



January 14, 2021

To: Transit Committee

From: Darrell E. Johnson, Chief Executive Officer

Subject: February 2021 Bus Service Change

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Darrell E. Johnson", is written over a light blue rectangular background.

Overview

The February 2021 bus service change will continue the same level of bus service as was implemented in October 2020. This recommendation is based on generally stable ridership demand. Staff is also underway with the development of a contingency plan should demand increase and additional service is needed between February 2021 and the regularly planned June 2021 schedule change.

Recommendation

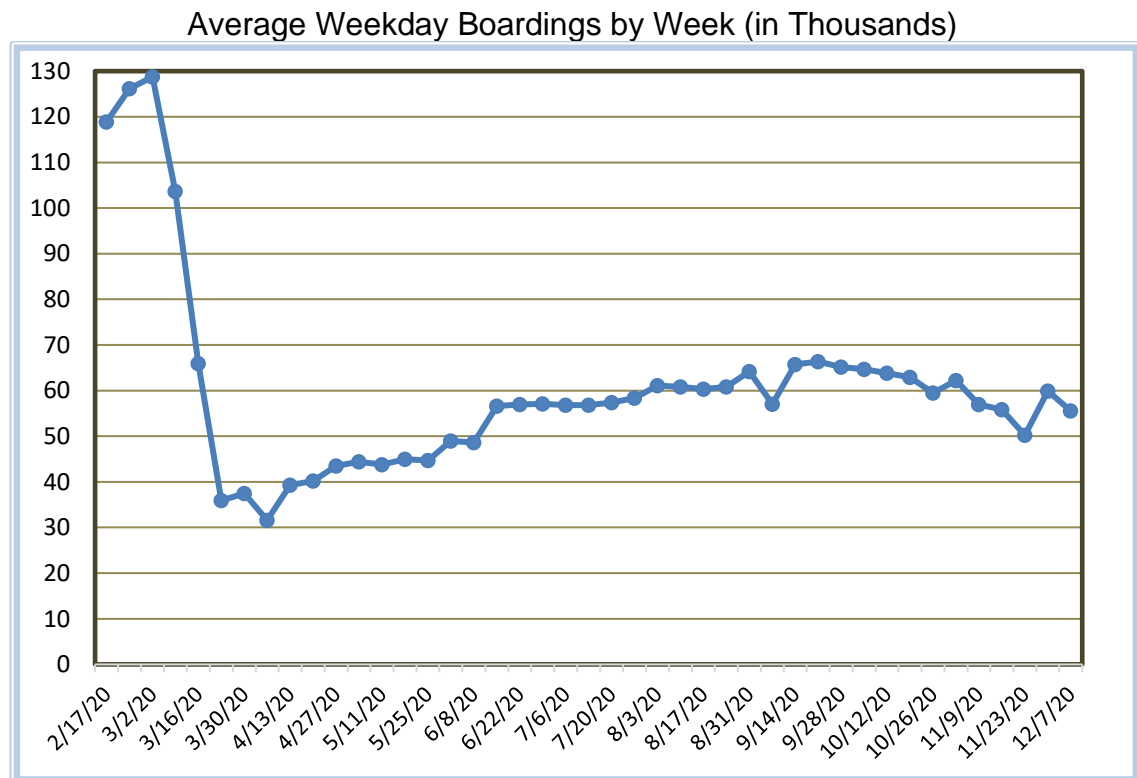
Receive and file as an information item.

Background

The Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) implements schedule and route revisions to selected OC Bus routes three times a year, in February, June, and October. The next bus service change is scheduled for implementation on February 14, 2021. OCTA implemented an emergency service change on March 23, 2020. This emergency service change reduced service levels to balance a reduction in demand for transit due to Governor Newsom's stay-at-home order to help reduce the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) by providing a baseline level of service for customers needing to make essential trips. Bus service was subsequently increased slightly in June 2020 as demand increased and to help ensure social distancing for passengers and OCTA coach operators. The same service levels were continued with the October 2020 service change. The increase in COVID-19 positivity rates in November and December continues to have a negative impact on bus ridership. Therefore, the February 2021 service change will continue the service that OCTA is currently operating.

Discussion

After the implementation of the COVID-19 stay-at-home order, weekday OC Bus ridership dropped significantly. Weekday ridership decreased from approximately 125,000 boardings per day to the low 30,000s in April 2020 and then steadily recovered to the mid-60,000s where it remained from late August to late October. With the current rise in COVID-19 positivity rates, ridership has again decreased below 60,000.



On March 23, 2020, OCTA reduced fixed-route bus service approximately 40 percent by implementing Sunday service schedules on all routes, seven days a week. The June 2020, and subsequent October 2020 service change, provided an enhanced Saturday service schedule on weekdays and a regular, pre-COVID-19 schedule on Saturdays and Sundays.

For the February 2021 service change, weekday service will continue to be suspended on eight bus routes originally suspended in March 2020. To improve on-time performance, some minor schedule adjustments will be implemented on a select number of bus routes. Annualized revenue vehicle hours will continue at 1,182,000. This maintains the same service levels since June and

October 2020. This is approximately 25 percent below the 1,625,000 annualized revenue vehicle hours operated prior to COVID-19.

Staff anticipates that demand for OC Bus service will continue to remain steady between now and spring 2021 and can be accommodated with current service levels. In the event ridership increases and / or additional service is necessary to allow for social distancing, buses can be deployed, as needed, to operate additional bus trips (i.e., “trippers”), following the current practice. The completed installation of coach operator shields on the entire fleet allowed the number of passengers on each 40-foot bus to increase from 15 to 20. This allowed for sufficient social distancing and re-established front-door boarding which also allows for the active collection of fares. Capacity on 60-foot buses was also increased from 20 to 35 passengers. The change provided OCTA with the ability to accommodate more demand with scheduled services. After implementation in February 2021, staff will reassess the service change based on customer demand, workforce availability, and social distancing.

Staff has also started developing contingency plans, which could be implemented between February 2021 and the regularly planned June 2021 service change if ridership increases to a level that cannot be accommodated by existing service levels plus trippers. The plan may assume increased passenger loads and provide additional scheduled frequency, as needed, to accommodate additional ridership growth. Events that could trigger the implementation of this plan could include ridership increases associated with a wide-spread vaccination, schools reopening for in-person classes, and reopening of major businesses, the hospitality sector, and activity centers.

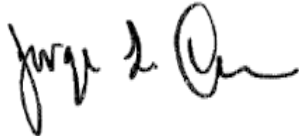
Communication and engagement will continue to play a key role in building confidence and trust as OCTA delivers critical public transportation services during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. OCTA has developed an aggressive customer information campaign that includes the latest changes to bus service, as well as all of the safety measures OCTA has implemented. Information regarding the February 2021 service change will be distributed two weeks prior to February 14, 2021. This will include brochures distributed on-board the buses and by mail, signage inside and outside of the buses, as well as at stops and transit centers. In addition, digital messaging via email, texting, social media, mobile apps, and OCTA’s website will be deployed to ensure sufficient level of awareness of the February service change.

Summary

The February 2021 bus service change will maintain the same schedules as were implemented in June and October 2020. Staff will continue to monitor ridership, deploy trippers as needed, and develop a contingency plan to implement additional service, if necessary, between February and June 2021. If the deployment of a contingency plan becomes necessary, staff will notify the Board of Directors prior to implementation.

Attachment

None.

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