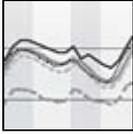


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Transit use soars - budget heads the other way

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(06-02) 20:10 PDT -- Ridership on the nation's buses, trains and ferries is on pace to be the highest in 50 years, according to a report released Monday by the American Public Transportation Association.

Public transit systems across the Bay Area also are dealing with a surge of new riders. The news comes as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposes taking hundreds of millions of dollars earmarked for BART, Muni, Caltrain and other agencies to help erase a \$17.2 billion budget deficit.

"Even with California's massive deficit, scaling back the state's support for public transportation makes no sense environmentally or economically," said Nathaniel Ford, who runs the San Francisco Municipal Railway.

"Every dollar spent on transit helps clean the air by getting people out of their cars. And with gas prices continuing to escalate, we should be doing everything we can to encourage, not discourage, transit use."

Nationwide, transit ridership reached 2.6 billion during the first three months of this year, according to the report. That's 85 million more trips, or a 3.3 percent increase.

Bay Area transit operators, facing what they say is a combined loss of up to \$273 million, have yet to determine what the potential effects would be on service. Officials say that if money isn't restored, everything will be on the table - cutting service, raising fares and delaying capital projects - just as more people are riding mass transit.

Many Bay Area transit operators are part of the upward ridership trend outlined in the new report. Caltrain, the commuter rail line, leads the pack.

With an average 35,200 weekday riders logged during the first three months of the year, Caltrain saw a 6.37 percent jump in ridership. BART, with 366,000 weekday riders during the reporting period, experienced a 4.5 percent bump. And even Muni, which had been losing riders in recent years and provides close to 700,000 trips a day, experienced a 4.7 percent increase, according to the data, which is based on estimates.

To a lesser extent, the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Valley Authority and the Golden Gate

transit system also picked up new passengers.

"I feel it - every day," said 37-year-old financial analyst Brian Chin, as he emerged from the Powell Street BART Station Monday morning after starting his rail commute in Lafayette. "The (station) parking lots fill up faster, the trains are more crowded. I feel lucky when I get a seat."

BART has responded to the added crush by experimenting with removing seats in some cars to provide more space for standing-room-only passengers.

Factors that have contributed to the growth spurt in ridership include record-high gas prices, mounting concern over the environment and, in places like San Francisco, a growing population.

Among major Bay Area agencies, only SamTrans and AC Transit lost riders in the quarter-to-quarter comparison, according to the American Public Transportation Association. SamTrans dropped less than 1 percent; AC Transit fell 4.5 percent. AC Transit officials question the finding and believe that, if anything, ridership has increased, particularly on the cross-bay runs, said AC Transit spokesman Clarence Johnson.

With transit use up generally in the region, the budget battle in Sacramento is being closely watched.

"Everyone is nervous," said Randy Rentschler, legislative director for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, a Bay Area planning and funding agency.

Schwarzenegger proposed keeping the state transit budget at the current year's level of \$306 million. But California transit agency administrators believe that under a voter-approved funding formula they are due another \$1.4 billion, the bulk of it for operations and a smaller amount for capital projects. The governor's budget is in the hands of the Legislature.

The deadline to pass a budget is June 15 but is rarely met.

Under the governor's current budget, Bay Area transit agencies are in line for \$108 million in funding. About \$274 million would be diverted to other state programs under the plan, according to a Metropolitan Transportation Commission analysis.

A similar diversion occurred last year.

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