



**TO:** Metro Board of Directors and CEO Stephanie Wiggins  
**DATE:** January 18, 2022  
**RE:** Bus Operator Shortage

Dear Metro Board of Directors:

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered the daily lives of people across the globe. For nearly two years, uncertainty has upended work and family routines, all while our community members have faced trauma and isolation during these trying times. It is no surprise that services like public

transportation have been asked to make difficult and demanding adjustments as well.

Throughout the pandemic, we, the undersigned individuals and organizations, have sought to balance patience with Metro as the agency moved to protect essential workers, such as Metro's bus operators and bus riders using transit to get to work at hospitals, grocery stores, and daycares, among others. We have shown up to tell Metro how service cuts impact riders who rely on good transit service. We have also thanked Metro's Board for listening to the outpouring of feedback and demanding a return to the pre-COVID service levels.

The latest staff report before the Metro Board suggests that Metro's promised service has fallen short. Despite the Board's assurances that service would be restored to pre-pandemic levels, riders have been left stranded as buses have failed to arrive according to schedule. The new report belatedly ratifies the anecdotal evidence that riders have been attesting for months: Metro is providing nowhere near the frequency of service that it promised the public.

With the current number of operator call-outs, Metro is not achieving the level of service promised in its timetable and the promise of NextGen. Now Metro is once again seeking to resolve the problem by potentially cutting bus levels of service.

We would like to express our opposition to a "right-sizing" plan that views frequent service as a problem to be solved with punitive cuts and transit austerity. Transit riders have continued to fight every day of this pandemic to keep Los Angeles moving. We deserve a transit system that will fight for us.

We are deeply concerned about what appears to be the lack of transparency in decision making, data sharing, and communications around levels of service. In March 2020, when COVID-19 began spreading, Metro canceled all committee meetings for the month, cut transit service, and instituted a hiring freeze across the agency in anticipation of significant revenue shortfalls.

For the next several months, community members and advocates attended every Metro Board meeting, sharing their experiences of long waits for buses, crowded buses where people were not able to socially distance, and

unreliable bus service. Month after month, the comments of bus riders were sidelined. Meanwhile, weekly ridership data from the American Public Transit Association showed LA Metro has suffered the least amount of transit ridership loss than anywhere in the country since the start of the pandemic<sup>1</sup>, and the four LA Metro countywide sales taxes - a significant revenue source - were nowhere near the low revenue projections that had been forecasted. In fact, revenues were significantly higher than anticipated. Additionally, the Federal Relief COVID packages brought billions of dollars in funds for transit operations. The last funding package, the American Rescue Plan, included at least \$1.24 billion in additional funding for LA Metro for the next two budget years. So if the funding was there, why is bus service still poor?

In January 2021, the Metro Board issued a motion directing staff to restore bus service to pre-COVID levels of 7 million revenue service hours by June 2021. However in February 2021, Metro staff pushed back on the Metro Board's recommendation citing the bus operator shortage and the delays caused by the hiring freeze - which had not been lifted until January 2021.

According to the [January 20, 2022 staff report on operations ridership and hiring](#):

- Pre-pandemic bus service cancellation averaged about 1-2%,
- But now bus service cancellations are currently trending at about 10-15%.

With funding in place, and the Metro Board committing to restoring bus service, why is the bus operator shortage still so severe one year later, and why is there no regional hiring strategy to methodically address the operator shortage?

As representatives of a broad coalition of transit advocacy groups, community leaders, policy analysts, and bus riders, we are hopeful that the Board of Directors will give serious consideration to the requests for information and transparency to inform and expand the conversations and input towards improving Metro's bus service.

- 1. Resume back door boarding and suspend fare collection immediately** to reduce deaths and severe illness of bus operators and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://transitapp.com/apta>

riders from the Omicron variant, which is projected to overwhelm California hospitals before the end of January and [reach peak transmission in California in 4-6 weeks](#), until the Omicron infection surge subsides, a suggested metric could be when COVID transmission levels are no longer substantial as defined by the CDC.

2. **Direct the** Metro CEO to resume back door boarding and suspend fare collection temporarily to protect bus operators and riders if future COVID infection surges occur.

### **3. Provide information on labor, contract improvements, and rail operations**

- a. Since there has been low enrollment for new bus operators, what is being done to restructure the job (pay rate, contract issues, hours).
- b. What takeaways are coming up that will inform labor goals with the new Bus Operator contract being developed now?
- c. What is Metro doing to increase the rate of retention of its bus operators?
- d. What is the path to full time employment?
- e. What are the changes being made to the training process? [This tweet calculated that the current rate of training will only graduate 299 operators per year \(so fewer net drivers added, since some leave the driver job\).](#)

### **4. Provide Data: Bus operator call outs**

- a. Breakdown of bus operator call outs by division from April 2020 - Present and monthly reports thereafter
- b. Provide insight on how much of the ongoing operator shortage now is from covid-related absences vs burnout-related attrition. Ideally this would be a chart going back to 2019. COVID leave, sick, vacation, workers compensation, disciplinary, other.

### **5. Provide Data: Scheduled vs. actual bus service**

- a. Data on scheduled vs Actual Bus Service from April 2020 - Present and monthly reports thereafter
- b. A log of canceled service by route from April 2020 - Present and monthly reports thereafter

**6. Provide Data: Stop level analysis of bus ridership**

- a. Analysis of neighborhoods that saw high ridership (less than a 50% drop) during April 2020 - Present. We have heard anecdotally that some bus lines/stops have sustained ridership even in the early months of COVID-19. These potentially indicate key transit areas that require additional resources. To date, Metro has not released this data. Metro has only released line by line totals which make it impossible to see key clusters given the fact many Metro Bus Routes are over 10 miles long.

**7. Provide information on management practices: Hiring freeze**

- a. A better understanding of why the hiring freeze was not lifted earlier to identify the structural issues in the Transit Operations department that need to be addressed in order to ensure strategic planning and leadership for high quality service.

**8. Provide information on management practices: Canceled bus runs**

- a. Description of the process of how it is decided what bus runs are canceled and which ones are not. And, when operators are available, how/when/if cancelled runs are backfilled with extra board operators. And in terms of bus maintenance, are all canceled runs due to lack of operator availability or are there runs canceled due to lack of ready buses/buses out to preventive or non-routine maintenance?

**9. Provide information on stop gap measures:**

- a. What can be done now to improve management of operator call-outs without cutting bus service?

**10. Provide information on funding: Federal ARPA dollars**

- a. With the ARPA stimulus funds granted to Metro last week (they are not in the FY22 budget), and sales tax revenues coming in above expectations, what are Metro's plans to spend the additional revenue to address these issues (as either part of FY22 mid-year budget revision or for the FY23 budget)?

For any questions, please feel free to contact Jessica Meaney at [jessica@investinginplace.org](mailto:jessica@investinginplace.org) or 213-210-8136.

Sincerely,

**Individuals**

AnneTobin  
Bill Lam  
Carrie Madden  
Christopher Ahuja  
Chih-Wei Hsu  
Cynde Soto  
David Michel  
Dorothy Wong  
Erik Abriss  
Gregory Wright  
Hank Fung, Metro Community Advisory Council Chair (for identification purposes only)  
Jiyoung Carolyn Park  
Lorenzo Mutia  
Lyndsey Nolan  
Muriel Nacar  
Stephen Jones  
Virginia Wexman

**Organizations**

Active San Gabriel Valley  
Alliance for Community Transit - Los Angeles  
Climate Resolve  
Communities Actively Living Independent & Free (CALIF)  
Esperanza Community Housing  
Ground Game LA  
Investing in Place  
LA Forward Action  
Labor Strategy Center - Bus Riders Union  
Move LA  
People Organized for Westside Renewal (POWER)  
Public Advocates Inc.

The Independent Living Center of Southern California  
The Transit Coalition