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The Bay Area's Transit Dilemma: Too Many Agencies, Not Enough Riders.

With budget gaps fraying a large and fragmented public transportation system, transit voices in San Francisco and Oakland push for a single regional operator.

As public transit agencies across the U.S. grapple with budget holes, safety concerns, and ongoing economic uncertainty, a number of policymakers, advocates and officials in the San Francisco Bay Area are calling for the region's numerous and disjointed systems to join together for better interoperability. Bus and rail operators must coordinate pandemic response plans and reduce barriers to access, or riders will suffer, they say.

"The Covid-19 crisis has laid bare the ways in which our current system puts modes in competition with each other—with serious consequences for access, equity, and the financial stability of the network," Laura Tolkoff, a regional planning policy director at the think tank SPUR, wrote in a letter to regional transportation leaders on Sunday. "The failure to coordinate service now could leave the Bay Area's riders with significantly degraded service and access."

Tolkoff's letter was addressed to the members of the Blue Ribbon Transit Recovery Task Force, a group of agency leaders, politicians, government officials and stakeholder representatives convened by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to split up tranches of federal pandemic aid. The MTC—a regional authority charged with coordinating and allocating funding to transportation projects around the Bay—does not have authority to override or require agencies to plan or operate service in tandem with one other. With 27 transit agencies serving the region's 9 counties and 101 municipalities, lack of coordination is a real problem.

The fragmentation of Bay Area transit has long been a target of local complaints. Back in 1872, "Emperor" Joshua Abraham Norton, a local eccentric known for issuing pretend proclamations via newspaper, called for the immediate construction of underwater link between Oakland and San Francisco. Norton commanded the leaders of the two cities to "determine the practicability of a tunnel under water; and if found practicable, that said tunnel be forthwith built for a railroad communication."

More than a century later, the real-life Transbay Tube opened as the final segment of the original Bay Area Rapid Transit plan. But while BART provides rail service across a vast area, it is just one player on a crowded stage of transit providers and agencies. From large operators such as the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District, and Caltrain to much smaller ones such as the Golden Gate Transportation District and the Rio Vista Delta Breeze, each agency largely functions as an independent fiefdom, with its own planning, operations, and fare payment concerns. The Bay Area is unique in the U.S. for being a massive metropolitan area without one central transit operator, in contrast with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York City, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, or Regional Transportation District in Denver.

That splintering creates problems for riders and taxpayers even under normal circumstances, advocates say. Complaints about afternoon SFMTA trains scheduled to arrive just minutes after a Caltrain departure at the adjacent station are common. A multibillion-dollar BART extension plan that has redundancies with a simultaneously planned Caltrain electrification has been a recent punching bag for local rail wonks.

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Ian Griffiths, the policy director for Seamless Bay Area, a group that advocates for a regional transit merger, said that the pandemic is revealing new frictions, such as the SFMTA bus routes traveling near full capacity, while BART trains that are nearly empty run parallel underground.

“If an alien came to look at the Bay Area and saw those long trains running empty, they’d probably observe that it’s not very efficient,” he said. With ridership and sales tax revenues gutted amid the pandemic, “there’s never been a better moment to reimagine this entire system.”

Efforts by SPUR, Seamless, and other local policy and advocacy groups culminated earlier this year in AB 2057, a bill put forth by California State Assembly member David Chiu that sought to force transit agencies to improve interconnectivity, with efforts like discounted fare programs that work between systems, standardized wayfinding and real-time arrival signage, and a comprehensive system map. “Every agency has wanted to do these kinds of things, but the bill would finally require it,” Chiu said.

The bill would have also convened a task force for tackling harder things like coordinating route planning and considering a common set of bus and rail fares—all paving the way towards a centralized transit-planning authority.

The pandemic knocked AB 2057 off the state’s formal legislative docket in late April. But Chiu, Griffiths, and other advocates are continuing to push their vision while the region’s transit recovery task force splits up emergency transit funding from Congress and develops a cohesive public health plan. They’ve gained support among a few county supervisors and smaller-agency transit managers.

“We are faced with an opportunity that we haven’t had in all the years I’ve served on the commission, which is to look at how transit operates across the region,” Jim Sperring, a Solano County Supervisor who is also chair of the task force, said at a virtual meeting in April.

But plenty of transit leaders warn that the devil is in the details. Jeffrey Tumlin, the executive director of the SFMTA, said that forcing big city transit agencies to cede their independent route planning authorities—in the absence of additional state or federal funding—would inevitably mean worsened service quality on systems like his, which is the largest in the Bay and serves 45% of the region’s transit riders. For example, if SFMTA bus arrivals had to match BART’s schedule, it would almost inevitably mean fewer buses for SFMTA passengers than what they have now. “Advocates are just not understanding the massive unintended consequences of their well-intentioned ideas,” he said.

Tumlin said that he and other agency heads recognize that they must work together, and that there are appropriate ways to coordinate, such as creating an official regional service map and helping passengers navigate stations and stops with more uniform and legible signage. State Senator Scott Wiener’s recent bill, which would remove environmental review requirements for simple transit and bike lane projects, is another way the entire Bay Area can speed transit improvements, he said.

Janice Li, a member of the Bay Area Rapid Transit Board of Directors, is conflicted. She said that she

believes that advocacy for system integration is logical, and that eliminating certain redundancies could help transit agencies save money. At the same time, she worries about the effects on riders who are already reeling from the pandemic's grave social and economic impacts.

"Communities of color are already facing evictions, police brutality and the inability to access employment," she said. Given that those groups have disproportionately used public transit in the past and have continued to as essential workers through the pandemic, "pushing forward with dramatic changes" on transit could be yet another disruption in their lives.

Further complicating these challenges are the dramatic changes that the transit landscape has undergone in the past three months, and which continue to unfold. Virtually every agency in the country is dealing with massive budget shocks, but in the Bay Area that looks different for each fiefdom: Caltrain's ridership base of tech workers are still largely working from home, and it's now mulling shutdown. Meanwhile, SFMTA is continuing to transport tens of thousands of daily riders, but still faces \$568 million in revenue loss over the next four years.

While the vision of a "seamless" regional transit system was always supposed to be about providing better service for Bay Area transit riders, the harsh financial reality could mean fewer transit agencies, period—which could be counterproductive to the original goal, said Bob Allen, the director of policy and advocacy campaigns at Urban Habitat, a housing and transportation justice nonprofit that has urged network coordination.

"Consolidating and saving money doesn't mean transit is better or more equitable for riders," he said. "The goal should be to run more and better transit service."

But that leaves difficult questions for transit agencies across the region as leaders argue about how to fairly allocate resources, with limited emergency aid from Congress eventually set to expire.

"What are the answers? And who makes the answers?" Li asked. "Then the question of restructuring and governance reform also becomes, who lives and who dies? It feels kind of Hunger Games-y."

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