



Kate Harrison  
Councilmember District 4

ACTION CALENDAR  
October 12, 2021

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council  
From: Councilmember Harrison  
Subject: Budget Referral: Allocate General Fund Revenues to Support Pilot Program Offering Free AC Transit on Sundays in Berkeley

RECOMMENDATION

Refer to the November 2021 budget process approximately \$500,000 in General Fund Revenue toward fully subsidizing AC Transit fares originating from Berkeley on Sundays for at least one calendar year.

CURRENT SITUATION, EFFECTS, AND RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

Reliable and low-cost shared mobility is necessary to reach the city's equity and climate goals. Fundamental social interactions and services, including but not limited to education, healthcare, commerce, socializing, recreation, and entertainment, require the conveyance of humans from one location to another. Berkeley is equipped with a robust, relatively low-cost, low-carbon, and unionized public bus transit system (AC Transit), connecting to many urban hubs through a larger system of regional public transit infrastructure. AC Transit also provides Berkeley with a ready-made means of accelerating its carbon emissions reduction strategy through mode shifting away from passenger vehicles. Even when powered by diesel, bus trips are significantly less carbon-intensive than gasoline-powered passenger vehicles; even greater climate benefits will be realized as zero-emission busses come on line.

The City has an opportunity to increase use of busses, particularly amongst those that do not commonly ride the bus, by working with AC Transit leadership to pilot fareless Sunday bus trips originating in Berkeley. Berkeley fully subsidizes passenger vehicle parking on Sundays and transit should not be placed at a disadvantage.

This proposal follows AC Transit's successful promotion of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funded 'Fare-Free Fridays' program during September 2021, and would support public transportation and local businesses which have faced steep declines in utilization and patrons amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The details of the program are part of ongoing discussions and coordination with Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District (AC Transit) staff and leadership.

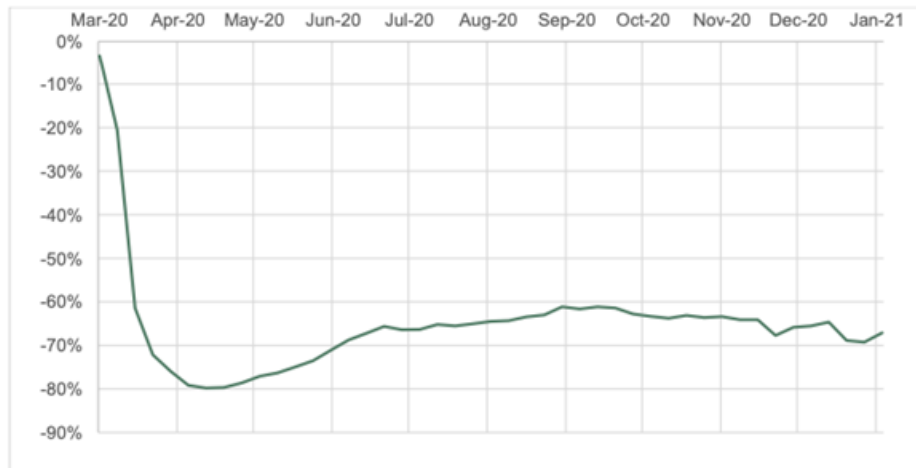
AC Transit busses reduce air pollution, frequent key urban locations, are relatively accessible to disabled persons, observe COVID-19 safety protocols, support commerce, and are outfitted with bicycle storage.

The federal government has empowered Berkeley to transfer ARPA funds to local agencies such as AC Transit. It is in the public interest for the City of Berkeley to support AC Transit and the Berkeley community by exploring and funding increased accessibility and utilization of public transit amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency through a year-long pilot of free Sunday bus rides.

**BACKGROUND**

According to data from the National Transit Database, monthly public transit ridership is 65% lower than before the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, public transit has been forced to reduce its hours and accessibility, and many people shifted to driving personal vehicles as their main mode of transportation. Even as schools and businesses begin to reopen following increased vaccination and masking policies, public transit ridership remains extremely low.

Figure 2 Public Transit Ridership Losses and Projections



Source: APTA Ridership Trends Dashboard powered by Transit, January 2021.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>“The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Public Transit Funding Needs in the U.S.” Evidence-Based Practice (EBP), January 2021, <https://www.apta.com/research-technical-resources/research-reports/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-public-transit-funding-needs-in-the-u-s/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://transitapp.com/APTA>.

More generally, transit ridership in the U.S. has been steadily declining since 2014.<sup>3</sup> The COVID crisis both demands and provides an opportunity for bringing the community back to public transport systems. Implementing free public transit on Sundays can help change the trajectory of Berkeley's ridership levels.

A pilot free transit program will have a positive environmental impact. We are facing a grave climate emergency, requiring municipalities to rapidly transition to a zero-carbon economy by 2030.<sup>4</sup> Berkeley has struggled to rein in its transportation emissions, which as of 2018 accounted for 59% of greenhouse gas emissions and only fell 6% below 2000 levels.<sup>5</sup>

Even when powered by diesel fuel, public bus transit trips are significantly less carbon intensive than passenger vehicle miles, and will continue to fall each year as AC Transit completes its Zero Emissions Bus Rollout Plan by 2040 with 100 percent of all transit new bus purchases being zero emissions by 2029.<sup>6</sup> According to national data from 2010, a single occupancy vehicle trip generates 0.96 pounds of carbon dioxide per passenger mile whereas a bus generates only 0.18 when fully occupied and 0.64 at average occupancy, representing a 33 to 81% decrease in carbon intensity per mile.<sup>7</sup>

---

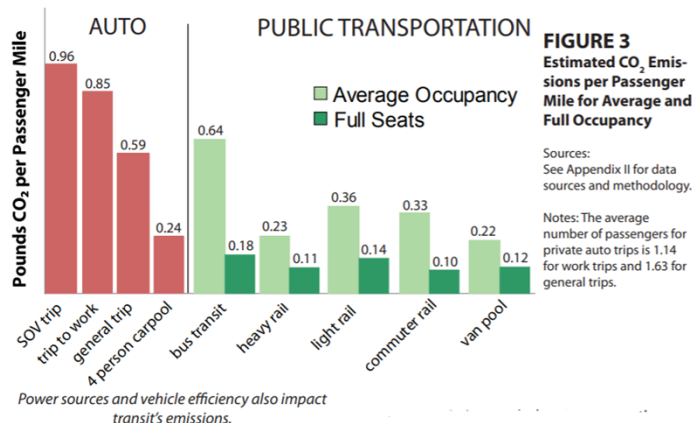
<sup>3</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. Analysis of Recent Public Transit Ridership Trends. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25635>.

<sup>4</sup> The City of Berkeley has historically shown its commitment to tackling climate change through the 2006 Berkeley ballot Measure G, 2009 Climate Action Plan, and the 2018 Climate Emergency Declaration. See also, "Endorsing the Declaration of a Climate Emergency", Resolution No. 68,486-N.S., June 2018 [https://www.cityofberkeley.info/uploadedFiles/Council\\_2/Level\\_3\\_-\\_General/Climate%20Emergency%20Declaration%20-%20Adopted%2012%20June%202018%20-%20BCC.pdf](https://www.cityofberkeley.info/uploadedFiles/Council_2/Level_3_-_General/Climate%20Emergency%20Declaration%20-%20Adopted%2012%20June%202018%20-%20BCC.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> 2020 Climate Action Plan and Resilience Update, Office of Energy and Sustainability, July 21, 2020, [https://www.cityofberkeley.info/Clerk/City\\_Council/2020/07\\_Jul/Documents/2020-07-21\\_Special\\_Item\\_05\\_Climate\\_Action\\_Plan\\_pdf.aspx](https://www.cityofberkeley.info/Clerk/City_Council/2020/07_Jul/Documents/2020-07-21_Special_Item_05_Climate_Action_Plan_pdf.aspx).

<sup>6</sup> Zero-Emissions Bus Rollout Plan, AC Transit, Version 1, 2021, [https://www.actransit.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/AC%20Transit%20ZEB%20Rollout%20Plan\\_06102020.pdf](https://www.actransit.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/AC%20Transit%20ZEB%20Rollout%20Plan_06102020.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Public Transportation's Role in Responding to Climate Change, U.S. Dept. of Transportation, January 2010, <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/PublicTransportationsRoleInRespondingToClimateChange2010.pdf>.



Source: Public Transportation’s Role in Responding to Climate Change, 2010.<sup>8</sup>

Scientists and researchers have warned that recovery and “stimulus” funds distributed by governments in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic must be expended on climate mitigation efforts in order to meet the extremely small carbon budgets agreed to as part of the 2015 Paris Agreement to limit global warming to “well below” 2 degrees.<sup>9</sup>

Across the nation cities are taking action through the implementation of free transit systems. The goal of these transit services is affordable mobility for all, whether through free bus systems, shuttles, railways, etc. In particular the establishment of pilot programs and COVID-19 recovery efforts across the country have demonstrated the need for a push to free public transit. In March 2021, Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont directed CTtransit to provide free, statewide bus service to the public every weekend in order to combat the economic losses incurred during the ongoing pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, thanks to the leadership of grassroots movements and Supervisor Dean Preston, during the pandemic the San Francisco Mayor agreed to adopt free transit for youth under 19 years old across MUNI for a minimum of one year.<sup>11</sup> Programs such as this aim to not only boost ridership but also to increase the accessibility of transportation to youth, low-income commuters, and

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> H. Damon Matthews, and Kasia Tokarska, “New Research Suggests 1.5C Climate Target Will Be out of Reach without Greener COVID-19 Recovery Plans.” *The Conversation*, 10 Aug. 2021, [theconversation.com/new-research-suggests-1-5c-climate-target-will-be-out-of-reach-without-greener-covid-19-recovery-plans-151527](https://theconversation.com/new-research-suggests-1-5c-climate-target-will-be-out-of-reach-without-greener-covid-19-recovery-plans-151527).

<sup>10</sup> “Governor Lamont Implements Free Weekend Bus Service During Summer Months in Connecticut as Part of Ongoing COVID-19 Recovery Efforts”, State of Connecticut, March 2021 <https://portal.ct.gov/Office-of-the-Governor/News/Press-Releases/2021/03-2021/Governor-Lamont-Implements-Free-Weekend-Bus-Service-During-Summer-Months>

<sup>11</sup> Mayor London Breed and Supervisor Myrna Melgar Announce Expansion of Free Muni for All Youth Program, Monday, July 12, 2021, <https://sfmayor.org/article/mayor-london-breed-and-supervisor-myrna-melgar-announce-expansion-free-muni-all-youth>.

seniors with disabilities. Before the pandemic, Lawrence Massachusetts launched a two-year free bus transit pilot program daily on its three primary bus routes in September 2019 and saw an impressive 24% increase in ridership. Other cities have seen an increase as high as 60%. Similar experiments are underway in Kansas City, Olympia Washington, and Boston. According to the New York Times, 100 cities worldwide provide free public transit.<sup>12</sup>

According to a Health Affairs study, certain groups, including “women, young adults (those ages 25–29), Black workers, and low-income workers,” disproportionately rely on public transportation for commuting and mobility, and public transportation has clear benefits for public health and health equity. At the same time “[l]ack of access to public transportation can disproportionately harm older people and people with disabilities... [and] can also contribute to existing racial and economic disparities by decreasing mobility and forcing individuals to depend on costly car ownership.”<sup>13</sup>

Currently, U.C. Berkeley students and Berkeley City employees enjoy unlimited AC Transit EasyPasses, incentivizing ridership on public transit.

Notably, the City of Berkeley does not charge for parking on Sundays, which encourages use of single-occupancy vehicles. Offering free public transit within Berkeley on Sundays can stimulate positive and COVID-safe social interactions by providing access to local businesses, open space and other public venues. It is also good for the economy. Figure ES-2 suggests that transport policies which make alternative modes of transportation such as public transit more accessible strongly correlate with enhanced commercial activity.<sup>14</sup>

---

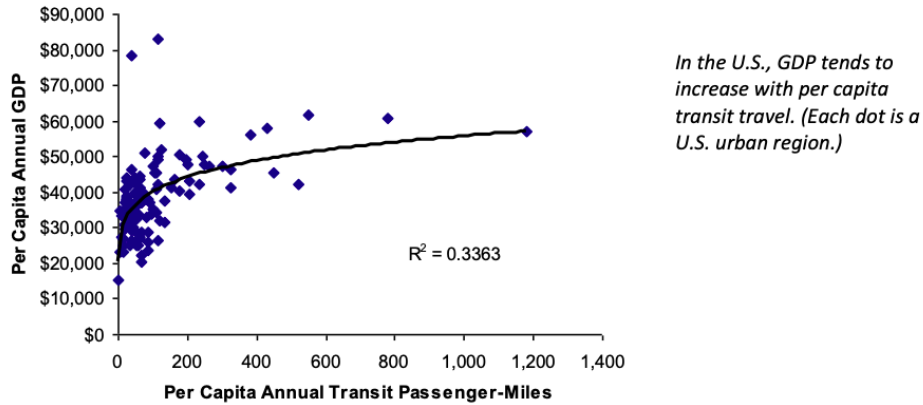
<sup>12</sup> Barry, Ellen, and Greta Rybus, “Should Public Transit Be Free? More Cities Say, Why Not?” The New York Times, The New York Times, 14 Jan. 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/01/14/us/free-public-transit.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/14/us/free-public-transit.html).

<sup>13</sup> Public Transportation in the US: A Driver of Health and Equity, Wendy Heaps, Erin Abramsohn, Elizabeth Skillen, July 29, 2021, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hpb20210630.810356/full/>.

<sup>14</sup> In a study conducted by the American Public Transport Association, researchers examined three cities: Silicon Beach, CA; Austin, TX; and Durham, NC, to analyze the impact of increased public transportation on local economic growth. The study found that “public transportation investments will yield a 2 to 1 return while helping to generate income for local businesses, its workers and their neighborhoods” APTA also stated that “87% of trips on transit directly benefit the local economy”. “Public Transportation Supports Knowledge and Innovation Districts”, American Public Transportation Association <https://www.apta.com/research-technical-resources/research-reports/public-transit-knowledge/>; “2021 PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION FACT BOOK”, American Public Transportation Association, 2021

<https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-2021-Fact-Book.pdf>.

Figure ES-2 Per Capita GDP and Transit Ridership (VTPI 2009)



Source: "Evaluating Transportation Economic Development Impacts", 2018 <sup>15</sup>

The City also receives sales and business license revenue from such commerce. However, consistent with its climate goals, the City’s aim in expanding transit *must not* be to increase economic growth for growth’s sake, but to enhance community access to the provision of basic human needs.

Supporting AC Transit operations also means supporting an “essential” and unionized transit workforce as well as the local maintenance and local manufacturing/assembly of busses.

Ahead of submission of this item, Councilmember Harrison’s office and AC Transit have discussed some potential preliminary logistical and fiscal aspects of launching such a pilot program, as well as discussed strategies to prioritize increasing transit ridership. Fortunately, AC Transit received significant funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) and ARPA to help stabilize massive fare losses, but ultimately these funds are temporary.

Meanwhile, the City of Berkeley has received approximately \$66 million over two years from the American Rescue Plan Act. It must expend these funds no later than December, 2024. Section 603(c)(3) of the American Rescue Plan Act allows local governments to transfer funds to other agencies such as AC Transit to assist with the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and to improve equity measures including access to transportation:

“TRANSFER AUTHORITY. — A metropolitan city... receiving a payment from funds made available under this section may transfer funds to ... a public benefit corporation involved in

<sup>15</sup> “Evaluating Transportation Economic Development Impacts”, Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 2018 [https://vtpi.org/econ\\_dev.pdf](https://vtpi.org/econ_dev.pdf)

the transportation of passengers or cargo, or a special-purpose unit of State or local government.”<sup>16</sup>

The City of Berkeley is considered a metropolitan city and AC Transit likely qualifies as a special-purpose unit of local government.<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, the Council could fund the program through excess equity. While the Transportation Network Company tax may provide funding in subsequent years, the Council has already indicated support in this first year for using these funds for priority protected bikeways and quick-build transit projects.<sup>18</sup> AC Transit leadership has repeatedly expressed the significance of Berkeley’s interest in funding such quick-build improvements.

It is in the public interest to allocate General Funds towards the AC Transit pilot program in order to boost ridership rates, expand access to local goods and services, and to reduce transportation-based carbon emissions. This item proposes an allocation of \$500,000 to support this program and to support possible increased demand resulting from COVID-19 recovery efforts or demand stimulated as a result of this pilot. Implementation of any Berkeley pilot would be subject to approval by the AC Transit Board.

A successful pilot initiative could inspire potential subsequent efforts to expand free transit on a more permanent and frequent basis and thereby further reduce emissions and expand mobility equity.

#### FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The item would have a net \$500,000 impact on the General Fund.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Reducing carbon emissions at an emergency and equitable pace is a necessary step to meet the goals of the Climate Action Plan and Climate Emergency Declaration.

---

<sup>16</sup> American Rescue Plan Act, U.S. Congress, January 3, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hr1319/BILLS-117hr1319enr.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> 41 CFR § 105-50.001-4 Special-purpose unit of local government. Special-purpose unit of local government means any special district, public-purpose corporation, or other strictly limited-purpose political subdivision of a State, but shall not include a school district.

<sup>18</sup> Budget Referral: Allocate Transportation Network Companies User’s Tax Proceeds and other General Fund Revenues to Support Tier 1 Protected Bicycle Lanes, Crossings, Demonstration Paving Projects, and/or Quick-build Public Transit Projects Under the Street Repair Program, Councilmember Harrison, March 9, 2021, [https://www.cityofberkeley.info/Clerk/City\\_Council/2021/03\\_Mar/Documents/2021-03-09\\_Supp\\_1\\_Reports\\_Item\\_21\\_Rev\\_Harrison\\_pdf.aspx](https://www.cityofberkeley.info/Clerk/City_Council/2021/03_Mar/Documents/2021-03-09_Supp_1_Reports_Item_21_Rev_Harrison_pdf.aspx).

Budget Referral: Allocate General Fund Revenues to Support Pilot  
Program Offering Free AC Transit on Sundays in Berkeley

ACTION CALENDAR  
October 12, 2021

CONTACT PERSON

Councilmember Kate Harrison, Council District 4, 510-981-7140