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COVID-19 Response and Beyond

In response to COVID-19, Tuolumne County Transit (TCT) management transitioned to a general public Dial-A-Ride service throughout the service area and suspended all fixed route operations on March 23, 2020. General public Dial-A-Ride has historically been utilized by rural counties throughout the United States to provide mobility services to their residents and employees working in their community. In many communities, the general public Dial-A-Ride service is very much like fixed route service, in that a member of the public calls and asks for a ride. Policies differ from community to community, with some requiring a 24-hour advance reservation and others allowing same day requests, typically two hours before a ride is needed.

The current General Public Dial-A-Ride service in Tuolumne County is for essential trips only with no fares being charged. However, in practice, the use for essential trips is self-enforcement by the passengers. About 70% of the trip requests are made the same day the trip is provided. Storer, the operations and maintenance contractor for TCT, cannot ask passengers for their trip purpose and make decisions as to what is and what isn't an essential trip. With schools closed, and discretionary trips eliminated, demand levels started out with reasonable demand, but rapidly increased to a recent peak of 140 passengers per day. To encourage social distancing, no more than three passengers are being transported at any one time. Typically, four or five Dial-A-Ride vehicles are being operated. However, up to eight vehicles can be operated and on some peak days and times all eight vehicles are being operated to keep up with growing demand. There have been no trip denials. Demand is continuing to grow each week, and it is quite possible that by mid-May available capacity will be reached, meaning that dispatchers may need to start negotiating with passengers the time when the desired trip can be provided.

It is widely expected that the transition from sheltering in place and social distancing to more normal social and business operations will be phased. While the plans at this writing are being formulated, it is very likely full normalcy will not return until there is a vaccine and the general population is fully inoculated. Most experts project that this could take 12 to 18 months from March 2020.

Even after government officials decide to relax restrictions over the next 18 months, it must be stressed that the use of public transportation as we knew it before COVID-19 may very likely change. The utilization for most transit trips will only be made if the passengers utilizing the service perceive the trip is safe from potential COVID-19 infection spread. For purposes here, it is assumed there will be a two-year phase-in period when full reopening of the economy is made and the need for social distancing is eliminated. Therefore, we may see more of a "plural transportation" than the more commonly used mass transportation service. For purposes here, "plural" transportation can mean a handful or less passengers on a bus, increased ridesharing with families, or trusted friends, in addition to general public Dial-A-Ride services, and moderate levels of fixed route transit with social distancing practices.

The following is a progression of recommended operational steps and options for this transition period, broken down into:

- "Immediate actions" while the full shelter in place order remains in place.

- “Initial Reopening Action” when shelter in place restrictions are lifted in phases.
- “Secondary Reopening Actions”
- “Full Reopening”

Immediate Actions

The current general public Dial-A-Ride service for essential services is currently operating more like a taxi service to ensure social distancing practices. The StrataGen dispatching software that Storer is utilizing is designed for ADA Paratransit service where passengers are registered and have been certified. Before COVID-19, the Dial-A-Ride service required seniors 60 and older and persons with disabilities to register with Storer before riding. The StrataGen software requires a customer ID number for each passenger. When the transition began, there was no time to fully register passengers with the three phone lines that Storer has. Passenger information instead was included as a note in a generic passenger entry. The registration process is not long but was not feasible during the rapid start-up. One of the **recommend first immediate steps** should be the requirement to have each passenger wanting free transportation to register so that individual passenger ID numbers can be used. Storer may need to ask passengers to call during what they consider non-peak times. Having this in place will enable better grouping of trips when restrictions are eased.

In discussions with Storer management, TCTA, and the software provider that Storer utilizes for Dial-A-Ride dispatching, a need was identified for upgrading the dispatching software to the most current version. A **second immediate recommendation** is that Storer upgrade its dispatching software to the most current version. This will make dispatching more efficient and enable the addition of other phased-in features.

A **third recommended immediate action** is to expand the number of vehicles in general public Dial-A-Ride from eight to ten cutaways vehicles when demand warrants. This will enable Storer to provide service with social distancing without having to deny important essential trips. As demand grows, it will be important to have at least a couple of buses dedicated to vulnerable populations such as seniors to have even fewer passengers on board for safety and security reasons.

The Tuolumne TRIP volunteer driver reimbursement program should be actively promoted in conjunction with human service agencies to provide alternatives for essential trips that cannot be served by the General Public Dial-A-Ride service. A **fourth recommended immediate action** is to allocate additional dollars from the first phase of CARE Act funding for this purpose as needed.

The **fifth recommended immediate action** is to make arrangements with human service agency partners to implement an updated Ride for All transit pass program when fares are re-instituted in the “Reopening” phase of the transition, described below.

Tuolumne County Transit should receive its allocation of the first phase of CARES Act federal funding in the next few weeks, according to an April 22nd webinar with Caltrans and the Federal Transit Administration, sponsored by CalACT. The first phase funding for Tuolumne County Transit will be \$351,289 from CARES Act according to the April 10, 2020 correspondence from

Caltrans. This money can be utilized for any purpose allowed by FTA 5311 programs but is limited to operating expenses. It is 100% funding that can be utilized for all operations from January 20th. The **sixth recommended immediate action** is to submit an invoice to Caltrans for all operating and administrative expenses through April 30th up to the maximum of \$351,289. This allocation is based on a 30% allocation of statewide CARES Act funding for FTA 5311 services. This will allow Tuolumne County Transit to save other revenue sources for later use this fiscal year and rollover significant amounts of LTF and STA funding for use in FY 20/21. It should be noted that a second allocation will be made of CARES Act funding later this summer representing 70% of the allocation of CARES Act funding. The exact amount of the future allocation is not known as it theoretically could be as high at \$700,000, but will depend on several factors including additional 5311 recipients, the amount of utilization of first phase funding by grantees, etc. It should be noted that several recommended actions could be funded with CARES Act funding, but this at the discretion of TCTA management. CARES Act funding has significant flexibility and can be utilized to offset lost farebox revenues, likely reductions in Local Transportation Funding that is derived from sales tax revenues or anticipated reductions in State Transit Assistance funding, derived from diesel fuel tax revenues.

Initial Reopening Actions

Governor Gavin Newsom has provided six key criteria including significantly more testing before shelter in place restrictions are officially lifted. The words “officially lifted” are utilized because there is increasing evidence based on increasing traffic levels, that many Californians are beginning to make non-essential trips for a variety of reasons. Given the normal range of human behavior, it is very likely that more and more individuals will take advantage of the free general public Dial-A-Ride service for both essential and an increasing number of non-essential trips. It is not known what the sequence of reopening steps will be, but most health officials anticipate it will be slow sequential re-opening. In order to plan accordingly, we are suggesting a sequence of major milestones that will need to trigger certain actions by TCT. Admittedly, this likely is a starter list and TCT will need to adapt to unanticipated milestones during the COVID-19 era.

The first milestone is when demand levels exceed what can be delivered with ten vehicles in operation at peak, the **first initial reopening recommended action** will be to implement fares. Because general public Dial-A-Ride is a substitute for fixed route service for many passengers, the recommended fares are \$2.00 regular fare and \$1.00 discounted fare. It is also recommended that monthly passes be at the same price as \$60 regular/\$40 discounted be available for general public Dial-A-Ride. Ticket books for Dial-A-Ride should be honored, but new ticket books for Dial-A-Ride should be at the same price as the fixed route ticket books at \$28/\$14. As discussed above, human service agencies should be able to provide free ticket books to their most vulnerable clients when fares are implemented.

A second major milestone is when restrictions are lifted and groups of developmentally disabled can resume trips. Storer drivers often transport 12-20 passengers at a time. These trips during pre-COVID-19 times required significant Dial-A-Ride resources during peak periods. If these trips continued as business as usual, it would not allow Storer to provide high quality general public Dial-A-Ride. According to the Storer lead dispatcher these higher occupancy trips are on a regular route and schedule. The **second initial recommended reopening action** is to make these trips scheduled fixed route tripper routes with larger fixed route buses, and not part of the

general public Dial-A-Ride service. The tripper routes are similar to a school bus route on a set schedule with designated stops based on actual passenger locations. Since TCT utilizes Federal funding, these tripper fixed routes must be published as a regular fixed route and open to the general public but designed to serve the need of the developmentally disabled community.

A third major milestone is when social service agency offices, government offices, shopping center stores other than grocery stores begin to re-open even if there are still social distancing guidelines in place. When this occurs, the **third recommended reopening action** is to re-open Route 1 on the same schedule as pre-COVID-19, limiting the number of passengers to maintain social distancing requirements at the time. Passengers should be seated one per row, and staggered with one passenger one side, and then a second passenger on the other side two rows back (skipping a row with no passengers). In order to provide sufficient capacity, it may be necessary to add a second bus in the opposite direction in order to limit the number of people on the bus. The cost for adding a second bus could be paid for with CARES Act funding if needed. When Sonora High school re-opens, the On-Demand stop would be added back into the service. The recommended base fare for Route 1 is \$1.00/\$0.50 in order to provide an incentive for those who can utilize fixed route to do so. Passes and ticket books good for the general public Dial-A-Ride would also be good on fixed route services.

Since Route 1 will be the only fixed route operating, there will undoubtedly be requests for use of Route 1 for part of a trip and then general public Dial-A-Ride for trips to their final destination. This would not be an efficient or a wise use of resources. It should be made clear to Route 1 passengers that they should only use Route 1 if their origin and destination is on Route 1. For a destination not served by Route 1, passengers should be instructed to book a trip on the general public Dial-A-Ride service.

A fourth major milestone is when Columbia College re-opens. At some community colleges in California it has already been announced that most Fall 2020 classes will be taught online. A search of the Columbia College website notes that Summer 2020 classes will be taught online, but no announcement has been made for Fall 2020 classes.

During the pre-COVID-19 era, the overall ridership for FY 2019/20 had exhibited significant Columbia College ridership declines the first six months of the fiscal year, even with the free transit pass program. If Fall 2020 classes open for face-to-face learning, there will likely be a significant increase in community college enrollment if patterns follow other recessionary times. However, it is not known what the new normal will be at Columbia College, and what percentage of classes will be taught online. Even if face-to-face classes are enabled, it is very likely that in both Fall 2020 and Spring 2020 some level of social distancing will still be required. The following is the recommended progression of actions from Columbia College:

1. Columbia College students should be able to make subscription trips on general public Dial-A-Ride. Therefore, if a student has classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and needs to arrive at 10 am and 3 pm, then the dispatcher would make a standing order to pick up and drop off passengers in order to accommodate the above pattern. It would be the responsibility of the student to cancel the subscription trip if they are unable to make a particular trip. On the second no-show, the student would then need to make a reservation for a pick-up and drop-off on each day.

2. TCT and Storer should monitor the trip patterns and capacity of the General Public Dial-A-Ride in accommodating trips to and from Columbia College. If there is a way to accommodate five or more trips at the same time along a particular corridor then TCT should consider running a tripper service for that run. This tripper route would be run in a checkpoint demand response mode. Let's say that there are six students living in Sierra Village, Mi-Wuk Village, Twain Harte and Sonora who have classes that start at either 10 or 11 am. Then each passenger would be given a time to be at the bus stop nearest their home with the understanding there could be a fifteen-minute wait. The bus would follow a route starting at Sierra Village and pick up students along the way at each of the designated bus stops. If bus capacity is available while maintaining social distancing protocols, then dispatchers could make arrangement to add trips from the general public Dial-A-Ride, and transfers from Route 1 at the new Stockton/Washington stop (or Courthouse Park in the interim if not completed). The bus would be scheduled to arrive at Columbia College at 9:45 am. The same scheduled tripper route in the opposite direction would be made only if there are five or more passengers that could be served along the corridor.

Secondary Reopening Actions

During the above initial reopening period, plans would be initiated for an online survey of passengers using the general public Dial-A-Ride, by sending a text with a link to a Survey Monkey site. The survey will ask general public Dial-A-Ride passengers who have used the service in the past month if being able to book trips online from the internet would be desirable and add convenience for the passenger. A second question would determine if an app were available, would they consider utilizing the app to book the trip. The online survey would gather information on who is using the general public Dial-A-Ride service, and how satisfied they are with the service, and issues they are having.

In discussions with the StrataGen Account Manager, the online booking feature is currently available, and the app-based service is launching in June 2020. The online interface would cost in the \$4,000-\$6,000 range, with an additional cost for the app-based application. StrataGen has not worked out the pricing for the app. Regardless, the costs could be paid for with the second phase CARES Act funding. If the online survey results are positive, then the **first recommended secondary reopening action** would be to implement the online booking by the internet and/or app.

It must be stressed that passengers could still book the trip with a phone call, just as they are doing today. The benefit of online or app reservation is customer convenience and less calls to the dispatching center. Storer would need to work with StrataGen so that the scheduling process remains efficient and effective among the passengers, drivers and dispatchers.

A second secondary reopening action is for TCT to monitor and analyze the general public Dial-A-Ride, subscription Dial-A-Ride, tripper route(s), and Route 1 origins and destinations in order to plan for the adjustments to services during the period when social distancing is still required and when they are fully lifted. The Double Map vehicle tracking system shows much of the data but would likely need to be supplemented with an online survey of Route 1 passengers. TCT could conduct this ongoing analysis with its own staff or contract with a consulting firm to collect and analyze this data to make recommendations.

Full Reopening

After all shelter in place and social distancing have been removed, the decision to return to Routes 2, 3, 4, and 5 should only be made after the origin and destination data, passenger volumes, and financial availability are determined. There are too many unknowns now in how transit passenger demand will be affected by COVID-19. In other words, the full reopening should be data driven based on the data collected and analyzed as described in more detail above.