

STREETSBLOG

SPUR Talk: Abandon Fares?

COVID has forced some transit agencies to abandon fare collection temporarily. Maybe they should make it permanent

By Roger Rudick | Jun 17, 2020 | 7 COMMENTS



Image: Wikimedia Commons.

The COVID pandemic has forced AC Transit and Santa Clara VTA to run buses without charging fares.

Temporarily abandoning fare collection and having passengers board through the rear door keeps them away from operators, limiting exposure to the virus. The agencies are now working on expanding contactless fare collection (such as Clipper and mobile apps) and putting up glass shields so that fare collection can resume, probably in the fall. So “...now is an opportunity to look at the larger questions” of fare collection and equity, according to Robert Del Rosario of AC Transit, who participated in a SPUR talk Wednesday about the future of fare-free transit.



AC Transit is rolling out protective shields so that fare collection can resume. From Robert Del Rosario's presentation

The most obvious challenge for fare-free transit is, of course, the loss of revenue. “If transit agencies stop collecting fares, it severs about ten percent for VTA, or \$35 million a year,”



said VTA transportation planner Adam Burger, also at the SPUR talk. “We’d have to turn this into a service cut. Those are really big, scary numbers.”



For AC Transit, fare collection is “16.7 percent of revenues... a significant amount,” said Del Rosario.



But those numbers may not actually be as big as the simple loss of gross revenue implies.

Service Updates

Service changes on June 8 extended service hours and restored some routes.

On June 13, Express 181 was discontinued and Rapid 500 service resumed due to the start of BART service.

VTA riders must wear face coverings.

VTA is running reduced bus service, with some routes suspended or coming less often.

We are not collecting fares at this time.

NO MASK, NO RIDE



From VTA. Masks required, but no fares.

Del Rosario explained that AC Transit loses about ten percent of what it takes in via fares in costs associated with collecting cash from fare boxes. Going to “non-cash fare payments... would help, of course,” he said, noting that mobile apps and Clipper still charge a small transaction fee. But even cashless payments waste time. “We timed how long it took to collect fares,” said Burger. “The average cash fare payment was twelve seconds, but could last two minutes” if someone is fishing for change. “Clipper takes two seconds, but sometimes people can’t find their cards.”

That adds up, and the current elimination of fare collection is allowing buses to complete their runs faster, so more service can be provided with the same equipment. Del Rosario and Burger both pointed out, however, that faster runs can also be accomplished via transit-only lanes, signal priority, and pre-paid boarding.

Burger and Del Rosario both said that social-distancing requirements means that buses that could once carry as many as fifty people can now only carry ten. “We have a homeless population that’s using the bus for shelter,” said Del Rosario. What happens if you only hav



ten seats on a bus and one is taken for the entire route by someone seeking shelter rather than transportation? Free fares make that more common.



However, “there are a lot of good arguments for free fares,” said Burger. “At a high level you’re thinking about mobility as a basic right.” That brings up equity concerns. He said when he rides buses and trains he encounters a fare inspector maybe once or twice a month. And yet “nobody is stopping and checking motorists on a biweekly basis to ask for proof of license, registration, and insurance.”

On the other hand, in favor of continuing fares, if something is free, it tends to make people devalue it. Would transit be seen as worthless?

“Could eliminating fares bring more people on board? Yes,” said Burger. “But we see increases in vandalism and it invites problematic riders—and people feel less safe.” Del Rosario said research shows that “frequency, speed of service, and reliability are the three things transit riders care most about, and fares are much lower down” on the list of concerns.

The two transit professionals seemed to conclude that the right answer to solving disparities and getting more people on the bus is not fare elimination, but a mix of solutions. Speed up fare payment via pre-paid methods, such as ticket machines at stations, Clipper, and mobile payment apps. Reduce travel times and increase reliability with transit lanes.

And “look at free transit for some populations, like students,” said Del Rosario. “We’re looking at that in Alameda County, and also looking at discounts or free fares for low-income populations.”

For more information, check out SPUR’s [“Solving the Bay Area’s Fare Policy Problem.”](#)

For more events like these, visit [SPUR’s events page](#).

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Name

Kutya'i • a month ago

SPUR goes through the performance of giving progressive ideas face time, but sternly clucks its neoliberal developer lobbyist tongue at the prospect of fare-free transit.

If it doesn't have a price tag on it, then it has no business in SPUR's San Francisco.

1 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

Bill Miles • a month ago

Here's a question I'd really like to know. When will Clipper come out with a app so that monthly holders and the like don't need to carry around that card all the time? Muni has an app for paying for fares - not sure why Clipper isn't modernizing with the times. Probably like most companies, by making a single card we have effectively killed any competition for these services so they feel no strong need to improve it.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

david vartanoff • a month ago • edited

If "farebox recovery" is 16.7% of the cost of AC Transit service, what is the full cost of collecting fares? Fareboxes, tickets, clipper cards, the storefront office AC maintains to process fare purchases, issue clipper cards etc. all cost money. Making AC free completes the transition to



full public service such as police, fire, paving, sidewalks, streetlights, etc.

As to depending on transit priority signals, and exclusive lanes, to speed up bus service we were promised those 20 years ago with the so-called Rapid routes on San Pablo, Telegraph, and East 14th. The signal priority was never turned on, no lanes were dedicated, and the Rapid on Telegraph was abolished.

Fareless buses can be boarded through any door, as can Muni buses in SF because they have card readers at each. Solving the rolling homeless shelter issue is not the transit agency's job--each city needs to act responsibly. (On my excursion to check out the new BART segment, I was reminded of the huge "container farm" in east Oakland which could easily and cheaply be used to build housing on currently vacant land)

Transit needs serious restructuring--the 27 agencies jealously guarding their turfs need to go; we riders are not impressed by paint schemes, differing driver uniform colors. We simply need to travel from A to B reliably and easily.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ethan ➔ david vartanoff • a month ago

"the rolling homeless shelter issue is not the transit agency's job--each city needs to act responsibly."

Until cities do, the consequences of their inaction will be felt on AC Transit, especially if it becomes free to ride.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

david vartanoff ➔ Ethan • a month ago

Yes, but that means WE and AC have to lean on the useless pols to actually do something.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

aslevin • a month ago

Another question about equity - bus services have suspended fares for Covid but rail services have not. Now, buses on trunk lines are running full given Covid distance limitations and passing people up, while BART and Caltrain are running nearly empty. To improve health/safety and equity, how about enabling people to use BART/Caltrain on parallel routes for the cost of a bus fare. That will reduce the crowding issues and give lower-income people an opportunity to affordably take faster trips when the stations work for the trip needs. Instead, if we make buses free and leave rail expensive, this will increase the already segregated nature of our transit system where lower income people are less likely to use expensive trains and take slower bus trips.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

david vartanoff ➔ aslevin • a month ago

YES!!! Very simple to make an AC pass on Clipper good on BART. And, end the distance based fares in the process.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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