

NCSPC STAFF REPORT

SUBJECT: Clean Air Express Report

MEETING DATE: August 11, 2021

AGENDA ITEM: 5

STAFF CONTACT: Scott Spaulding, Whitney Rush

RECOMMENDATION:

Receive monthly report on the Clean Air Express commuter bus service.

DISCUSSION:

SBCAG began operating and managing the Clean Air Express in 2001 after assuming responsibility for administering the service from the Air Pollution Control District, which created the service in 1990. The Clean Air Express serves residents of North County who work in Goleta and Santa Barbara and is currently operating reduced service due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The North County Subregional Committee makes policy recommendations to the SBCAG Board of Directors, which is the policy board for the service.

Operating Contract

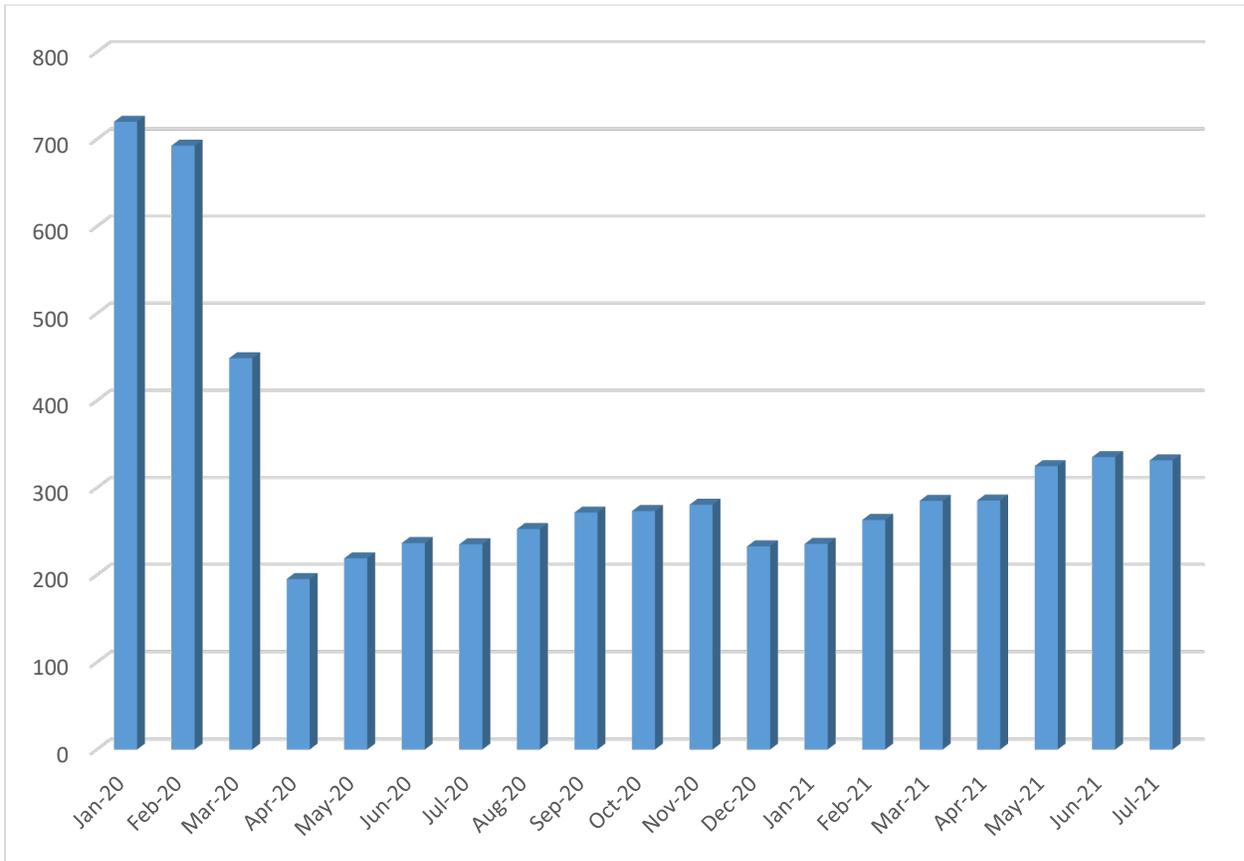
On July 2, 2021, SBCAG release a Request for Proposals for Clean Air Express operations and maintenance. The 2021 RFP process will feature several new elements, including the availability of an SBCAG-owned storage and maintenance facility in Goleta, the addition of one electric coach to the fleet, a cost structure based on the number of trips in operation rather than the standard cost per revenue hour, and the planned replacement of most of the current Clean Air Express fleet with coaches currently owned by the Antelope Valley Transit Authority (AVTA). The proposal deadline is August 10 and the expected contract start date is November 1, 2021.

Ridership update

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted transit ridership throughout the nation, including in our region. Due to the widespread transition to working remotely last year, transit ridership, particularly on commuter services such as the Clean Air Express, fell 70% following the Governor's March 2020 Stay-At-Home order. SBCAG, which relies on fare revenue to fund 60-70% of Clean Air Express operating costs, reduced service from thirteen daily round trips to eight in March 2020. Clean Air Express fares were waived in April 2020 but reestablished in May.

Figure 1 illustrates ridership trends beginning in January 2020. Following the recent gradual return of some employees to the workplace, universal vaccine availability, and the addition of a 9th trip on March 1, daily ridership has steadily increased. Although the COVID Delta variant has resulted in increasing community infection rates and additional State and County social distancing and masking requirements, staff anticipates ridership will continue to grow as vaccination rates increase and employers implement return to work policies.

Figure 1. Clean Air Express Daily Ridership



Antelope Valley Transit Authority Federal Asset Transfer

In 2018, staff began discussions with AVTA regarding an agreement to transfer 17 AVTA coaches to SBCAG for use in the Clean Air Express service. AVTA received funding to replace their commuter bus fleet with zero-emission vehicles and in coordination with the City of Santa Maria, AVTA agreed to transfer their existing commuter fleet to SBCAG under a Federal Transit Administration process known as an asset transfer. SBCAG and AVTA entered into an agreement in December of 2019 to facilitate the process.

Although delivery of the new zero-emission coaches to AVTA has been delayed 12-14 months, staff now anticipates that transfers will begin in October 2021 and be completed by Spring 2022. The current Clean Air Express fleet includes nine 18-year-old buses and an additional five that are over ten years old, which has resulted in higher maintenance costs, especially over the last two years. The AVTA fleet has a much lower average age and many have received significant mid-life overhauls that will extend the life of the vehicle. An amended agreement with AVTA that extends the original depreciation schedule will be brought to the SBCAG board in August.

State Partnerships

Over the last year, SBCAG has been working closely with the State Transportation Agency and Caltrans on three key pilot projects—implementation of onboard credit and debit card readers to make transit easier to use, development of a low-cost, standardized GPS system to integrate into Google maps to provide real-time transit information to customers, and the procurement of an

electric coach for demonstration in Clean Air Express revenue service to determine feasibility for long-distance intercity bus service.

Credit/debit card readers: Transit services have fallen well behind current retail standards for payment acceptance. While the use of debit and credit cards are pervasive in the retail environment, including contactless cards, transit services are typically tied to proprietary fare collection systems that are not customer friendly and require dedicated passes. SBCAG partnered with the State to install credit/debit card readers on Clean Air Express buses in July that allow anyone with a contactless-enabled credit or debit card to pay their fare when boarding the bus. Customers are also able to pay their fare with a phone or smart watch.

On July 26, SBCAG and MTD held a joint media event to publicly launch the new service, which MTD also installed on two MTD routes. Local print and television news agencies featured stories about the card readers, and Clean Air Express credit/debit card fare payments have increased each day since the launch event.

Zero-emission coach: Last year staff approached California State Transportation Agency executive leadership and pitched the idea of a partnership to procure and deploy long distance intercity bus service using a battery-powered, zero-emission coach. Although electric buses have been in service for local transit agencies for a decade or more, electric over the road coaches are a new product and there has been significant hesitancy among regional transit providers to purchase and deploy this technology for intercity service. CalSTA and SBCAG are partnering to procure and put into service a battery-powered coach, which is currently in production and expected for delivery in October. The state is contributing \$500,000 towards the coach.