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Reimagine Transit



Youth Score Win for Free Muni Passes

San Francisco Coalition Mobilizes for Transit Justice

By Rene Ciria-Cruz

Low-income youth of San Francisco will be able to ride Muni for free during a 16-month trial period starting early next year, thanks to the efforts of a broad community coalition. After a two-year campaign, the city's Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) gave final approval for the funding on December 4, 2012. Campaign organizers want the program to begin in February, with a massive drive to sign up youth for free passes fully underway by March.

In November 2011, the coalition won crucial support when the San Francisco Board of Supervisors lent its support to the campaign. Spirited actions by youth, parents, and community advocates through 2011 had been aimed at winning relief for students and their families from the rising cost of bus and light rail fares following school district cuts to funding for yellow school buses.

The coalition successfully overcame the regional transit authority's debatable funding priorities as well as opposition from some supervisors who wanted all available funds spent on improving Muni facilities and maintenance. Funds for the \$13 million pilot project will come from SFMTA, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), and the County Transportation Authority.

The grassroots drive for a free Muni youth pass began last year in response to the narrowing access to public transportation for the city's 40,000 low-income youth. The San Francisco Unified School District is cutting its yellow school bus service by nearly half, while the price of a Muni Youth Pass for youth five to 17 years old has risen from \$10 to \$22 since 2009. A monthly Muni-only Fast Pass for Adults now costs \$64.

Supporters of the project said the rising cost of Muni passes have led to a decline in ridership. Muni sold 18,410 youth passes in October 2010 but only 11,502 in the same period this year. With Muni becoming the school bus service for many students, the burden of paying for their commute falls heaviest

on working class families with more than one child going to school.

"With the rising costs of bus passes it would cost my family \$200 for all of us to get monthly passes for two adults and two kids," said Joanne Abernathy. "A lot of people in my neighborhood are deciding between \$2 for Muni fare or \$2 for milk."

Grassroots Initiative

San Francisco's Youth Commission in 2009 began questioning the decreasing access to public transportation, drawing the attention of community organizations to the growing problem of rising fares. "Muni has become too expensive and the services that we count on are becoming out of reach for us financially," says Leah LaCroix, who chairs the San Francisco Youth commission.



Photo:

Leah LaCroix, chair of the San Francisco Youth Commission and young women of POWER advocating for regional funding for the Free MUNI for youth program.

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Meanwhile, People Organized to win Employment Rights (POWER) had launched a successful effort to make Muni scale back its proof-of-payment enforcement crackdown, which had triggered complaints of intimidation and racial profiling.

“In March, April, and May 2010, there was an initial youth fare program for 12,000 kids, and the passes were used up really quick,” said Jaron Browne, POWER’s director of communication. “The need greatly exceeded availability. That’s when we saw the problem was huge.”

POWER convened a broad coalition of community organizations that propelled the free Muni for youths campaign, including the Chinatown Community Development Center, Jamestown Community Center, SRO Families Collaborative, MORE Public Transit Coalition, SF Organizing Project, Senior Action Network, Coleman Advocates for Children, San Francisco Bicycle Coalition, Filipino Community Center, Causa Justa, and Senior Action Networks, among other groups.

“Perhaps the most exciting part of the campaign is the leadership role San Francisco’s youth has played,” said Bob Allen, director of the transportation justice program at Urban Habitat, pointing to POWER, a community-based advocacy group founded in 1997, as the leading force of the movement. POWER had helped raise the minimum wage in the city and has been organizing women domestic workers as well as residents of low-income communities.

The Free Muni for Youth drive is part of POWER’s larger campaign for “transit justice,” to correct the rising cost of commutes, the poor quality of public transportation service to low-income neighborhoods, and heavy handed “criminalization” of fare evasion. Urban Habitat has provided campaign support for the project and is a coauthor with POWER and the Data-Center of *Next Stop Justice: Race And Environment at the Center of Transit Planning*. (See sidebars to this story and Research and Resources on page 87 for more on the report.)



Skewed Funding Punishes Low-Income Riders

Cities that want to maintain healthy bus service must contend with funding priorities at all levels of government that favor automobile use over public transportation. More than 80 percent of federal transit funds go to highways—only 20 percent goes to public transit—and the law bans use of such federal funds for day-to-day operations. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), which distributes federal and state transportation moneys in the nine-county Bay Area allots just 6 percent of its expansion funds to bus service.

A POWER survey of 727 public transportation users in San Francisco showed that 48 percent said they didn’t have enough money for transportation in the last month. Riders use public transporta-

tion for a whole range of activities, including going to school (57 percent), appointments (41 percent), work (40 percent), grocery shopping (35 percent), after-school appointments (15 percent) and childcare (8 percent). More than half reported waiting an average of 10 to 20 minutes for a bus and 16 percent reported waiting more than 20 minutes.

Rising costs of fares put the heaviest burden on the city’s low-income families of color in the following communities: Chinatown, the Mission, Bayview-Hunters Point, Excelsior, and Visitacion Valley, which have some of the city’s lowest per capita incomes. Families in these neighborhoods spent 20-24 percent of their household income on transportation in 2005, before the doubling of bus fares.

The expansion of proof-of-payment fare enforcement has fostered widespread fear and decreased access to public transit for people in these same neighborhoods. San Francisco began implementing proof-of-payment fare enforcement (POP) in the mid-1990s on Muni’s light rail lines, expanding it to bus lines by 2005. Uniformed and armed San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) officers began boarding the buses and handing out tickets that carried substantial fines. Last year, the city paid \$12 million to the police department for its POP enforcement services. However, from 2006 to 2010, the city recovered only \$1 million in lost fares after spending \$9.5 in enforcement. ■

An excerpt from Next Stop: Justice—Race and Environment at the Center of Transit Planning, a report published by POWER, DataCenter, and Urban Habitat.



Research and Strategy

The community coalition held a straw poll, setting up voting booths near the Mission and Geneva intersection to ask commuters if they thought youth should be able to ride Muni for free—“to get a sense of the depth of the need,” said Browne.

Then, with assistance from allies, such as Supervisor David Campos—who wants to follow New York’s example and provide public transportation that is

“accessible to students in our public school system”—Urban Habitat, and DataCenter, the coalition undertook extensive research to identify the key funding sources likely to be responsible for transit programs.

“Urban Habitat was particularly helpful in mapping us out an understanding of the regional funding stream,” said Browne. The campaign learned that competitive funding was available from a broad range of sources—city, county, and regional bodies

Better Public Transit for Better Air

In the San Francisco Bay Area, personal vehicle exhaust is a leading source of greenhouse gas emissions and toxic air pollutants. Cars and light trucks accounted for 78 percent of transportation sector emissions in 2007. In the city, transportation sources produce 50 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions. Passenger vehicles contribute nearly four times more to global warming than heavy duty trucks, ships, and aircraft combined.

San Francisco’s poor and working-class communities of color are affected more by poor air quality because they tend to live next to high-volume roadways. Residents of Chinatown, the Mission, Bayview-Hunters Point, the Excelsior, and Visitacion Valley suffer

severe health burdens from pollutant exposure. One study of 12,000 residents in the Bayview showed rates of cervical and breast cancer double those in other parts of the region, and hospitalization rates for heart failure, hypertension, diabetes, and emphysema more than three times the statewide average. San Francisco Department of Public Health figures show startlingly higher rates of asthma hospitalizations in these neighborhoods than in wealthier ones.

Approximately 60 percent of all trips in San Francisco used a private vehicle. Muni wants to reduce this to 30 percent by 2030, a step in the right direction. Yet, some recent Muni policy decisions, such as increasing transit fare and decreasing bus service, severely under-



mine this aim. Every 10 percent increase in fares decreases ridership by 4 percent, according to the American Public Transportation Association. ■

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Photos:

(Top) Transportation justice action in San Francisco for the Free Muni for Youth program.

Courtesy of POWER.

(Bottom) Riders on a Los Angeles bus.

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responsible for improving public transportation access for low-income communities and for addressing the region's air quality.

The coalition also “carefully analyzed areas of potential cost savings—the MTA’s capital budget, work order charges from other city agencies for providing services to Muni, overtime costs—that would allow Muni to put more service on the street,” said Allen.

Armed with data-based arguments, including a model program and price structure, the campaigners organized delegations to convince elected officials and decision-makers at various government levels. The campaign “was smart about it and had a strategy that made sense,” said Campos, It was well informed

about “the different pitfalls” ahead, he added.

“We really put a lot of pressure on various government levels,” said Browne. The SF Board of Supervisors would call on SF Municipal Transportation Agency, SFUSD, SF County Transportation Authority, and Metropolitan Transportation Commission to collaborate with community groups in designing and securing funding for a free Muni for youth program. Support also came from Mayor Ed Lee, the SF Board of Education and its Student Advisory Council, the SF Youth Commission and the Parent Teacher Association board.

Community-Based Lobbying

“Hundreds of young people came and testified

Transportation Sales Tax Defeated in Los Angeles

By Eric Roman

The bid by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to extend an existing transportation sales tax until 2069 failed to meet the necessary 2/3 threshold, delivering a setback to the Mayor's gentrifying and polluting vision for transportation expansion.

Sunyoung Yang, an organizer with the LA Bus Riders Union, which opposed the measure says, “Despite a multimillion dollar corporate-funded ad blitz and misleading ballot language, substantial numbers of voters heard our message about Measure J.”

The Coalition to Defeat Measure J hailed the result not as a defeat for mass transit progress, but as a rejection of MTA's pattern of running roughshod over civil rights, environmental justice, and community concerns in favor of corporate special interests.

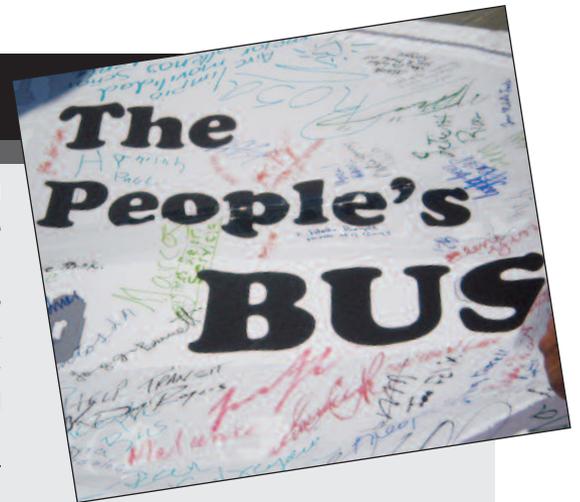
Yang explains: “This is not a denial of funds for the MTA. This result forces a shift in the debate on how to redistribute the ample funds from Measure R that MTA

already has, with racial equality, social justice, and good transit policy for all at the core.”

The coalition that united the Bus Riders Union with the Crenshaw Subway Coalition, Union de Vecinos in Boyle Heights, Northeast LA Residents Against Measure J, and community leaders from Beverly Hills, overcame a corporate-funded multimillion dollar campaign for Measure J by relying on grassroots tactics.

According to Damien Goodman, a member of the Crenshaw Subway Coalition, “Black community, clergy, and civil rights leaders from South LA were palpably offended by Measure J and joined forces with other working class communities of color out of common experience and common purpose. MTA was asking us for more of our money while promising to spend not a penny in our community.”

The coalition forces have an alternative plan that they'd like to see put in place. Specific policy changes mentioned by Yang include: Reverse the elimination of one



million hours of punitive and racially discriminatory bus service cuts; return the monthly bus pass to \$52; commit to a Leimert Park Station on the Crenshaw rail line; and cancel plans for the 710 tunnel.”

She calls on the MTA “to stop its alliance with the highway industry, stop its war with bus riders and let's sit down and work together to discuss a transit future for LA that includes everyone.” ■

Eric Roman is an organizer with the Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles.

■ Photo: Banner from the Bus Riders Union demonstration in Los Angeles. Courtesy of the Bus Riders Union.

before the Board of Supervisors, before the MTA, the Muni board of directors,” said Campos. “Kids talked about how they sometimes had to choose between paying their bus fare or buying lunch, or how they just walked to school and ended up late.”

It was also “very powerful,” Campos added, to have “parents and families talk about the impact of the lack of access to public transportation on them—how painful it was for them to not be able to give bus fare to their kids because they just didn’t have money.”

Coalition activists also disseminated information through social media and the mainstream press, with students from various schools throughout the city videotaping messages of support for the plan.



Photo: Youth transit activists on MUNI. Courtesy of POWER.

They explained that up to 70 percent of San Francisco high school students surveyed use public transit to commute and that the pilot program would cost less than one percent of Muni’s \$800 million annual budget.

With the steadily increasing prices of fares and passes many people, including students, are tempted to resort to fare evasion, risking fines of \$100 to \$150—a big bite off a working family’s budget—if inspectors catch them without proof of payment. And yet, campaigners reported, the enforcement

New Era for Transit Finance

By Lindsay Imai

In spite of rising gas prices, worsening traffic, and growing public concern about climate change, voters in two of the largest and most diverse counties in the state rejected transportation tax measures (Measures J and B1) that promised to meet these important transportation needs. Yet, these same voters, only four years earlier, in the case of Los Angeles County, and 12 years before, in the case of Alameda County, approved similar measures (Measures R and B) with strong support. What has changed in that time and what does this mean for transit-dependent communities and their transportation justice allies?

Alameda County’s Measure B1, promoted by Urban Habitat and many of its allies, included many important benefits for low-income bus riders. These were critical funds to improve bus service and restore cuts in service, provide seed money for a county-wide free student bus pass program, make major investments in bicycle lane and sidewalk safety, as well as provide more money for paratransit for seniors and people with

disabilities. For this reason, B1 didn’t face the same grassroots opposition that Measure J did.

Like Measure J, B1 was a sales tax measure that would have continued to shift the transportation tax burden onto working families and away from corporations and wealthy individuals. (This is one of the main reasons why, after much debate, Urban Habitat ultimately decided not to endorse the final B1 measure. We were also concerned that the tax would become permanent and that it lacked protections against gentrification and the displacement of low-income renters from neighborhoods well-served by transit.)

The rejection of J and B1 by the same voters who supported Prop 30 (the progressive income tax on the wealthiest 2 percent of Californians) is a signal that the public is recognizing that our current taxation system is unfair and that they are tired of footing the bill, while corporations and the elite pay less and less. This awareness provides bus riders and their allies with an opening to begin



needed reform of our transit finance system—how we fund transportation as well as how we spend those funds. The change in how we fund transportation must begin at the national level by flipping the current distribution of federal funds which gives 80 percent to highways and only 20 percent to transit. And it must continue down through every level of government, with serious consideration of new carbon fees, progressive income taxes, corporate taxes, and real estate transportation impact fees.

While B1’s defeat will mean more hardship for AC Transit riders, we are hopeful that it provides an opportunity for a more progressive county tax in the near future. ■

Lindsay Imai is the associate director of the transportation justice program at Urban Habitat.

Photo: Inside of an AC Transit Bus. © Daniel Gies

More Public Transit Means More Jobs

From 2008 through 2010, nearly 90 percent of all the transit systems in the U.S. had to raise fares or cut service. As a direct result of these service cuts, 97,000 U.S. transit workers lost their jobs in 2009. By September 2010, an additional 78,000 jobs were lost. The economic impact of transit austerity politics goes beyond job cuts for bus drivers and mechanics. Every \$1 in service cuts caused by operating deficits bleeds \$10 from the local economy in lost wages and increased transportation costs. These cuts hit transit-dependent people the hardest.

Investment in transit operations and service—and in bus drivers, mechanics, and support staff—is one of the most efficient and effective economic development strategies available. Ten million dollars invested in transit operations produces \$30 million in increased business sales. This strong multiplier effect yields both additional jobs in the local economy and increased sales tax revenues for state and local governments. An analysis of federal stimulus spending showed that transit operations created 72 percent more jobs than similar investments in transit capital.

An excerpt from Next Stop: Justice—Race and Environment at the Center of Transit Planning, a report published by POWER, DataCenter, and Urban Habitat.

program costs \$9.5 million a year but recovers only \$1 million in lost fares.

Campaigners also argued that a free Muni for youth program was one of the best ways to secure a generation of new users of public transportation. In the long run it would help improve air quality, said POWER leader Manuela Esteva. “We started realizing that not only would free Muni benefit youth, but we could also have a positive impact on the environment.”

At the MTA-level negotiations, the campaign agreed to a compromise. Instead of an initial goal of free passes for all youth, it agreed to make the program specific to “low-income” youth. “We will eventually push for between 100 percent to 120 percent of median income, so we could include even unionized workers and more working class people,” reported Browne.

After hearing youth and parent testimonies in a public hearing, the SFMTA board in April approved \$9 million for a free youth fare program, but only if \$4 to \$5 million could be obtained from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC).

The MTC is the transportation planning and financing body for the Bay Area’s nine counties. It disburses up to \$3 billion annually to local transit operators, highway and road construction, and planning activities.

Letdown

In July, however, the MTC voted 8-7 against giving San Francisco the \$4 million, arguing that only the city’s youth would benefit from the program while there were other low-income families in other cities that need help just as much. That left Muni’s \$9.4 million free youth pass plan \$5 million short.

Yet, in the same meeting attended by an audience of nearly 150 plan supporters, the MTC approved at least \$18.6 million for the new ferry service between Alameda and South San Francisco. An

example, critics say, of class bias and lopsided funding priorities.

The ferry outlay amounts to a public subsidy of \$47 per ferry ride. Workers from biotech firms, such as Genentech, are currently the main users of the ferry. Meanwhile, coalition activists contended, the subsidy for free Muni for 40,000 kids would amount to only \$2.86 per ride.

“It’s been a very eye-opening experience for me,” said Zeke Osmond, a restaurant worker and sales clerk who is also a member of POWER. “It’s been very tough and somewhat embarrassing to see these commissioners, and how they approach these situations.”

However, on October 10 came a pleasant surprise—the MTC awarded the city \$6.7 million in federal funds meant to increase transit ridership and improve system performance. The money could be used for a variety of purposes, including free fares.

But Supervisors Scott Wiener, Mark Farrell, Sean Elsbernd, and Carmen Chu wanted the new funds to be spent on capital improvements and maintenance first, instead of free youth fares.

Campaign supporters criticized them for setting up a “false choice” between increasing transit access for low-income youth and improving Muni. SFMTA transportation director Ed Reiskin stated, “I don’t see this as an either or. We have ridership goals and we have productivity goals. We’re trying

Recommendations from Next Stop: Justice

1. *Increase San Francisco's investments in public transportation by taxing large developers and corporations.* Large developers and corporations already benefit from public transit's contribution to increasing property values and bringing in workers and customers. Corporations have a responsibility to pay their fair share and invest in the system as a whole.

2. *Expand and improve transit in the city's eastern neighborhoods.* The SFMTA must commit to improving transit service in working class communities of color in order to meet the needs of its residents who rely on transit the most. Seriously investing in the eastern neighborhoods is essential to making San Francisco family friendly and to increasing connectivity in the city.

3. *Scale back aggressive fare enforcement and use resources to improve service.* Saturating bus stops and buses with police officers to catch fare evaders generates far more fear than fares, criminalizing people for trying to ride while poor and black, Latino, or Asian Pacific Islander. The money saved by cutting out the POP program should go towards improving service.

4. *Reduce transit fares as a central strategy for reaching San Francisco's climate objectives.* Free Muni rides enticed more than 200,000 San Franciscans to leave their cars at home during the first two "Spare the Air" days in 2007. Make public transit the

first choice for workers, youth, and families by making it truly affordable and accessible. An important first step is establishing permanent funding for free Muni passes for all youth in San Francisco.

5. *Expand transit as a green job growth sector.* Public transit not only supports the environment, it also sustains a racially diverse unionized workforce that earns living wages—making it a model of a green jobs sector. To expand transit jobs, San Francisco should prioritize use of transit resources for operations, rather than large capital investments.

6. *Shift transportation policy to prioritize public transit over car travel.* San Francisco must designate auto-free zones and expand the bus priority zones in areas where transit and alternative mobility options exist to encourage people to use transit. It should also close tax loopholes that favor wealthy drivers, including increasing the tax on corporate downtown parking garages, and closing the valet loophole in the city's parking tax. Both the city and the region must prioritize operations and maintenance needs for public transit over freeways and capital projects.

7. *Collect and publish demographic data about transit riders in the city.* Low income communities and communities of color have the highest rates of transit dependency, but the SFMTA doesn't consistently track infor-



mation about the ethnicity, gender, or income levels of riders. San Francisco should look to the data tracking and transparency practices of Los Angeles and other cities to find ways to ensure that public transit serves the communities who depend on transit the most.

8. *Create a mechanism for greater democracy and community accountability in the SFMTA.* All members of the SFMTA Board of Directors are appointed by the mayor and have little direct accountability to transit riders. The agency manages a multimillion dollar budget and decisions made by its board have huge public impacts. Its board should be publicly elected, like the Board of Education and the Community College Board. Even splitting appointments to the SFMTA board between the mayor and the Board of Supervisors would allow for greater public accountability and more motivation to refocus transportation priorities on the needs of the environment and the community. ■

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to use these dollars to address both.”

Reiskin proposed to use \$1.6 million of the \$6.7 million for setting up the free Muni rides for low-income youth between February and June, and the remaining \$5.1 million for rehabilitating Muni light-rail vehicles. The agency would set aside another \$1.8 million in the following fiscal year to keep the pilot project going.

Challenges Ahead

On December 4, the SFMTA Board approved the final funding allocation of regional transportation funds from MTC and gave the green light to launch a 16-month pilot program estimated at \$6.9 million.

“Our challenge now is to push hard for permanent funding,” Browne said. “The Free Muni for Youth program isn't the only thing we're fighting for. There are other transit justice issues on our agenda.” ■

Photos:

Everyday MUNI riders.

Courtesy of muni-diaries.com

Rene Ciria-Cruz is a freelance writer based in San Francisco and a frequent contributor to Race, Poverty & the Environment.