

Caltrans In **Transition**

Survey for Barriers to Implementing Transit Session

CalACT Conference November 2008

The Division of Mass Transportation (DMT) in the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) invited the registered participants of the fall joint CalACT/CTA conference to take part in this survey. The survey results will be used to help DMT identify the barriers external agencies face when trying to implement a transit project on the state highway system. Our goal is to work within Caltrans to remove the barriers.

Forty-two agencies responded to this survey and approximately 90 people attended the evening session at the conference. Below is a summary of the responses.

Questions:

1. What do you perceive to be the biggest obstacles your organization faces in providing optimum transit service?

The majority of answers (27 out of 42) stated the lack of funding and specifically the lack of operating funds as their largest obstacle. Many answers included statements to the effect that the uncertainty and instability of long-term funding hinders the transit agencies abilities to plan for future transit improvements. Three agencies mentioned they have postponed capital improvements and planned expansions to future years because they do not foresee the ability to operate at a higher capacity for quite some time with the ongoing cuts to the State Transit Assistance Fund (STA). Two answers also included the lack of planning funds and the need for more flexible funding sources.

The next largest category included infrastructure challenges (9 of 42). These answers ranged from un-friendly transit streets, including the lack of pedestrian ways and suitable bus stop locations, to low-density suburban development that makes it cost prohibitive to serve with high-quality transit, and land use/planning laws that fail to promote transit first. Four answers also mentioned the difficulties with Caltrans permitting process including sighting and installations of bus stop signs, shelters and other amenities. One respondent said the procedures for installing bus stops, or adjusting locations have changed and become more financially burdensome.

Six answers included internal challenges of retaining drivers and maintaining an adequate fleet size, which included mechanical issues, the need for software upgrades and uncertain fuel costs.

Three answers mentioned the difficulty in reaching potential customers. This includes conflicting missions between serving the transit dependent verses reaching conscientious folks who would use transit if it were designed for their use

Three answers listed difficulty with regulations on the use of diesel fuel technology (new technology is not as reliable), including the cost of new regulations and dealing with the ARB.

Four answers were related to information sharing. Poor coordination of scheduling with other transit agencies, a lack of sufficient O and D information for developing express or commuter services, and lack of getting the message out about the benefits of technology and the major improvements that can be made by utilizing Freeway Management and Traffic Operations models were specifically mentioned.

Four answers mentioned Traffic; Unmanaged traffic congestion on the freeway system; Inner city traffic; and the discrepancy between peak and non-peak services (and travel times).

During the Conference session, we heard the above and some additional suggestions such as posting more information on the Division of Mass Transportation's website. We were asked if there is a place where you can find contact information for all employees in the Department, and if there is a place where the public can see Caltrans Deputy Directives. One participant felt that often information doesn't flow to all levels of staff within Caltrans and different people or divisions provide different answers.

2. Are there Caltrans policies/processes/permitting issues that impede your planning, implementation or operation of transit on the State Highway System?

Twelve answers referred to problems with the encroachment permit process, especially for bus stops and shelters. Many are discouraged by the time and energy it takes to process encroachment permits, shelter design and engineering documents, and then prepare maintenance agreements. One said Caltrans standards increase the cost of stop installation dramatically and another said it would be useful to get some specific guidance on how they should work with Caltrans to get an encroachment permit for bus stops on the state highways.

There were twelve comments made about policies, procedures, standards, regulations, and administrative problems. These included lack of coordination, consistency or timeliness, confusing or redundant paperwork or manuals, uncoordinated and time consuming approval processes, and one observation that grant cycles don't correspond with most transit agencies' fiscal years. The need for Caltrans to be more flexible and transit supportive was also pointed out several times.

Six comments were made about the need for project coordination in corridors, incorporating bus stop work along highways with roadway repair/improvement projects, and notifying transit operators about road work/closures. One specific comment said they would like to see bus stops at freeway interchanges added whenever interchanges are upgraded and would like to be made aware of other Caltrans projects being planned for the same corridor as their routes. In general there should be a process coordinated at both the regional and State level to ensure maximum coordination of projects.

Three comments were made about wanting Caltrans to allow for buses on shoulders and one asked to look at allowing bus stops on expressways.

Three comments were made on infrastructure, including the need for pedestrian access to transit and concern about Caltrans "withdrawing" from park and rides.

A couple people mentioned system management, one stressing the need for revising performance measures and the other encouraging ITS technologies.

3. What assistance could Caltrans provide to enhance transit operations on the State Highway System?

Thirteen comments were made about infrastructure issues, including locating safe and accessible bus stop locations on State highways, better design and signage of bus stops on highways and park and rides; HOV lane access and complete the HOV system; and exclusive bus lanes (including bus on shoulder).

Six comments were made on policies, procedures, standards, regulations and administration. These included the need for timeliness, flexibility and clarity. One person suggested streamlining

the grant process and another requested a template of approved guidelines for rural counties who are building transit systems, which rely heavily on State Highways.

Six comments were made about problems with coordination, including the request to notify transit operators as soon as possible about road work and lane closures that may affect them, providing assistance for buses to get through construction zones, and coordinating construction projects with operators in a way that bus stop improvements could be made at the same time. Two people suggested more nighttime construction.

Five people commented on the need for Caltrans to work more proactively with transit operators, including the availability of a knowledgeable contact person to help with issues, and providing research.

Five comments were about the need for more funding, four for capital and one for operating.

Three responses were about system management, including suggestions for more TSP, ITS technologies, and one person mentioned revising TDA (performance standards?)

Two people talked about the permitting and encroachment process, asking for flexibility and streamlining.

4. Are there Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) technologies that would help your agency plan and operate more effectively?

While most answers listed several ITS technologies they would like to implement, a couple said they were not sure what possibilities there are out there, and one simply said they would like simple low cost (in plain English) solutions and new extra money to consider and implement them. The wide variety of answer fell into two categories, those that are passenger amenities, and those that will help the agency with operations.

The first category of responses include improvements that make transit more attractive to passengers. These include infrastructure improvements such as bus stop pole illuminators to signal an on-coming bus and provide lighting onto the waiting passengers, security cameras and lighting at bus stops and shelters, and passenger information systems such as "Next Stop" or similar information at major transit centers and elsewhere. They also include automatic bus stop announcements, various fare payment programs such as a universal fare card or those that allow a passenger to pay a transit fare via cell phone, and online and mobile trip planning tools.

Eight responses mentioned online trip planning including electronic passenger information on handheld mobile devices, such as real-time arrival and schedule information and web based transit information services that can be received via cell phone. Two specifically asked for the State to coordinate and provide support for all agencies to become part of Google Transit.

The next group of responses listed solutions that aid agencies with their operations. These include systems that provide surveillance, radio communications, schedule adherence data, and passenger counts by location. Ten answers said signal prioritization for transit would help, five said GPS, two mentioned automatic passenger counting systems, and one would like dedicated bus lanes. Nine answers mentioned Automatic Vehicle Locators (AVL) and how it is particularly important in timing connections between routes and providing passenger information. One respondent suggested the State include a statewide AVL/trip planning system on the state contract, as long as it is a system that allows FTA grant recipients to participate without breaking any federal procurement rules. Some asked for better dispatch programs and said CAD, computer aided dispatching, is essential. Others mentioned the TransitMaster, Trapeze, Hastus, & Mentor systems.

The final answer seemed to encompass it all and said, “Traffic Operation and Management of the Highways is vital for transit operations. Changeable message signs, variable speed limits, drop ramps, transit priority and HOT lanes all play a vital role in ensuring transit can operate efficiently on the highway. Having a management system in place that utilizes all these technologies under one program allows transit to operate within the constraints of the highway system.”

5. What are the challenges your organization faces in establishing or improving online transit trip planning tools?

These answers fell into three categories: funding, software, and coordination challenges.

Seventeen respondents listed the lack of funding. Funds are needed to create their own trip-planning program, for assistance to tap into existing programs, or staff time and software to integrate current trip planning with Google or other programs. Even if an agency wants to use Google transit, which is free, they still need to invest the time to convert their data into the GTFS format and provide ongoing support to maintain the data for their routes. One agency said the biggest challenge is funding an upgrade to their web site to facilitate local trip planning and another listed the cost of hardware for real time information.

Nine responses listed challenges with software or other technical limitations. These include managing various software applications to provide consistent and compatible information, finding qualified staff and or local vendors to provide on-site advanced technical and ITS support in remote rural areas, finding trip planning tools that can provide “real time” information, and the ongoing task of maintaining the information. One suggestion was for the State to assist with sharing information and continuing marketing. “Many transit agencies think they have to get a special program written just for their trip planning. Information would go a long way to helping low-cost on line trip planning...hey, Google's free!”

Fifteen answers mentioned coordination challenges in various areas. These range from the technical challenge of coordinating different trip planning formats to the political challenge of coordination with multiple service providers each providing oversight. A few agencies said the development of standard format would help. “For example, all transit information for airports should be in the same format and published by the airport authority in the same way so a traveler will always know how to get the information without fighting the format. The ACRP (Airport Cooperative Research Program) from TRB is kicking off a study to develop that format right now.”

One mentioned a challenge with riders that do not have computers or Internet access. They would like a way to help these riders, which often include elderly, disabled, and low income persons, plan travel using 2 or more carriers (then providing printed itinerary with options in case journey is interrupted or delayed because of weather, roadway

Is your organization actively involved with Regional Blueprint Planning?

Yes – 64% No – 17% Not sure – 19%

Is your transit organization involved with or has it been invited to participate in State Highway Planning efforts, such as Corridor System Management Plans, Transportation Concept Reports, or Route Concept Reports?

Yes – 55% No – 24% Not sure – 21%

Two additional comments were listed. One said the Transit Agency gets very little share of time at these meetings and they might do better if they participated separate from the others. The other said they are involved, however, they frequently are invited late or after the requirements have been outlined.

Is your organization interested in better utilization of Park-n-Ride lots?

Yes – 89% No – 2% Not sure – 9%

Two additional comments were listed below. One would like more, and better located Caltrans park and ride lots, owned or leased and the other suggested combining park and ride lots with transportation centers and united usage of land and resources.

Is your organization interested in collaborating with Caltrans to plan enhanced transit services (such as Bus Rapid Transit or express buses)?

Yes – 79% No – 9% Not sure – 12%

Do you have any other suggestions or issues you'd like to discuss?

Overall in this section we were commended for asking for the feedback, and asked that we continue to do workshops in the districts on this issue throughout the year. If we do a workshop at a future conference they would like us to allow a lot more time and schedule it earlier in the day. Most suggestions here asked for better communication with the operators. They would like more coordination among transit, local cities, and Caltrans and better information sharing in a timely manner from the Department. This includes more outreach to the transit industry to let them know about transit and other types of planning grants from Caltrans that they are not always aware of, sharing industry wide information such as on various cutbacks and the impact on ridership, or information on changes to regulations such as ARB's current review of the Zero Emission Bus regulation.

One comment suggested Caltrans could take more of a lead (regarding BRT) in smaller / simpler strategies that can significantly aid transit operations, such as signal pre-emption (green extension) or "right turn only -- buses exempted" lanes. They also suggested Caltrans should develop a coordinated internal process to insure that Department comments reflect Caltrans guidelines not just a single branch. Another said it would be beneficial to have a local agency assist with the transit section of the highway design manual (under revision).

There were three additional comments related to funding, one asked for additional funding to offset the impacts of fuel cost increases and for capital equipment and another restated the need for more state funding for transportation assistance and to stop diverting funds from State Transit Assistance (STA) funding. The final funding comment asked for realistic Funding Cycles and decreasing the time to actually get the funds.

The final comments said Caltrans should keep the focus on barriers and bringing transit staff to the planning table and all Caltrans Regional Planners need to speak up on transit issues at regional meetings. This will help them become better transit advocates. They also suggested DMT should focus on those areas that intersect with Caltrans system, rather than try to solve everything.