</i> Housing prices are associated with a decline in locally-residing workers, which may be depressing transit use in some areas	<i>Plan Bay Area 2040, Plan Bay Area 2050</i> development, CASA Compact	Continue and strengthen involvement in housing-related planning efforts, with the goal of increasing the supply of affordable housing near jobs

**For More Information**

This policy brief is drawn from the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies report “What’s Behind Recent Transit Ridership Trends in the Bay Area?” To access this report and additional policy briefs on UCLA ITS transit trends research, go to [www.its.ucla.edu](http://www.its.ucla.edu). This project was funded by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the UC ITS Statewide Transportation Research Program, and the California Department of Transportation.