South Bay Cities Council of Governments

September 24, 2020

TO: SBCCOG Board of Directors

FROM: Steve Lantz, SBCCOG Transportation Director

RE: SBCCOG Transportation Update Covering August 2020

Adherence to Strategic Plan:

Goal A: Environment, Transportation and Economic Development. Facilitate, implement and/or educate members and others about environmental, transportation and economic development programs that benefit the South Bay.

Federal

Americans Saved Nearly $91 Billion By Mid-August Working From Home During Pandemic
Americans have saved nearly $91 billion working from home during the coronavirus pandemic, according to a study by economist Adam Ozimek of Upwork. The analysis estimated that cutting daily commutes has saved Americans about $758 million a day in time and expense since the pandemic began, including $411 million per day in time savings, $183 million a day in gas and repairs, and $164 million saved due to fewer accidents and reduced pollution. Each commuter who has worked remotely since mid-March has saved an average of $2,000 thus far.

Not On The Road (Or Transit) Again
Traffic volumes remained down by as much as half on some major turnpikes and toll authorities around the country, according to the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, which released new data from early August. The Eno Center for Transportation theorizes: “The numbers may stabilize in the 10-15% down range, as gasoline production already has."

By comparison, Metro transit ridership is approximately 50% of pre-COVID levels. So the lower traffic volumes could be masking the precipice of a looming traffic catastrophe if the economy slowly recovers and people go back to work but don’t return to taking transit. Metro and other major transit operators around the nation have predicted it will take more than two years for transit to return to its former levels. (See Metro’s free fare proposal below).

State Transportation Groups Seek $37B In COVID Federal Funding Relief
A group of 15 transportation industry organizations in mid-August asked the White House for an “immediate infusion” of $37 billion in federal funding for state departments of transportation in COVID-19 relief. The groups also asked the President to oppose measures to suspend or permanently repeal a dedicated federal user fee within the Highway Trust Fund (HTF) that generates revenue for surface transportation improvements.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials estimates state transportation revenue losses of $37 billion over five years (through FY 2024), with an estimated loss of $16 billion in FY 2020. According to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the HTF account will become insolvent sooner than anticipated. For example, revenue had fallen by 46 percent by the second half of April, when compared to April 2019.

Multi-Year Highway Bill In Limbo Amid Negotiations
As of the end of August, with a month before the country's current Surface Transportation policy law expires, Congressional leaders and the White House have not agreed on the text of the next Surface Transportation Reauthorization Bill, the multi-year federal legislation that establishes policy and funding parameters. Most expect a series of continuing resolutions will be adopted before the next administration and Congress come to agreement.

The U. S. Department of Transportation sent a proposal to the White House Office of Management and Budget months ago for the interagency "clearance" process and the administration referenced a draft 10-year plan in its FY 2021 budget proposal. But that process has not yet produced a final product, which puts the Trump Administration at risk of joining the first Obama Administration in the exclusive club – the only Presidents who never put forward their own multi-year surface transportation proposals.

Senate panels with jurisdiction over freight, transit and taxes have not contributed to an initial highway bill the Environment and Public Works committee approved last year. The U.S. House this summer passed along partisan lines an update of the 2015 highway law. Like the Senate, the House did not adopt a fix for the Highway Trust Fund's looming insolvency.

USDOT Unveils Accessibility Plan As Part Of ADA's 30th Anniversary
The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) turned 30 years old on July 26 – a civil rights law that has profoundly affected how highway and transit agencies across the nation approach mobility issues.

Celebrating the ADA's 30th anniversary, the U.S. Department of Transportation unveiled what it called a "first-of-its-kind" draft accessibility strategic plan to ensure a "unified vision" and "clear path forward" to continue removing barriers in transportation access for people with disabilities. The document, which is expected to be formally published at the end of 2020, will include specific goals that will guide USDOT's accessibility work for the next five years. The focus of the agency's plan is to provide a single, cohesive roadmap to ensure USDOT is prioritizing and working diligently to increase access to transportation for people with disabilities.

The creation of the new accessibility plan follows an effort launched by USDOT in 2019: a four-year, $40 million accessibility program. As part of that program, USDOT created an Inclusive Design Challenge – a contest aimed at encouraging the development of autonomous vehicle solutions geared toward the need of persons with physical, sensory, and/or cognitive disabilities. The deadline for submissions for the Inclusive Design Challenge is October 30. More information on the challenge is available at: https://www.transportation.gov/accessibility/inclusivedesign

State

California Adopts Major Pollution Cuts For Autos, Diesel Trucks And Ships
On Aug. 17th, the California Air Resources Board (CARB) finalized its agreements with five major automakers aimed at upholding its stringent vehicle emissions standards against an effort by the Trump administration to roll the rules back. In doing so, the state delivered an unmistakable warning to the rest of the auto industry that California's rules are likely to remain in place.

The state carefully crafted its agreements with Ford, Honda, BMW of North America, Volkswagen Group of America and Volvo as a contract rather than a regulation to keep them free from interference by the federal Environmental Protection Agency or anyone else in the Trump administration.

In a second initiative, CARB on August 27th adopted their biggest pollution-cutting regulations in more than a decade, targeting diesel trucks and cargo ships that spew much of the state's health-damaging pollution.

The pair of rules establishes stringent new emissions standards for heavy-duty diesel trucks, and requires more ships docked at ports to plug into electric power or scrub their exhaust. Diesel trucks emit nearly one-third of smog-forming nitrogen oxides and more than one-quarter of diesel particulate matter in the state. Oceangoing ships are projected to surpass trucks to become Southern California's largest source of nitrogen oxides by 2023.

Tougher truck rules could, however, add to California's many legal battles with the Trump administration. Much like the fight over auto emissions, California's move to adopt its own stricter rules for heavy-duty trucks puts the state at odds with federal officials and manufacturers, who want a single, nationwide standard.

The new standards would reduce allowable emissions of nitrogen oxides from new trucks 90% by 2027. The rule, which has been in development for more than seven years, is the state's biggest cut in smog-forming pollutants since 2008 and is equivalent to taking 16 million cars off the road, according to the air board. That's nearly two-thirds of 26 million light-duty trucks.

The rules adopted Thursday would also overhaul emissions-testing procedures to better account for real-world driving, including when trucks are idling, traveling slowly or in stop-and-go traffic and are known to release much higher levels of pollution. Neither the truck nor ship rules will bring immediate air quality improvements because they do not start taking effect until 2023 or later and take years more to phase in.

Assembly Appropriations Committee Approves CEQA Streamlining
Two key CEQA streamlining proposals were approved by the Assembly Appropriations Committee on August 21st. Senate Bill 757 (Allen/Atkins), a Metro-sponsored measure, and Senate Bill 288 (Wiener) both passed and now move to the full Assembly Floor for consideration.

SB 757 (Atkins/Allen) is the first CEQA streamlining legislation of its kind for public transit, granting the AB 900 (2011) shortened CEQA litigation period to key transit projects, including the Green Line South, one of Metro's four Pillar Projects. AB 900 provisions were previously reserved only for environmental leadership projects related to the development of a residential, retail, commercial, sports, cultural, entertainment, or recreational use project, or a clean renewable energy or a clean energy manufacturing project. SB 757 will grant certainty in the legal process which will help to meet Metro's aggressive Twenty-Eight by 2028 schedule, prevent significant delays, and cost increases.

SB 288 (Wiener) includes provisions to expand statutory CEQA exemptions for key active transportation, bus rapid transit and other capital projects.

Uber, Lyft To Stay In California, For Now
Ride-hailing giants Uber and Lyft will keep operating in California at least through November after an appeals court stayed a decision that the companies must reclassify their drivers as employees, not keep them as independent contractors. A consortium of app-based companies are supporting a ballot initiative, Proposition 22, which the companies say would "protect the ability of app-based rideshare and delivery drivers to work as independent contractors" and preserve the "current on-demand system."

The ride-hailing companies had contemplated shutting down their services to bring voter attention to the proposition. Proposition 22, a ballot measure backed by Uber, Lyft, DoorDash and other gig economy companies, aims to exempt the companies from Assembly Bill 5, a state law that took effect this year and sets stricter standards for companies that seek to treat workers as contractors.

The companies have argued that AB 5 in its current form would raise their operating costs, because treating drivers as employees would mean providing benefits such as healthcare coverage, a minimum wage and workers' compensation. They also argue it would force them to completely restructure their businesses and limit their services by requiring drivers to work specific shifts and fixed schedules.

The impacts of withdrawing their service from California could have been tremendous, both on riders who have relied on ride-hailing during the pandemic with transit seeing severely curtailed service, and on the thousands of drivers who rely on Uber and Lyft for their income. The Orange County Register reported Uber estimated it would have put 158,000 drivers out of work. In an email, a spokesperson for the California Labor Federation said the threatened withdrawal is part of a broader play to not protect drivers.

Region

Metro Proposes 20% Bus Service Cut in FY 2021 Metro Budget

The L. A. Metro Board is holding public hearings before adopting its fiscal year 20-21 budget in September. If Metro passes the proposed budget, FY 21 bus service hours would be cut from the pre-pandemic levels of 7.4 million revenue hours to 5.2 million, a 20 percent service cut. And, while Metro's phased bus recovery plan shows an 8 percent cut in FY21-22, their data show a 14% increase in service hours between last quarter and this quarter, followed by quarterly increases of 0.7%, 0.1%, and 0.09% over the next three quarters.

Metro sales tax revenues, which provide most of Metro's operating subsidies, are down about 16 percent, leaving an estimated $1.8 billion deficit by June 30, 2021 the end of FY 20-21. $700+million of that loss is anticipated to be covered by the federal CARES Act COVID-19 stimulus.

Metro is trying to stem the ridership and revenue losses by accelerating its Next Gen Study recommended route and schedule changes and capital improvements. Metro expects to spend $15 million in FY 21 and nearly a billion $ in capital funds over the next five years to implement bus-only lanes, all-door boarding (potentially with free fares), transit signal prioritization, and bus stop improvements.

Metro Studies Making Bus, Rail Service Free For All Riders

L. A. Metro's CEO, Phillip Washington, announced during the August 27th Board meeting that staff is initiating a 3-month study to determine how Metro can make riding its buses and trains free starting sometime in 2021. The Fareless System Initiative (FSI) would make L.A. County's public transit system the largest in the world to be entirely fare less.

An internal staff task force hopes to provide a plan, complete with funding sources and implementation scenarios, to Washington and Metro's board within three months. Washington said he views fare elimination as a moral obligation to help L. A. County recover from the pandemic and the lack of housing affordability and he views it as an economic development tool similar to other public services such as policing and firefighting.

The task force is charged with looking at funding opportunities, such as local, state and federal grants, and looking at how Metro's funds — including revenue from advertisements and sponsorships — could be reprioritized to pay for the program. The task force will also look at how eliminating fares could reduce or eliminate allegations against Metro of targeting people of color for fare enforcement, and will discuss how eliminating fares could affect homelessness in the region. It will also weigh other considerations, such as equipment purchasing and upkeep, as well as staff and enforcement. Additionally, the task force will look at how free fares would affect other county transit agencies, and impact ridership, the rider experience and traffic.

In fiscal year 2019, which ended on June 30, 2019 (before the pandemic), Metro collected nearly $300 million in fares but had $1.9 billion in operating costs, a farebox recovery of less than 16%. That percentage has been in decline for the past 20 years, but has dropped close to zero during the pandemic. At the end of August, L.A. Metro was running about 78 percent of its pre-pandemic service for about 50 percent of its pre-pandemic ridership due to the need for distancing of riders and an intent to not eliminate any Metro operations positions.

L.A. Metro's Transit App Now Predicts Crowding Levels On Buses

Projected crowding levels on Metro buses are now available through the Transit app, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (Metro) official app that was introduced last May. The new feature in the Transit app uses recent ridership numbers collected by automated passenger counters on each bus to predict the number of riders on any L.A. Metro bus at a particular time, location and direction of travel. The estimated number of riders is shown using three levels and is based on the size of the vehicle. In the app, riders will see these three designations:

- Usually many seats available means that 0-33 percent of seated capacity is being used.
- Usually seats available means that 34-85 percent of seated capacity is being used.
- Usually standing room only means that 85 percent or more of seated capacity is being used.

Nearly one in three LA-area app users told Transit in a June survey that having this type of crowding information would get them riding the bus more often.

Hermosa Beach Council Trades Car Lanes For Bike Lanes, Dining Decks On Hermosa Avenue

One lane in each direction of Hermosa Avenue will be closed for at least six months in downtown Hermosa Beach in order to provide more opportunities for outdoor commerce and to create more space for cyclists and pedestrians.

The temporary design will double the amount of space available for outdoor dining and retail options and create a dedicated north- and south-bound bike lane while reducing car lanes from two lanes in each direction to one. To accommodate those new features, all parking will be moved to the west side of the street, with capacity expanded by painting parking space lines at an angle, rather than parallel to the curb. The new parking spaces will be "reverse angle," meaning drivers will have to back in, rather than enter nose first. The design is being implemented between 14th Street and Eighth Street.

The new configuration doubles the space available for potential dining decks, going from seven feet from the curb to 14. A bike lane will border the decks, providing an additional barrier between patrons and motor vehicles.

LA County Approves 'Vision Zero' Plan To Eliminate Traffic Deaths By 2035

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors on August 4th approved a plan to reduce traffic-related injuries and deaths in unincorporated areas of the county, setting a goal of zero fatalities by 2035.

The plan will be co-led by the departments of Public Works and Public Health. The action plan — Vision Zero Los Angeles County: A Plan for Safer Roadways — identifies various safety improvements to be implemented over the next five years, including installing high-visibility crosswalks and pedestrian head-start signals. Pilot programs will be launched at three or more high-collision corridors.

The plan to enhance street safety comes as traffic deaths countywide have jumped by nearly 28% countywide from 2013-2017, with 3,400 lives lost. More than 10% of those people were killed on roadways in unincorporated communities.

TRENDS

Americans Becoming Leerier of Autonomous Technologies

A new report from an American Automobile Association (AAA) indicates that consumer trust in autonomous vehicles has quickly eroded over the past few years. Today, three-quarters (73 percent) of American drivers report they would be too afraid to ride in a fully self-driving vehicle, up from 63 percent in late 2017. Additionally, two-thirds (63 percent) of U.S. adults report they would actually feel less safe sharing the road with a self-driving vehicle while walking or riding a bicycle.

Surprisingly, AAA's latest survey found that Millennials – the group that has been the quickest to embrace automated vehicle technologies — were the most concerned by traffic incidents involving autonomous vehicles. The percentage of Millennial drivers too afraid to ride in a fully self-driving vehicle has jumped from 49 percent to 64 percent since late 2017, representing the largest increase of any generation surveyed.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) analyzed 5,000 U.S. crashes and concluded that only a third of all U.S. road crashes could be prevented by driverless cars, far lower than the 70% claimed by self-driving technology advocates. The IIHS reported that only those caused by driver perception errors and incapacitation are likely to be prevented by self-driving cars.

AAA researchers also urged caution in relying on the autonomous features appearing in new vehicles. They investigated partially automatic driving systems from five manufacturers in vehicles over a distance of 4,000 miles, and found problems occurring every eight miles.

The researchers found the most problems with systems that are meant to keep vehicles in their proper lanes and prevent collision with other cars and trucks. Their findings also showed that partially automated systems combined with controls on acceleration, braking and steering would often quit working without immediately prompting drivers, which could lead to dangerous accidents if drivers are not fully aware in an emergency.

Transit passengers elsewhere seem skeptical too. A recent study found that around half of transit riders in Michigan would be wary of driverless service. In addition, autonomous transit vehicles would need to be able to travel faster than their current 12 mph top speed and transit unions are understandably opposed.