

STAFF REPORT

SUBJECT: Clean Air Express Report

MEETING DATE: November 18, 2021

AGENDA ITEM: 4N

STAFF CONTACT: Whitney Rush, Scott Spaulding

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 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.

Ridership

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 dramatically 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 but reintroduced two additional trips in 2021.

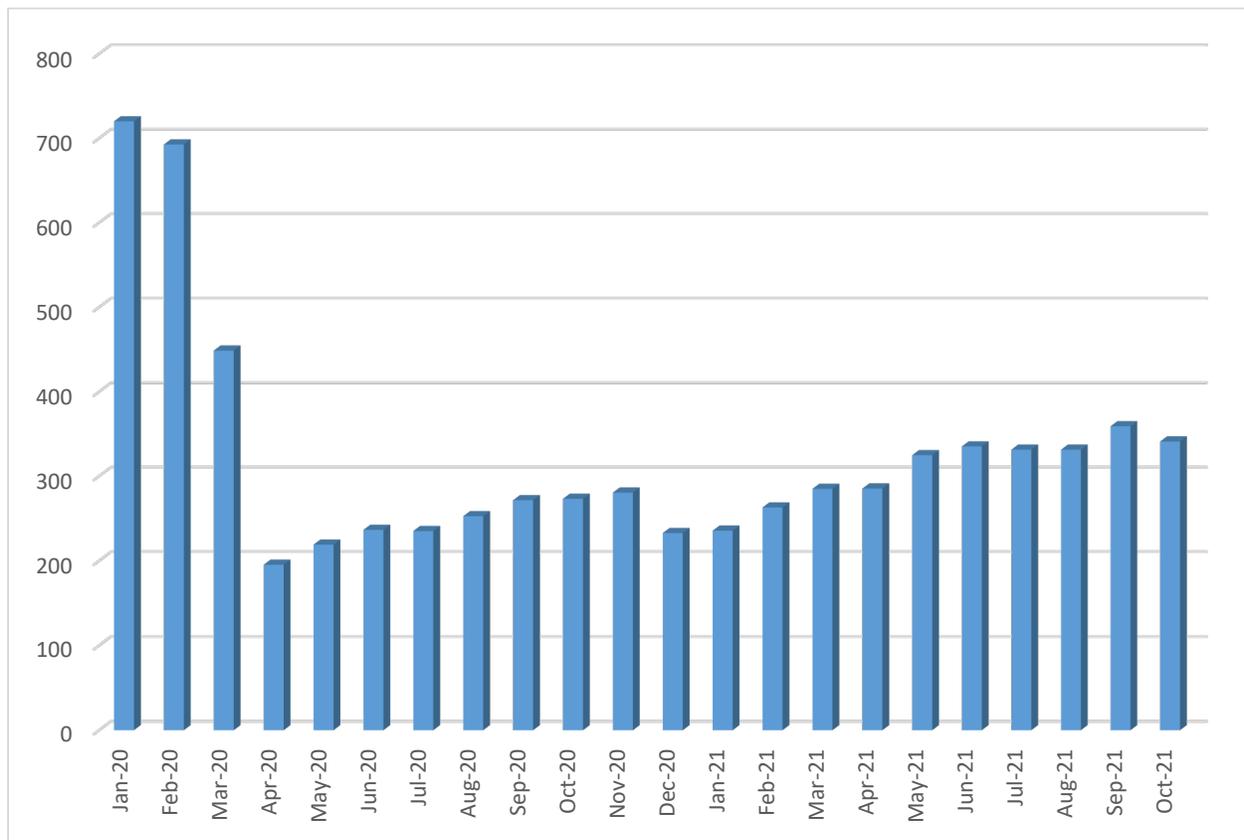
Figure 1 illustrates Clean Air Express ridership beginning in January 2020. Following the recent gradual return of some employees to the workplace, universal vaccine availability, and the addition of a 9th trip on March 1, daily ridership has steadily increased. Although the COVID Delta variant has resulted in higher 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. October ridership was impacted by the Alisal Fire, which closed US 101 for several days and created lengthy travel times using SR 154, but still marked an improvement from the summer months. Controlling for the impact of the fire, daily ridership averaged 352 passengers, very close to September's figure.

Service to UCSB

On October 1, SBCAG reintroduced Clean Air Express service to UCSB. In September many UCSB staff began returning to work in person at least part time, and SBCAG took the opportunity to modify Clean Air Express service to create direct service from the Santa Ynez Valley to UCSB for the first time. This modified trip continues to originate in Lompoc but now travels on SR 246 and features a stop in Buellton on both the morning and afternoon trips. Ridership the first month was lower than expected but is anticipated to increase as employees return to work on campus. Particularly considering the long-term structural deficit facing the service, trips that do not consistently serve a significant number of commuters are unlikely to be recommended for

continued operation. Staff plans to monitor ridership on the dedicated UCSB trip over the next several months and either modify service to increase ridership or bring a recommendation to the Committee to discontinue service to campus.

Figure 1. Clean Air Express Daily Ridership



On board credit/debit card readers

In July, following nearly a year for planning and coordination, SBCAG partnered with the State to install credit/debit card readers on Clean Air Express buses 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.

Use of the card readers continues to grow, consistently averaging 20-25% of all payments by customers not enrolled in employer sponsored commuter benefit programs. Staff also worked with Cottage Hospital to launch a pilot program on November 1 to make Cottage’s commuter incentive program benefit available through the Tap-to-Ride system.

Electric coach partnership

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. In late 2020, SBCAG and the California State Transportation Agency partnered to procure and put into service a battery-powered coach to demonstrate viability of zero-emission technology for long distance

transit service. The state is contributing \$500,000 towards the partnership to purchase the zero-emission coach, which is expected to be delivered in mid-December and put into revenue service before Christmas.

AVTA Coach Transfer

As of the end of October, the Antelope Valley Transit Authority had received several new electric coaches and staff is now working with AVTA staff to coordinate the transfer process for the seventeen AVTA diesel coaches the agency is transferring to SBCAG for use in Clean Air Express service. The transfer process is expected to begin this month and be completed by March 2022. The process will include painting and installing decals on most of the AVTA vehicles, transferring farebox, card reader, GPS, and WiFi equipment to the new vehicles, and preparing older fleet vehicles for disposal.