



February 11, 2021

To: Transit Committee
From: Darrell E. Johnson, Chief Executive Officer
Subject: Draft June 2021 Bus Service Change Update

Overview

Based on Federal Transit Administration Title VI requirements, the June 2021 bus service change requires a public hearing. This requirement includes an equity analysis and a public hearing for major bus service changes that have been in place for 12 months or longer. In response to the coronavirus pandemic, an emergency bus service change was implemented in March 2020, it was subsequently refined in June and October 2020, and remains in place as of February 2021. To meet these requirements, a public hearing is planned for April 2021, and recommendations are presented to the Board of Directors to initiate this process.

Recommendations

- A. Direct staff to implement a public outreach program on the June 2021 Bus Service Change and solicit feedback for the development of the fiscal year 2021-22 Bus Service Plan.
- B. Direct staff to return to the Board of Directors with outreach results in April 2021.

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 June 13, 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 because of the federal and state emergency declarations, including the State's stay-at-home order to help reduce the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) and correlating public health guidance.

Based on these factors, service levels were adjusted to provide 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 and February 2021 service change. The current state of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a negative impact on bus ridership. Therefore, the June 2021 service change will continue the service that OCTA is currently operating. Additional bus trips and trippers (unscheduled extra buses on busier routes) will continue to be operated, as needed, based on social distancing requirements.

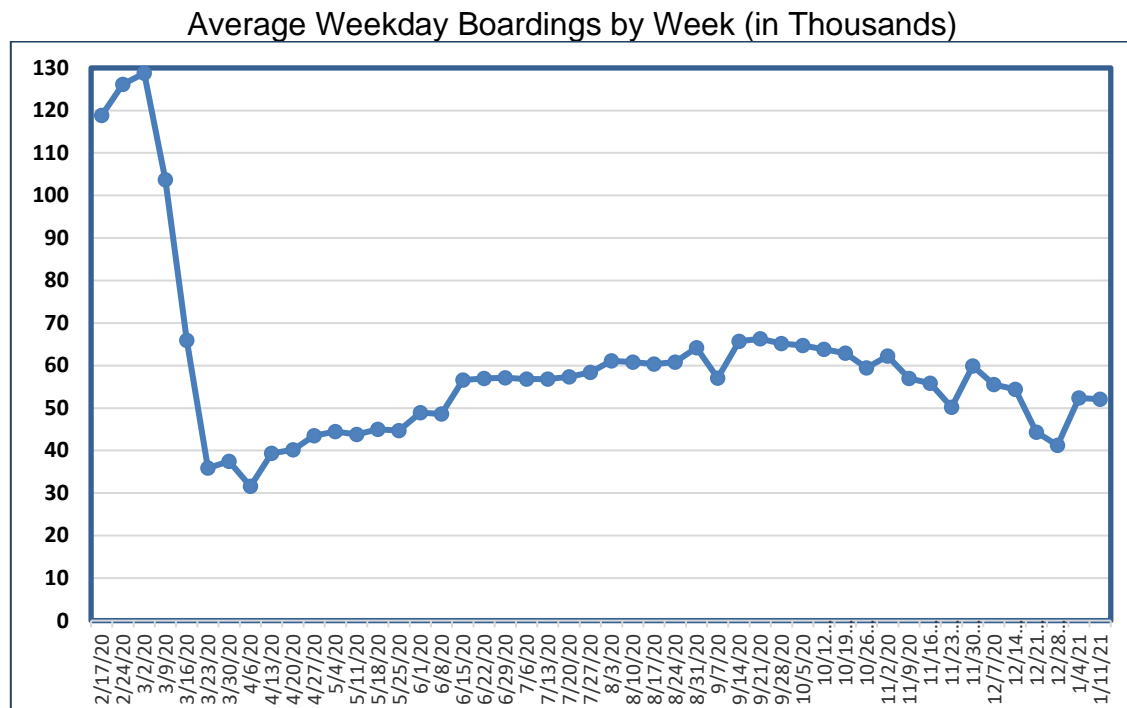
Federal Requirements

OC Bus routes have been operating under a public health emergency since the initial service changes went into effect in March 2020. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) allows transit agencies to implement necessary service changes on a temporary basis during emergencies or unique circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a service equity analysis is required for temporary major service changes¹ enacted directly or indirectly related to an emergency that continue longer than 12 months or those that are planned in advance as permanent. FTA requires that, pursuant to Title VI, any major service change that lasts longer than 12 months include a service equity analysis to determine if there are disparate impacts on minority and/or low-income populations who rely on bus service. As a result, OCTA is required to perform a service equity analysis, conduct public outreach, and hold a public hearing for the June 2021 service change. The June 2021 service change represents a major reduction in service, compared to the service operated pre-COVID-19. OCTA follows a consistent set of policies that guide service and fare changes to consistently assess impacts of bus service changes and ensure compliance with federal requirements (Attachment A).

Discussion

After the implementation of the COVID-19 stay-at-home order in March 2020, weekday OC Bus ridership dropped significantly, from approximately 125,000 boardings per day to the low 30,000s in April 2020 and then steadily recovered to the mid-60,000s in late August 2020. With the rise in COVID-19 positivity rates, ridership decreased again below 60,000 since November 2020. The chart below shows average weekday ridership from mid-February 2020 through mid-January 2021.

¹ Service changes that alter the length of bus route by more than 50 percent or change the route or system level bus service hours by 25 percent or more are deemed "major." Refer to Attachment A for details.



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 service changes in October 2020 and February 2021, provided an enhanced Saturday service schedule on weekdays and a regular schedule on Saturdays and Sundays.

For the June 2021 service change, OCTA will continue to deliver enhanced Saturday service levels on weekdays and February 2020 service levels on Saturdays and Sundays. Annualized revenue vehicle hours will continue at 1,187,000. This maintains the same service levels since June 2020. The June 2021 service hours are approximately 27 percent below the 1,622,000 annualized revenue vehicle hours operated in February 2020. Attachment B summarizes the service changes for each OC Bus route. Maps of the impacted routes on weekdays and weekends are shown in attachments C, D, and E. These changes include:

- Reduced service frequency on 37 routes.
- No changes to service on 13 routes.
- Temporary suspension of eight routes.

Staff anticipates that demand for OC Bus service will remain steady between now and summer 2021 and can be accommodated with current service levels.

In addition, the June 2021 service level can handle more demand over current ridership levels. In the event ridership increases even further and/or additional service is necessary to allow for social distancing, additional buses (trippers) can be deployed, as needed, following the current practice.

The entire fleet has been equipped with coach operator shields, which allowed the number of passengers to increase on each 40-foot bus from 15 to 20, and from 20 to 35 passengers on 60-foot buses. The protective shields allowed for sufficient social distancing to add capacity. The change provided OCTA with the ability to accommodate more demand with scheduled services. Depending on the spread of COVID-19 in the near future and the vaccine rollout to the population, social distancing requirements may be relaxed, allowing OCTA to further increase capacity.

After implementation in June 2021, staff will reassess the service change based on customer demand, workforce availability, and social distancing. Public input received as part of the outreach effort will be considered in the development of bus service changes in fiscal year 2021-22 (October, February, and June).

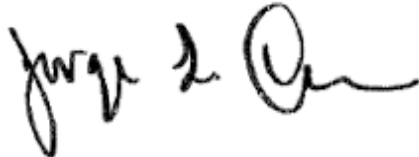
Summary

Staff is seeking Board of Directors approval to present the June 2021 Bus Service Change to the public and solicit input for the development of the fiscal year 2021-22 Bus Service Plan. A public outreach process is required for service changes of this magnitude, and the comments received will be used to develop recommendations for future bus service changes. This process will include three virtual community meetings. With Board of Directors' approval, a public hearing would occur on April 26, 2021, and results will be presented to the Transit Committee and at the Board of Directors meeting in May 2021.

Attachments

- A. Service and Fare Change Evaluation Policy
- B. Draft June 2021 Bus Service Change Summary
- C. Draft June 2021 Bus Service Change System Map, Weekday Impacted Routes
- D. Draft June 2021 Bus Service Change System Map, Routes with No Changes
- E. Draft June 2021 Bus Service Change, Suspended Routes

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