

Alameda County Urges MTC to Halt Funding Bias Against East Bay Bus Riders

Similar Positions Taken by the Oakland, Berkeley, and Richmond City Councils

By Keith Carson, President Alameda County Board of Supervisors

Fifty years ago, Rosa Parks did not give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama and public transportation, more specifically buses, became the stage from which the civil-rights movement was launched. The paradox is that today, discrimination is alive and well in mass-transit bus service. In the Bay Area, for instance, a federal civil-rights lawsuit is pending in the U.S. District Court in San Francisco, charging that the Bay Area's Metropolitan Transportation Commission (which plans and allocates the majority of funding for the area's transit needs) supports a "separate and unequal transit system" that discriminates against poor transit riders of color.

I am proud to write that the Alameda County Board of Supervisors joined a growing chorus of East Bay elected officials—more than thirty in the last year alone—who have called on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) to treat low-income bus riders equitably in its funding practices. On May 23, by a vote of three to one, our Board adopted a resolution requesting that MTC increase the allocation of public funds so that low-income and minority AC Transit passengers receive a substantial increase in subsidy per transit trip from MTC to approach parity in the subsidy levels provided to users of BART and Caltrain.

We did so to reinforce the cry for fair treatment by those who depend on the bus daily to conduct one's basic needs, among which are getting to work or school every day. Most of these families are fighting their way out of poverty, yet they are the first to suffer from service cuts and fare hikes. More often than not, these individuals live on the margins. If bus service is not made more reliable and inexpensive, moderate income folks will not use it and lower income folks, with no alternatives, will continue to pay more for less service. Those of us who are already ravaged by the increases in gas prices, housing prices, the closing of our inner city schools, bear the brunt of these decisions. The bottom line is that society pays either way: we pay on the front end with the increasing costs as I just described, or we pay on the back end with increasing high school drop out rates, increasing unemployment, and increasing violence in our communities. These are the costs of disparity; more often than not, these are the ones living on the margins.

Supporters of our resolution note that funding decisions by MTC have left AC Transit bus riders with lower per-passenger subsidies, and lower levels of service, than the predominantly affluent riders of BART and Caltrain. While AC Transit bus riders receive a per passenger public subsidy of \$2.78, BART and Caltrain passengers receive subsidies of \$6.14 and \$13.79, respectively.

I believe that the Bay Area has two 'separate and unequal' transit systems: an expanding rail system, Caltrain and BART, for relatively affluent communities, and a less financially supported bus system for low-income people. Over sixty percent of adult riders of AC Transit are transit-dependent, and over seventy percent are from households

with extremely low or very low incomes. In short, a majority of AC Transit's passengers depend on AC Transit's vital bus services. In addition, about eighty percent of AC Transit's riders are people of color. These passengers receive a fraction of the public subsidy that riders of Caltrain and BART enjoy, and have experienced a steady reduction in essential transit services while their rail counterparts have benefited from expanded service.

The resolution that we at the Alameda County Board of Supervisors passed requests that the Metropolitan Transportation Commission make use of its extensive authority in the area of transportation finance, project planning and selection, and legislative advocacy to ensure that each transit passenger, regardless of income or ethnicity, receives an equitable subsidy of public dollars and equal access to vital transit services. I believe that until public transit is free for all, we must work towards the goal that everyone in the Bay Area has equal access to a first-class, safe, dependable public-transit system.

To get a copy of the resolution or to find out more, please e-mail Lara Sim on my staff at lara.sim@acgov.org.