
April 6, 2026

Chair Stephen Whitburn
Metropolitan Transit System
1255 Imperial Ave, Suite 100A
San Diego, CA, 92101

SUBJECT: San Diego's Transit System Depends on Maintaining Service Levels

Dear Chair Whitburn and Members of the Metropolitan Transit System Board:

On behalf of Circulate Planning & Policy, whose mission is to create excellent mobility choices and vibrant, healthy neighborhoods, I am writing to urge the Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) to take the actions necessary to maintain service levels as it considers actions to address its operational deficit.

1. Maintaining current levels of service is essential for the long-term sustainability of the region's transit system.

The long-term success and sustainability of the MTS system depends on the number of people riding transit. When transit becomes less convenient and less predictable, less people use the system. Increased headways, reduced routes, slower service, and other measures to scale back the quality of transit service will inevitably result in reduced ridership and farebox revenue. This results in more service cuts and the self-reinforcing downward spiral of a system, known as the "transit doom loop." In the long-term, raising fares leads to less ridership loss than cutting service.

A robust transit network is essential to meet the City's equity, climate, and mobility goals. Cutting service to keep fares low near-term is counter to all of these objectives in the long-term.

2. Package B with phased implementation is the best available approach.

Package B presents the best opportunity for MTS to have sufficient fare revenues to maintain service in the immediate term. A phased implementation will help soften the blow and keep the system moving.

We must all acknowledge that any increase for fares will be a hardship for some riders, and should be a method of last resort. Nevertheless, keeping high levels of service will benefit the vast majority of riders who will continue to rely on the system, and it will help rebuild ridership with intact, well-established routes.

3. Transit riders repeatedly favor paying higher fares to maintain service.

In addition to being most advantageous for the sustainability of our transit system, transit riders themselves do not want MTS to cut service. The most recent MTS fare change community outreach yet again found that most transit riders favor paying modestly higher fares to keep service levels the same. This finding is consistent with prior MTS fare change surveys. Transit riders over and over ask MTS say they prefer higher fares if necessary to maintain current service levels. MTS must listen to the needs of the people it serves.

4. MTS must get creative to keep the trolley and buses running.

While essential in the short-term, raising fares will not solve MTS' structural deficit. MTS needs to explore long-term solutions to maintain the financial sustainability of the system. MTS must get creative and explore all options to raise revenues. Ballot measures, advertising revenues, refreshing employer-offered transit programs, and enforcing fares should all be explored.

5. Conclusion

Fare increases are never ideal. With today's increasing affordability challenges, any measures that may impact household budgets require informed and thoughtful debate. With that said, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the region's transit system is the best thing that we can do to advance long-term equity, sustainability, and mobility in the region. I urge you to recommend to the San Diego Association of Governments Board of Directors Package B with phased implementation. That is the best option to balance maximizing new revenue with minimizing long-term ridership loss.

Sincerely,



Aria Grossman
Policy Manager
Circulate Planning & Policy