

AGENDA ITEM II – A
STAFF REPORT

**SACRAMENTO COMMUTER & MIDDAY EXPRESS
SERVICE CHANGES**

Issue

Historical ridership patterns on Yuba-Sutter Transit's Sacramento services have shifted, often significantly, over the last few months in response to changes in both internal and external operating conditions. Several schedules now require supplemental service four days a week to provide adequate seating capacity while others regularly operate with plenty of available seats. The purpose of this agenda item is to determine the advisability of making low or no cost service changes to improve the operation of the service for both current and future passengers.

Background

Ridership patterns on Yuba-Sutter Transit's Sacramento Commuter schedules have shifted in the last few months especially since the suspension of alternative work schedules that for many state employees became effective on or about September 1st. In addition, the July expansion of state employee furloughs to three Fridays each month; the October 1st implementation of new Highway 70 schedules in conjunction with the opening of the Plumas Lake Park & Ride Lot; and, a 7.6 percent increase in average weekday ridership (Monday – Thursday) from June to September have all contributed to this shift as well. While average weekday ridership is 7.4 percent less than the record levels of August/September 2008 compared to September 2009, the apparent redistribution of those passengers has become a significant issue as our system gradually developed over nearly 20 years under dramatically different demand patterns.

In response to these changes, a fourth supplemental bus was added to the operation on September 1st for additional seating capacity (now operating one AM and three PM supplemental buses), but standing loads are still experienced at times on several schedules even where supplemental capacity is provided. We have also implemented a leap frog operation when possible with the regular and supplemental buses on the 3rd AM Highway 70 schedule to mitigate the passenger and schedule impact of serving both Plumas Lake and East Nicolaus. The result is increased operating cost; overcrowding on some buses while others have significant available capacity; and, increased passenger confusion and frustration which will ultimately lead to reduced ridership.

One possible action being considered is to adjust the afternoon schedules where the shift of passenger demand has been most dramatic to make better use of the existing seating capacity with the intended result of reducing or containing operating costs through the elimination or reassignment of one or more supplemental buses. (Each supplemental schedule has an annual operating cost of approximately \$16,000 to \$17,000.) In October, the first two afternoon Highway 99 schedules (including a supplemental bus) averaged 93 passengers each weekday (Monday – Thursday) while the last two afternoon Highway 99 schedules averaged just 41 passengers. During this same period, ridership on the 1st PM Highway 99 schedule averaged 53 passengers (up 11 over August) while the last of the six PM Highway 99 schedules averaged just 12 on board. Less dramatic, but similar shifts appear to be occurring on morning schedules as well.

The Board's August 27th decision to retain East Nicolaus on two AM and two PM Highway 70 schedules along with the northbound 2nd Midday schedule is being reconsidered at the same time. In addition to the approximately \$3,400 annual operating cost of this alternative, the response from those boarding one of the two schedules prior to East Nicolaus has been overwhelmingly negative due to the additional travel time required. This is made worse by the small number of passengers that now board in East Nicolaus. After seven weeks of operation, East Nicolaus ridership is averaging less than four boardings each day on the combined two morning schedules with a high of eight (once) and a low of zero (twice). In addition, ridership figures to date seem to indicate a shift of passengers away from the two Highway 70 schedules possibly due, at least in part, to the East Nicolaus related changes. This further complicates the ridership shift on other similarly timed morning and afternoon Highway 99 schedules.

Reduction of the state furlough program or relaxation of the new policy regarding alternative work schedules certainly could occur without notice, but it appears that these are not going to significantly change anytime soon. In addition, the three new 57 passenger buses that are now expected to be available for service by June will help since two schedules now average more than 50 passengers each afternoon with the use of supplemental buses, but relief from this source is still many months away at best. As a result, the Yuba-Sutter Transit Board of Directors authorized staff at the October 15th meeting to initiate a service review process to assess the impact of possible service alternatives to address this issue and set a public hearing for a special night meeting on December 3rd to receive passenger input on the various alternatives.

Public Input / Staff Recommendation

On October 17th, staff sent an e-mail to our list of approximately 500 addresses informing them of the Board authorized service review to address the shift in ridership patterns. This same notice included discussions of the possible shift of the afternoon Highway 99 schedules; the possible elimination of the East Nicolaus stop; and, the December 3rd special night meeting. Based in part on the response to this e-mail, staff developed an on-board survey that was offered on Wednesday, October 28th to all who boarded any of the six afternoon Highway 99 schedules. The survey was also available electronically to anyone requesting one. A total of 155 surveys were received.

The survey results did indicate strong support for an earlier afternoon Highway 99 schedule with a first downtown stop of 3:30 or 3:35 p.m. (compared to the existing 3:45 p.m.), but also strong support by those who regularly use the later afternoon Highway 99 schedules to retain their current schedules. Based again in part on the results of the on-board survey, the seven schedule alternatives were reduced to three including the current afternoon schedules as a status quo alternative. The three alternatives including the proposed elimination of the East Nicolaus stop were then circulated as a draft service plan on November 3rd for formal public input. It was available electronically as well as distributed in hard copy on all Sacramento buses. Copies of the public hearing notice and the related draft service plan are attached for reference along with a summary of the comments that have been received to date on the draft service plan.

Based on our evaluation of these comments and current ridership patterns, staff is now making the following recommendations:

1. Eliminate the East Nicolaus stop on all schedules and adjust the start time for the 1st and 3rd AM Highway 70 schedules five minutes later and the end time of the 1st and 3rd PM Highway 70 schedules and the northbound 2nd Midday schedule five minutes earlier to reflect the reduced travel time resulting from this change; and,
2. Make no changes to the current afternoon Highway 99 schedules (Option #1) at least until after the new 57 passenger commuter buses are placed in service.

The elimination of the East Nicolaus stop received near unanimous expressions of support in comments on the draft service plan. Dropping this controversial stop will result in a small cost savings, but it will significantly improve service quality for all who board a Highway 70 bus north of East Nicolaus through reduced travel time and less passenger confusion. It will also reduce the incentive to ride other schedules to avoid the East Nicolaus stop possibly easing congestion however slightly on those schedules which include some AM and PM Highway 99 schedules.

The status quo recommendation for the afternoon Highway 99 schedules is due in no small part to the complex interactions between the six afternoon Highway 99 schedules. Based on the survey, an earlier afternoon schedule would almost certainly eliminate the current capacity crisis on the existing 1st and 2nd Highway 99 schedules, but the necessary reduction in service later in the afternoon to accomplish this feat would almost certainly create capacity problems there especially on the 5th Highway 99 schedule. Should this result, there would likely be no cost savings since the existing supplemental bus would simply be shifted to later in the afternoon. This would mean better service for some; significant service disruption for others; and, no cost savings.

This recommendation is not intended to dismiss this concept, but to simply defer it until after the new buses are placed in service. Because the 1st afternoon Highway 99 schedule is already averaging up to 55 passengers on board using two buses, the new 57 passenger buses are likely to immediately be full to standing loads with supplemental buses still necessary. The addition of an earlier schedule to better spread demand over more schedules may be desirable at that time as the resulting consolidation of passengers on a later afternoon schedule can be addressed with a larger capacity bus. This would allow the existing supplemental bus to be eliminated entirely for the desired cost savings. In addition, the long term (FY 2011 and beyond) state furlough and alternative work schedule policies may be known by June and any ridership shift due to the East Nicolaus stop should have normalized to further uncompllicated the issue.

Staff will be prepared to discuss this issue in further detail as desired at the meeting.

RECOMMENDATION: Approve the service changes as proposed or amended effective January 4, 2010.