



BOARD OF DIRECTORS REPORT

MEETING DATE: JULY 21, 2026 **AGENDA ITEM #: 8**

TYPE: ACTION ITEM

PREPARED BY: PLANNING AND MARKETING MANAGER HILLARY BLACKERBY

REVIEWED BY: GENERAL MANAGER JERRY ESTRADA

SUBJECT: UCSB Student Transit Bus Pass Program Fee

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Board of Directors receive a presentation on student transit pass programs at UCSB and other UC schools and authorize the General Manager to pursue a student transit fee increase measure for consideration on UCSB's Spring 2027 ballot.

INTRODUCTION

The Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District (MTD) and the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) have had some form of student transit pass program agreement in place since the 1970's, with the intent to "mutually and cooperatively promote and encourage students attending University to use public transportation," and have developed a strong and successful partnership over the years. For decades, the student cost per academic quarter was \$13.13, though this increased in 2025 to \$18.76, commensurate with MTD's 2025 general fare increase. To continue to support undergraduate and graduate students' use of public transportation and ensure program viability for years to come, an additional transit fee increase is necessary to account for both increases in costs of transit service and increases in rider demand, especially as UCSB adds additional on-campus housing.

All University of California campuses offer some form of transit pass program for their students. To better understand how the programs operate, the benefits they provide, and the costs of the service for students and UC campuses, MTD staff researched current program offerings at the 10 different University of California (UC) campuses: UC Berkeley, UC Los Angeles, UC San Francisco, UC San Diego, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UC Riverside, UC Santa Cruz, UC Merced, and our local campus, UC Santa Barbara.

Comparison of transit benefits across UC campuses is inherently limited – factors such as proximity to other transit options, distance from campuses to downtowns or major metro areas, size of campus, parking availability, and topographical differences all make comparison challenging. While transit pass programs differ widely in their location, context, and access to adjacent transit services, all UC transit pass programs offer bus passes, and most programs are funded by student referendum-based fees, many of which have been established for decades.

Currently, many of the programs are in transition – either piloting new program offerings, operating under recently-approved fee increase referendums, or planning to increase fees soon.

DISCUSSION:

Student Transit Fees at UCSB

As discussed, MTD and UCSB have decades of experience working together to provide students with reliable transit options, and UCSB ridership on MTD buses remains strong. Lines 11 (UCSB), 24x (UCSB Express), 27 (Isla Vista Shuttle), and 28 (UCSB Shuttle) are consistently in the top five lines by ridership systemwide – and UCSB student ridership for the 2025-26 Fiscal Year reached 1,498,435 passengers. This represents a third of total system ridership for the year. While ridership and demand are strong and growing, minor increases in student transit fee costs have not kept pace with increases in costs for providing the transit service, and that delta will continue to grow if not addressed in the near future.

On March 4, 2025, the Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District (MTD) Board of Directors approved a general rate adjustment to regular adult fares systemwide for the first time in over 16 years, effectively raising the cost from \$1.75 to \$2.50, representing a 42.9% increase. As stated in Item 1.d. in the "Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District - UCSB Superticket Agreement," the quarterly student transit fee shall be modified only as part of a general rate adjustment by MTD, shall be modified in the same proportion as the change in the regular adult fare, and shall become effective the quarter immediately following the general rate adjustment. As such, effective August 18, 2025, the UCSB student transit fee was adjusted from the previous amount of \$13.13 per quarter to \$18.76 per quarter, commensurate with the increase implemented in MTD's regular service.

Even at the increased rate of \$18.76 per quarter, the UCSB student transit fee represents significant savings when compared to the adult 30-day unlimited pass offered by MTD (\$80.00 per month). A full-time UCSB student would require a minimum of 9 months of passes to complete a typical academic year (Fall, Winter and Spring quarters), totaling around \$720.00. Adding Summer sessions would push that number up to \$960.00 per year for 12 months of unlimited transit use. As evidenced in the comparative data outlined below, UCSB's current transit fee is the third lowest out of all 10 UC campuses, costing students \$52.68 per academic year (Fall, Winter, and Spring quarters) or \$75.04 including the Summer quarter.

Much like the general fare increase, the student transit fee increase was overdue and still does not cover the true cost of transit system access for UCSB's student population. To help inform future student transit fee rates and identify a more sustainable funding stream to ensure longer-term program viability, staff looked at student transit pass programs at other UCs for input on what works, and what recent referendums have achieved.

Student Transit Fees at Other University of California Campuses

As a point of comparison, staff researched student transit fees at the other University of California campuses (see Attachment 1). Transit fees, transit fare structures, and levels and types of service all vary from site to site. Many UC student transit pass programs have undergone significant recent overhauls, increasing service partners, access to transit services, and cost. Students at

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UC Santa Cruz, UC Berkeley, UC San Francisco, UC San Diego, and UC Los Angeles all voted to increase student transit fees in the last several years. UC Berkeley and UC San Francisco are piloting new transit pass programs that provide additional access throughout the Bay area, while UC San Diego recently increased student access to trolley and light rail. These shifts demonstrate that there is strong appetite for student transit programming across UC campuses.

While all UC transit pass programs are different, certain comparative themes emerge when considering available transit options and locational context – some of the more expensive offerings are in larger urbanized areas such as the San Francisco Bay area with access to multiple different transit providers, while others are more catered to serving students at smaller campuses or more rural settings.

To better understand how UCSB's transit pass program compares to other UC campuses, staff sought to identify comparable agencies in terms of system size, service to adjacent downtowns and transit networks, and types of transit infrastructure, and developed a grouping methodology with three distinct categories: Large Urbanized Programs, Medium-Sized Programs, Small/Rural Programs:

Large Urbanized Programs – includes UC Berkeley, UC San Francisco, UC San Diego, and UC Los Angeles. Offer a multitude of transit options, including bus, light rail, and even ferry trips in the SF Bay Area.

Medium-Sized Programs – includes UC Santa Cruz, UC Davis, UC Santa Barbara, and UC Riverside. Offer trips on fixed route buses that serve both UC campuses and robust connections to larger transit networks.

Small/Rural Programs – includes UC Merced and UC Irvine. Offer on-campus bus/shuttle transportation with limited connection to larger transit network.

Large Urbanized Programs are characterized by larger population centers, extensive regional services, and multiple transit operators. Costs also tend to be the highest for these programs, apart from the heavily subsidized* UC Los Angeles program.

Large Urbanized Programs

Campus	Cost per academic year
UC Berkeley	\$458.00
UC San Francisco	\$272.00
UC San Diego	\$225.00
*UC Los Angeles	\$50.40

Campus	Program Details ¹
UC Berkeley	Pilot program launched after successful 2025 referendum (90% vote) raised student transit fees and increased transit access. Includes access to 24 Bay Area transit partners including BART, bus, and ferry via the Clipper Bay Pass.
UC San Francisco	UCSF program is for graduate students only, no undergraduate population. Students passed a referendum in Spring 2023 to assess

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	a Student Transit Pass fee effective Fall 2023. Includes access to 24 Bay Area transit partners including BART, bus, and ferry via the Clipper Bay Pass.
UC San Diego	Triton U-Pass was renewed in 2025 (83% vote) and increased transit fees to improve access to rail options and allow free summer use. Provides unlimited access to regional San Diego Metropolitan Transit System and North County Transit District bus and trolley/light rail routes and COASTER commuter rail.
UC Los Angeles	2025 Bruin U-Pass renewal referendum passed with 96.9% of the votes cast, doubling the cost per quarter. Provides unlimited public transit access across Los Angeles County.

Medium-Sized Programs link UC campuses to established and robust fixed-route regional bus networks. From a population and transit services standpoint, these programs are most comparable to the services offered by MTD for UCSB students.

While UC Santa Barbara is the third lowest-cost program out of all 10 UCs (\$18.76), it is closest in size, offerings, and locational context to UC Santa Cruz (\$171 per quarter) and UC Davis (\$48.79 per quarter).

Medium-Sized Programs

Campus	Cost per academic year
UC Santa Cruz	\$513.00
UC Davis	\$146.37
UC Santa Barbara	\$75.04
*UC Riverside	\$0.00

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Campus	Program Details
UC Santa Cruz	In place since 1972, the 2019 reapproval increases transit fees annually until 2029/2030 cap of \$191/qtr. Fee supports access to free on-campus transit, fare-free rides on Santa Cruz METRO buses for all undergraduate and graduate students, maintaining campus transit staff and operations, and staffing and operating Disability Van Service.
UC Davis	Undergraduate students show their AggieCard for unlimited rides on Unitrans buses.
UC Santa Barbara	Students tap valid UCSB ID on the farebox for unlimited rides on MTD fixed-route buses, which provide interregional connections to bus and rail for the entirety of the South Coast between Goleta and the Ventura County line.
UC Riverside	Students, faculty, and staff get free unlimited rides on Riverside Transit Agency with valid UCR ID card or through RTA mobile app with verified campus email. UCR's UPASS program is not funded through any student fees, all program costs are paid directly through UCR Transportation Services with revenue from parking citations. This cost is capped at a maximum per year amount. *This program is fully funded, and an outlier amongst all UC transit pass programs.

Small and Rural Programs include campuses that are further from downtown cores, generally serve lower-population centers or campuses, and offer dedicated on-campus shuttle services with limited connectivity to larger transit networks. It is important to point out that both of these programs are higher cost and offer significantly less service than the UCSB student transit pass program.

Small/Rural Programs

Campus	Cost per academic year
UC Merced	\$175.00
UC Irvine	\$160.00

Campus	Program Details
UC Merced	Free rides for students, staff, and faculty with CatCard. Includes limited transit on Merced's "The Bus", and CatTracks dedicated on-campus shuttles. Shuttle service is subsidized by UC Merced.
UC Irvine	Undergraduate students pay \$160.03 in mandatory student fees for access to the Anteater Express on-campus shuttle. All students, faculty and staff are eligible for a discounted University Pass (\$169 annually) for unlimited rides on Orange County Transit Authority buses.

¹ Data compiled from various online sources, direct communications, and historical documentation.

Proposed Transit Fee Increase

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To continue to provide robust and reliable access to transit for University of California Santa Barbara students, MTD staff recommend pursuing a student transit fee increase measure for consideration on UCSB's Spring 2027 ballot. While a substantial initial increase is warranted, staff also recommend including Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA) to keep track with anticipated inflation over time and ensure ongoing stability in the program.

UCSB continues to construct new on-campus student housing, with two projects currently underway that will provide 3,500 new undergraduate student beds on the UC Santa Barbara main campus. In 2025, UC Santa Barbara Transportation and Parking Services updated their Residential Student Parking Restriction Policy, effectively preventing first year students from parking personal vehicles on campus. In concert, these two changes will significantly impact MTD routes that serve UCSB and will increase demand on an already impacted student transit network.

As the Board of Directors is aware, MTD is facing a fiscal cliff and projecting a significant budget deficit for Fiscal Year 2026-27 and beyond. To help maintain core service, staff are implementing reductions in service this year and anticipate greater reductions in the years to come. Stable funding from partnerships like the student pass program can help ensure continued transit access for UCSB students even as MTD implements serious service reductions.

Next Steps

Every four years, UCSB undergraduate and graduate students are asked to vote to reaffirm the student transit fee agreement in place with MTD. The fee was last reaffirmed in campus elections held in the spring of 2024 and would be up for reaffirmation in 2028. With direction from the Board, staff are aiming to bring a new student transit fee increase measure for consideration on UCSB's Spring 2027 ballot in advance of the 2028 scheduled reaffirmation. Should the 2027 ballot measure be successful, it would effectively update and replace the existing agreement. If the measure is not successful, the existing agreement would remain in place until 2028.

Staff's recommendation is to propose an increase of the existing student transit fee to \$45.00 per quarter, and include an annual Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) of no less than zero and not to exceed 4% to keep pace with inflation. It is staff's understanding that ballot language for this new measure would be due by October 31, 2026, for a student election to be held the following May. Should the Board authorize the General Manager to pursue a student transit fee increase measure for consideration on UCSB's Spring 2027 ballot, staff will begin conversations with UCSB staff and draft language for the student transit fee increase measure with the intent to provide these deliverables in time for consideration on the upcoming 2027 spring ballot.

Attachment 1: Comparison of UC Transit Benefits by Campus