

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District (MTD) provides public transit to the residents and visitors of the South Coast of Santa Barbara County, a service area of approximately 52 square miles and service area population of 199,668. According to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), Santa Barbara is a small transit-intensive community (STIC), meaning that MTD provides an unusually high level of service, and residents use the service at a very high level, for a community of this size.

MTD's service area encompasses the southern portion of Santa Barbara County, including the cities of Santa Barbara, Carpinteria, and Goleta, and the unincorporated areas of Montecito, Summerland, and Isla Vista. The South Coast, distinguished as the area of Santa Barbara County south of the Santa Ynez Mountains, is characterized by hosting a myriad of cultural and recreational amenities while still maintaining the feel of a small, tight-knit community.

MTD provides fixed-route transit service that aims to serve not only residents of the various communities for a variety of purposes, like to get to work, to receive healthcare, and to shop, but also routes designed specifically for the large seasonal, student population of post-secondary schools in the area, the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) and Santa Barbara City College (SBCC). MTD also operates school booster services to high schools and middle schools throughout the service area as well as lines geared toward tourists, like waterfront and downtown shuttles.

Understanding the need to plan for the future as the region continues to recover from COVID-19 and in the face of other issues and constraints such as an operator shortage, MTD has designed a short-range transit plan (SRTP) to guide service investments and improvements over the next five-year planning period, called **MTD Moves Ahead**. Importantly, this plan also considers initiatives that can help MTD reach a new level of service reliability by considering the feasibility of different transit priority measures.

The *MTD Moves Ahead* planning process consisted of the following tasks:

- A background review and analysis of MTD existing conditions.
- Development of project goals and objectives.
- Public and stakeholder outreach at multiple points throughout the planning process.
- A phased recommended plan of service priorities to guide future service changes and investments over the next five years, dependent upon the availability of financial and human resources to sustainably implement the service
- A financial forecast with yearly operating budget estimates and a discussion of potential funding sources.
- Other strategies including supporting recommendations, consideration for transit priority measures, considerations for future service investments, regional service coordination, and providing on-demand service/Easy Lift (the paratransit provider for MTD).

Based on the analysis of existing conditions, stakeholder and public outreach, and consultation with MTD, the recommended service priorities was developed with the goals of providing service that is:

- Future-focused,
- High quality, and

- For all South Coast residents and visitors.

As this project took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, MTD underwent several phases of service changes over the course of the pandemic. Like many agencies, MTD first reduced service dramatically as ridership evaporated in response to stay-at-home orders in 2020 and as schools transitioned to remote learning. In 2021, MTD restored much of its service and in 2022, continued to augment service levels. However, due to labor force issues plaguing organizations worldwide including the transit industry, MTD has had to prune service levels to reflect its ability to deliver scheduled services; bus operators are in short supply.

With this new reality as a backdrop, the planning process took a fresh look at MTD’s services and used the new reality of workforce shortages and financial constraints when planning ahead. The guiding principles that shaped the service design include:

- **Strengthening core routes** by increasing frequency and service span to provide better service throughout the day.
- **Optimizing alignments** for passengers and operations. Most of MTD’s network is performing well and routing is efficient given street layouts and the geography of the region.
- Proposing ways to **speed up buses and passengers** on their trips.
- **Collaborating** with regional partners on **piloting bus priority treatments**.

The service proposals were developed in a collaborative manner with MTD staff and by presenting them to the public and incorporating feedback. Importantly, the service proposals are grouped into an **immediate and short-term service plan** that account for recommendations that can be achieved with current resources (both labor and financial), and into **mid-term and long-term service priorities** that will require a larger workforce and additional revenue to achieve these priorities. This is the new reality coming out of COVID-19—labor markets are tight and inflation rates mean that operating the same level of transit service costs more and outpaces revenues.

In the immediate to short-term, the service priority focuses:

- Restoring more service to lines that are still operating with reduced service (Lines 15x, 27, and 28).
- Introducing a new line, Line 19x, that provides peak-hour express service between Carpinteria and SBCC.
- Introducing the Wave microtransit service, a shared ride curb-to-curb on-demand service in the Goleta/Isla Vista areas. This service is currently slated as a pilot.
- Adjusting routing for Lines 23 and 25 by interlining the two routes to improve operations and neighborhood access.
- Renaming Line 12x to Line 6x and Line 24x to Line 11x to improve network legibility and wayfinding; this effort would take place during a larger effort to rebrand MTD’s bus stops.

Table 1 summarizes the immediate to short-term service priorities.

Table 1: Immediate to short-term service priorities

Service change	Proposed change in annual revenue hours (compared to Aug 2022 service levels)	August 2022 service levels (annualized)	Notes
New service: Line 19x	+742	N/A	Funding for this service has been identified: US Highway 101 Project Caltrans Traffic Management Plan funds.
The Wave Goleta/ Isla Vista	+4,960	N/A	One year of funding for piloting this service has been identified: Caltrans LCTOP grant. Includes most populous service area previously served with Line 10.
Restore service to (Lines 27, 28, and 15x)	+9,207	21,019	Funding assistance from schools.
Lines 23 and 25 operational and routing changes	No change in service levels, but interlining will improve connections in these neighborhoods.		
<i>Total change</i> in hours compared to August 2022 annualized	+14,909		

In the mid-term, service priorities include:

- Improving service span and frequencies on Lines 1, 2, 4, and 17. These lines are heavily used and serve disadvantaged communities who rely on public transit. These priorities would improve frequency during the day for Lines 4 and 17, while late night service would be provided on Lines 1 and 2, enabling later journeys.
- Introducing the Wave microtransit service, a shared ride curb-to-curb on-demand service in the Carpinteria area.

Service proposals for mid-term service priority are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Mid-term service priorities

Service change	Proposed change in annual revenue hours (compared to Aug 2022 service levels)	August 2022 service levels (annualized)	Notes
Lines 1 and 2 frequency and service span improvements	1: +1,588 2: +654 Total: +2,241	1: 10,197 2: 16,003 Total: 26,200	Slight reduction in peak service and increase in service during off-peak hours results in a total number of hours similar to pre-COVID.
Lines 4 and 17 frequency and service span improvements	4: +1,240 17: +961 Total: +2,200	4: 4,531 17: 3,387 Total: 7,918	Increase in frequency results in more revenue hours.

Service change	Proposed change in annual revenue hours (compared to Aug 2022 service levels)	August 2022 service levels (annualized)	Notes
The Wave Carpinteria	+4,960	N/A	Includes service area previously served by Line 36 – Seaside Shuttle.
<i>Total change in hours compared to August 2022 annualized</i>	+9,401		

In the long-term, service priorities include:

- Improving service span and frequencies on Lines 6 and 11. These lines are the most productive and heavily used routes in MTD’s network. They provide key connections throughout the communities served by MTD. Later service would enable more journeys. However, given the length of these routes, the proposed service changes require a significant investment in service hours.
- Improving service span and frequencies on Line 20, a key route that saw significant ridership during the pandemic, emphasizing its critical role to MTD’s network.
- Introducing a newly redesigned Downtown-Waterfront Circulator, similar to the Downtown and Waterfront shuttle routes but operating on different streets to reflect the pedestrianization of State St. This service will require funding arrangements with city partners.

Long-term service priorities are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Long-term service priorities

Service change	Proposed change in annual revenue hours (compared to Aug 2022 service levels)	August 2022 service levels (annualized)	Notes
Lines 6 and 11 frequency and service span improvements	6: +5,307 11: +8,452 Total: +13,759	6: 17,975 11: 27,467 Total: 45,442	Significant increase in revenue hours due to longer span and more frequent service and length of these lines.
Line 20 frequency and service span improvements	+6,936	16,067	Significant investment in revenue hours.
Downtown-Waterfront Circulator	+6,040	N/A	No funding currently identified; requires funding agreement with City partners. New service will be faster due to transit signal priority and using streets with fewer stops. Service levels are proposed to be lower than pre-COVID.

Service change	<u>Proposed change in annual revenue hours (compared to Aug 2022 service levels)</u>	August 2022 service levels (annualized)	Notes
<u>Total change</u> in hours compared to August 2022 annualized	+26,735		

The impacts of the recommended service priorities on mobility and accessibility were analyzed. Compared to the baseline network, the **MTD Moves Ahead** proposed network improves the service area’s access to transit services, with **98%** of all residents within ½ mile of either fixed route or the Wave on-demand service, compared to **94%** of the population with the pre-Covid network. This comparison also clearly illustrates that MTD already achieves high levels of coverage and the recommendations improve coverage even further.

Proximity to high-quality service (15 minutes or better) is also slightly improved across all categories, and we see significant improvements in the number of residents and jobs that are within ½ mile of 16–30-minute service. Not only does the **MTD Moves Ahead** network improve overall proximity to service, but it improves proximity to high-quality service, increasing the number of residents and jobs that are close to frequent services and potentially resulting in increased ridership.

Ultimately, MTD envisions providing service tailored to new ridership demand and travel patterns that have resulted from COVID-19. This project was conducted during the recovery portion of the pandemic, and throughout the planning process, MTD was slowly restoring service in order to respond to passenger demand as well as the realities of operator shortages that grip the nation at large. As a result, the new reality is the service MTD operates as of Fall 2022—a lean network focused on its core routes and markets that MTD can reliably serve. To truly move ahead, MTD will first need to shore up its services based on realistic service levels reflective of funding and revenues and available operators, and eventually expand service in a fiscally responsible manner.

Below is a table that summarizes forecasted operating revenues and expenses based on a service baseline comprised of the August of 2022 revenue hours and the proposed service priorities classified as “short” term.

Table 4: Forecasted operating revenues and expenses.

	FY22-23	FY23-24	FY24-25	FY25-26	FY26-27	FY27-28
	Baseline year	Plan year 1	Plan year 2	Plan year 3	Plan year 4	Plan year 5
Operating Revenue						
Passenger fares	\$4,438,000	\$4,499,000	\$4,561,000	\$4,652,000	\$4,745,000	\$4,841,000
Non-Transportation income	\$347,000	\$354,000	\$361,000	\$368,000	\$376,000	\$383,000
Local Operating Assistance	\$835,000	\$852,000	\$2,289,000	\$2,354,000	\$2,394,000	\$3,439,000
Measure A	\$2,753,000	\$2,814,000	\$2,900,000	\$2,779,000	\$2,885,000	\$2,826,000
TDA - Local Transportation Fund	\$10,045,000	\$10,246,000	\$10,451,000	\$10,660,000	\$10,873,000	\$11,091,000
Property Tax Revenue	\$1,544,000	\$1,621,000	\$1,702,000	\$1,787,000	\$1,876,000	\$1,970,000
FTA 5307 Operating Assistance	\$5,277,000	\$5,277,000	\$5,277,000	\$5,277,000	\$5,277,000	\$5,277,000
COVID-19 Federal Stimulus Funding	\$4,747,000	\$5,446,000	\$5,656,000	\$6,438,000	\$3,660,000	\$-
Total Operating Revenue	\$29,986,000	\$31,109,000	\$33,197,000	\$34,316,000	\$32,087,000	\$29,826,000
Operating Expenses						
Route operations	\$16,986,000	\$17,697,000	\$19,055,000	\$19,639,000	\$20,242,000	\$21,336,000
Vehicle maintenance	\$4,656,000	\$4,857,000	\$5,184,000	\$5,366,000	\$5,554,000	\$5,844,000
Fuel costs	\$2,542,000	\$2,643,000	\$2,866,000	\$2,937,000	\$3,011,000	\$3,180,000
Passenger accommodations	\$1,212,000	\$1,269,000	\$1,329,000	\$1,392,000	\$1,458,000	\$1,527,000
General overhead	\$4,590,000	\$4,642,000	\$4,763,000	\$4,982,000	\$5,212,000	\$5,461,000
Total Operating Expenses	\$29,986,000	\$31,109,000	\$33,197,000	\$34,316,000	\$35,476,000	\$37,347,000

*values rounded to nearest \$1,000

The financial forecast illustrates the challenge faced by MTD to establish a new financial baseline, from which, it can begin to reliably introduce new transit services. The financial forecast utilizes the operating budget for fiscal year FY2022-23 as a baseline, which included a projected deficit of approximately \$4.7 million. The FY2022-23 fiscal budget assumed peak renewable fuel costs, conservative sales tax and fare revenue growth, and full employment. It is reasonable to assume that the operating deficit for FY2022-23 may come in lower than what was projected.

Nevertheless, to address the actual deficit spending that will result in FY2022-23 due to the slower pace of revenue growth compared to growth in expenses, MTD must consider taking the following steps prior to the exhaustion of COVID-19 emergency funds:

MTD's passenger fares, an important source of revenue, will likely need to increase at some point within the 5-year period to help recapture some of the investment in operations. Once employment levels are reached to ensure service reliability and operational activity is sustainable, MTD will need to limit the growth in operating expenses so that it can be offset by the annual increase in sales tax revenue. These steps are necessary to establish a new service level benchmark that is sustainable and inclusive of the "short term" transit priorities. Moving ahead, implementation of the recommended transit priorities outlined in the "mid" and "long" term will require additional operating assistance.

To support the service plan proposals and to support MTD as a dynamic and innovative transit agency, Table 5 summarizes supporting recommendations that will help MTD achieve the goals of *MTD Moves Ahead*.

Table 5: MTD Moves Ahead supporting recommendations

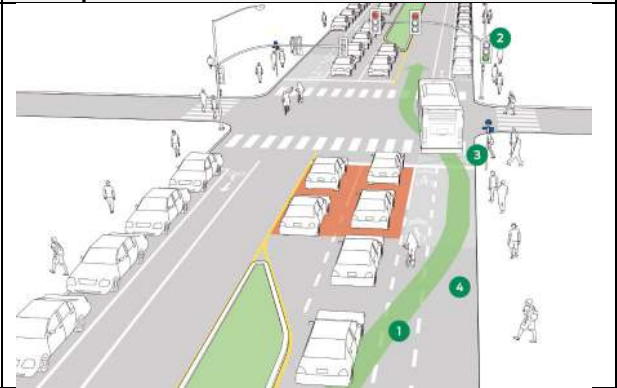
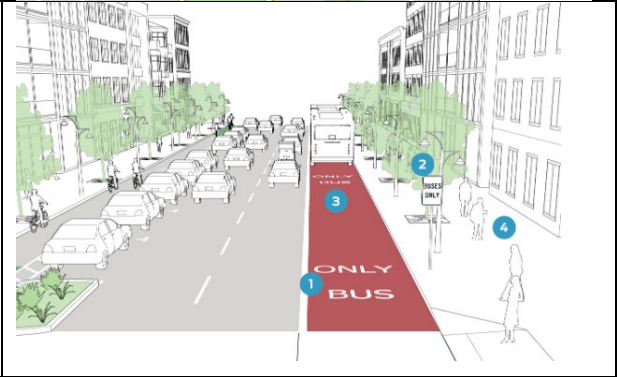
Goal	Supporting Recommendations
Transit that is future-focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deploy open payment/contactless payment across the entire MTD system • Continue to build partnerships to strengthen MTD service • Enhance operations and network connectivity by completing facility improvements at Terminal 1 and Terminal 2 and improve stops where lines converge and transfers are common • Continue to transition to a zero-emission bus (ZEB) fleet
Transit that is high-quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deploy 3-bike racks across the system • Launch a bus stop improvement program and update bus stop design guidelines • Leverage high quality data and software to make more data-driven decisions to improve service
Transit that is for all South Coast residents and visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore offering “request-a-stop” service on key lines during evening hours • Strengthen and improve customer communications

During the *MTD Moves Ahead* planning process, several different transit priority measures were explored to understand where and how these can be implemented throughout the South Coast to improve service and reliability. Survey respondents were asked about their support for different priority measures, and whether these would make them ride more often. Within the South Coast, support for transit priority measures is strong among current MTD riders and the community at large, with 81% of riders and 78% of all survey respondents stating that they would be much more likely or somewhat more likely to ride if bus queue jumps and bus only lanes were implemented, and 83% of riders and 80% of all survey respondents would be much more likely or somewhat more likely to ride if transit signal priority were implemented. Table 6 summarizes the transit priority measures that were looked at as a part of this planning process.

Table 6: Transit priority measures overview

Project	Concept	Example ¹
Transit signal priority	Extend the green signal so an approaching bus can make it through the intersection. Provide a signal for buses only at key intersections to provide buses the right of way before general traffic.	

¹ NACTO Transit Street Design Guide

Project	Concept	Example ¹
Bus queue jumps	<p>Combine short dedicated transit facilities with either a leading bus interval or active signal priority to allow buses to easily enter traffic flow in a priority position. Comparable to a bike box treatment, but for buses. Can considerably reduce delay and result in run-time savings and improved reliability.</p>	
Bus only lanes	<p>Only buses (or bikes, if low bus frequency) are permitted. Speeds up buses and improves journey time consistency.</p>	

Regarding transit priority measures, MTD has received funding to implement transit signal priority (TSP) at all intersections within the City of Santa Barbara and is moving towards TSP implementation. An opportunity has also been identified for the implementation of bus-only lanes on El Colegio Rd. in Isla Vista. More detail about the next steps for transit priority measures in the South Coast is presented in the body of the report.

MTD Moves Ahead has proposed a vision and plan for the next five years of providing high-quality transit to South Coast residents and visitors. The plan was developed under the guiding principles of continuing to recover and rebound from COVID-19 as well as adapt to the new realities of travel.

MTD will need to continue working together with riders, partner agencies and stakeholders across the community to make *MTD Moves Ahead* a reality.