



**May 13, 2021**

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

### **Overview**

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, emergency bus service changes were implemented in March 2020, with refinements subsequently implemented in June and October 2020. These service changes have remained in place through the February 2021 bus service change. Based on Federal Transit Administration Title VI requirements and Orange County Transportation Authority policy, the upcoming June 2021 bus service change required a public hearing. This requirement also included an equity analysis for major bus service changes that have been in place for 12 months or longer. The public hearing was conducted on April 26, 2021, and the final June 2021 bus service change has been developed based on input received.

### **Recommendations**

- A. Approve the final June 2021 bus service change and direct staff to begin implementation.
- B. Receive and file the June 2021 Bus Service Change Public Involvement Program Final Report.
- C. Direct the Executive Director of Planning, or his designee, to file a Notice of Exemption from the California Environmental Quality Act related to the bus service change.

### **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 service resulting from the federal and state emergency declarations. This included the State's stay-at-home order to help reduce the spread of the 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 COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a negative impact on bus ridership.

Based on the continued impacts to ridership, the proposed June 2021 service change, as presented to the Board on February 22, 2021, will generally 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, to address demand for transit and fulfill social distancing requirements. Per OCTA policy, the proposed changes require a public hearing.

As part the February 22, 2021, item and consistent with OCTA policy, the Board directed staff to implement a Public Outreach Program to solicit feedback. A robust Public Outreach Program was then conducted and concluded with a public hearing at the April 26, 2021 Board meeting. Staff is proposing changes to some route recommendations in the June 2021 service change based on public feedback. Additionally, public feedback will also be used to inform future service changes.

### **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 changes<sup>1</sup> enacted directly or indirectly related to an emergency that continues longer than 12 months or those that are planned as permanent. Further, FTA requires that, pursuant to Title VI, any major service change lasting longer than 12 months must include a service equity analysis. This analysis determines if there are disparate impacts on minority and/or low-income populations who rely on bus service. OCTA performed the required service equity analysis, conducted public outreach, and held the public hearing on April 26, 2021, for the June 2021 service change.

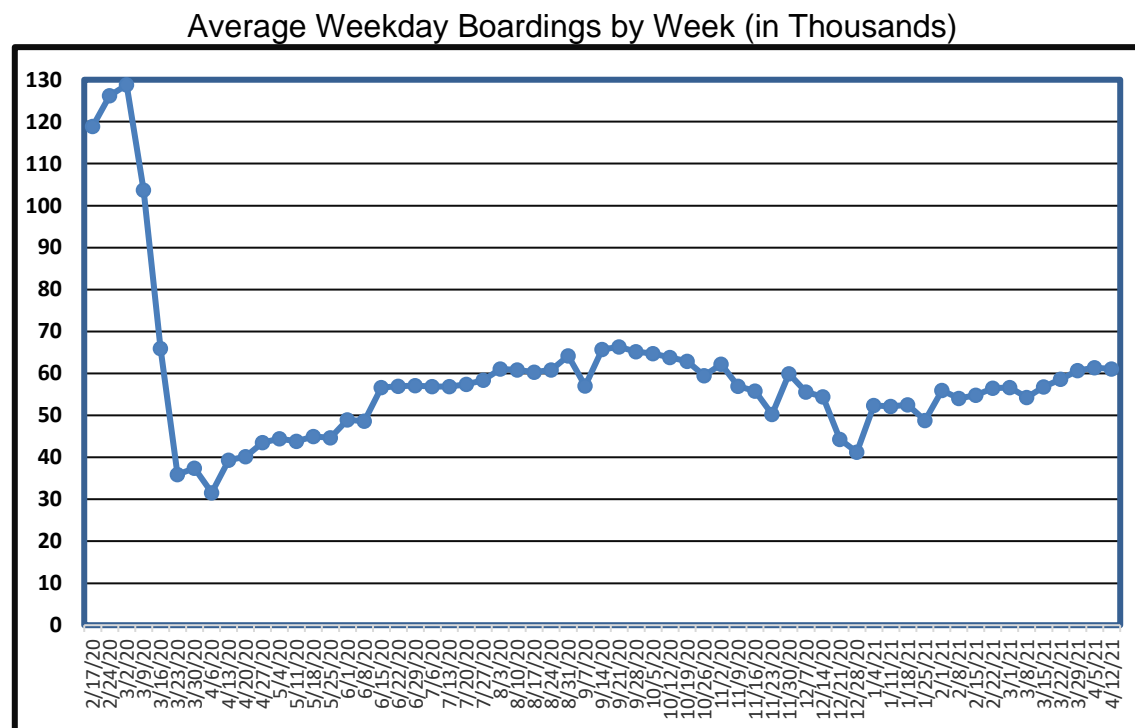
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<sup>1</sup> Service changes that alter the length of a bus route by more than 50 percent or change the route or system level bus service hours by 25 percent or more are deemed "major." Refer to Attachment A for details.

The June 2021 service change represents a major reduction in service, compared to the service operated pre-COVID-19. OCTA policy requires that service and fare changes consistently assess impacts of bus service changes and ensure compliance with federal requirements (Attachment A).

### ***Discussion***

After the implementation of the State's 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. Boardings then steadily recovered to the mid-60,000s in mid-summer. With the rise in COVID-19 positivity rates in the fall, ridership decreased again below 60,000. Recent ridership trends indicate that ridership is still in the low 60,000s. The chart below shows the average weekday ridership from mid-February 2020 through early April 2021.



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. As presented to the Board at the February 22, 2021 meeting, the draft June 2021 bus service change would continue to deliver enhanced Saturday service levels on weekdays plus some additions in response to public input. Saturday and Sunday service will continue operating at the same service levels as provided since the June 2020

bus service change. Attachment B summarizes the draft service changes for each OC Bus route which includes the following:

- Reduced service frequency on 37 routes,
- No changes to service on 13 routes,
- Continued temporary suspension of eight routes.

#### Public Outreach Summary

The Board-directed Public Outreach Program began on February 22, 2021, to solicit feedback on the draft June 2021 bus service change. This effort resulted in the receipt of 2,262 questionnaires and comments and concluded with a public hearing at the April 26, 2021 Board meeting.

As part of the customer questionnaire, respondents were asked to identify up to three of their most frequently used OC Bus routes and provide a satisfaction rating for each route. Overall, 69 percent of respondents indicated they were either satisfied or very satisfied with existing routes, 21 percent were neutral, and ten percent were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

While feedback on current OC Bus routes was largely positive, a highlight of customer-requested improvements included:

- Increase service frequency
  - Routes 25, 30, 35, 29, 71.
- Add service span
  - Weekday mornings: Routes 26, 53, 25, 72, 30, 54, 70,
  - Weekday evenings: Routes 42, 87, 25, 83, 26, 38,
  - Weekends: Routes 42, 87, 29, 167, 86.
- Restore service/routes suspended due to COVID-19
  - Routes 560, 57X, 721, 701.
- Improve On-Time Performance
  - Routes 57, 35, 53, 50.

Other specific comments are included in the draft Public Involvement Program Report (Attachment C).

### Final Service Plan Recommendations

Staff has recommended several changes to the draft June 2021 bus service changes based on customer and stakeholder feedback. Of the 50 bus routes currently operating, adjustments are proposed to 18 based on the public feedback received. These changes will improve the reliability of service by targeting on-time performance and strategically adding bus trips during specific times of the day. Early morning span of service will also be improved. The final recommendations are detailed in Attachment D. Although a number of routes are proposed to receive improvements in response to public feedback, the service being offered on 37 bus routes in June 2021 is still less than what was offered prior to COVID-19. Thirteen bus routes have experienced no changes to service, and eight routes will continue to be suspended, as shown in attachments E, F, and G. Service will increase by about 9,000 annual revenue vehicle hours (RVH), from 1,187,000 to 1,196,000. This is approximately 26 percent below the 1,622,000 annualized RVH operated in February 2020 prior to COVID-19.

Staff anticipates that demand for OC Bus service will remain steady between now and summer 2021 and can be accommodated with proposed service levels. In addition, the proposed service changes for June 2021 will accommodate more demand over current ridership levels. If 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. If the spread of COVID-19 continues to slow and the vaccine rollout to the population continues, social distancing requirements may be further relaxed, allowing OCTA to further increase capacity on the buses to accommodate more boardings with the same number of RVH.

After implementation in June 2021, staff will reassess the service change based on key variables, such as customer demand, workforce availability, and social distancing. A contingency plan is being developed that will build on the June service plan based on these variables. The plan would increase service by about 154,000 annual RVH to a total of 1,350,000 annual RVH or about 17 percent below pre-COVID-19 service levels, consistent with the proposed OCTA Fiscal Year (FY) 2021-22 Budget. If necessary, this plan could be implemented prior to the next scheduled service change in October 2021. Staff will inform the Board prior to implementation. Additionally, public input received as part of the outreach effort will be considered in the development of bus service changes in FY 2021-22 (October, February, and June).

**Title VI and Environmental Justice Analysis**

Staff conducted a Title VI and Environmental Justice Analysis of the recommended June 2021 bus service change, per OCTA policy and FTA requirements. The analysis considered the cumulative impacts to minority and low-income communities by comparing the transit service levels pre-COVID-19 with proposed June 2021 route changes. Based on this analysis, it has been determined that the final June 2021 bus service change, taken in its entirety, would not have a disparate impact on minority persons nor a disproportionate burden on low-income persons.

***Summary***

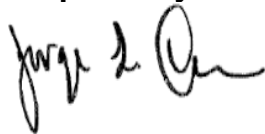
Staff recommends the Board approve the June 2021 bus service change and continue to use the public feedback received to develop the FY 2021-22 Bus Service Plan. With Board approval, staff will begin implementing the recommendations for the June 2021 bus service change. Customers will be notified of the changes three weeks prior to implementation.

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***Attachments***

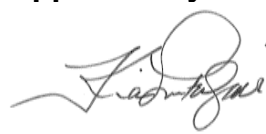
- A. Service and Fare Change Evaluation Policy
- B. Draft June 2021 Bus Service Change Summary
- C. June 2021 Bus Service Change, Public Involvement Program, Final Report, May 13, 2021
- D. Final June 2021 Bus Service Change
- E. Final June 2021 Bus Service Change System Map, Weekday Impacted Routes
- F. Final June 2021 Bus Service Change System Map, Routes with No Changes
- G. Final June 2021 Bus Service Change System Map, Suspended Routes
- H. Final June 2021 Bus Service Change System Map, Customer Feedback

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