

CAL MATTERS

Can California public transit recover?

April 5, 2023

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Bay Area Rapid Transit, San Francisco's MUNI, Los Angeles Metro and transit agencies across the state are struggling to keep afloat.

Public transit ridership in California hasn't recovered since plummeting during the pandemic. And since then, transit agencies have been anticipating a "fiscal cliff" — a steep drop in revenue combined with the end of federal aid within two years.

According to CalMatters' state Capitol reporter Sameea Kamal, there are no clear solutions. And if the state doesn't step in to help, the few fixes being proposed have problems of their own. They include:

A fare hike or service cuts: This would not only disproportionately impact low-income people who depend on public transit to get around, but also commuters on their way to work and other regular riders. Expensive fares and spotty service also might keep ridership perpetually low.

Slashing transit expansion: With an estimated \$22.5 billion to \$25 billion budget shortfall on the horizon, Gov. Gavin Newsom is proposing to delay and cut some transit expansions and equipment programs. That doesn't directly affect services, but could hamper efforts to attract more riders.

Revise zoning laws: To increase ridership, some experts say cities should develop more housing around transit areas, ease parking requirements that drive up costs and revive business or

downtown districts. (For example, office occupancy took a nosedive in downtown San Francisco during COVID-19 and the city hasn't recovered since.)

Make working and riding public transit safer: Many transit operators retired or shifted to work with lower health risks, such as trucking. Many drivers and riders alike have also become fed up with the mental health, drug and homelessness crises apparent at transit stations. Some debate whether increasing police is the answer, but one new bill would require operators to collect and publish data on harassment of passengers.

Of course, there's one solution that would help the most: More money, either directly from the state or through local ballot measures, which take time and require voter approval. Whatever solution or combination of solutions will be implemented, however, lawmakers and advocates say public transit is crucial to keep cities accessible.

Monica Mallon, founder of the Turnout4Transit advocacy group in San Jose: "If we let agencies fall off this cliff, it's going to be really hard to get transit back in the future. And then everybody's going to be in traffic and complaining."

OTHER STORIES YOU SHOULD KNOW

More homeless students in CA

During the pandemic, the number of students experiencing homelessness unexpectedly dropped. But as CalMatters' K-12 education reporter Joe Hong and data journalist Erica Yee report, the latest numbers from the California Department of Education show that student homelessness has now increased for the first time since the pandemic began in 2020.

That's alarming researchers and administrators.

Jesus Nunez, communications director at Monarch School, a San Diego school for unhoused students: "If students' basic needs aren't being met, it doesn't matter what teaching strategies are being used."

Students experiencing homelessness are often evicted from their homes and the count includes those who live in motels, trailer parks, campgrounds or public spaces. According to the Department of Education report released on Tuesday:

About 5.9 million students enrolled in California public schools this school year, that's close to 40,000 fewer students than last year (or a 0.7% drop)

The number of homeless students in the state increased by 16,000 (a 9% increase)

13 of California's 20 largest districts have more homeless youth now than in the 2019-20 school year

At Kern High, the number more than doubled (150 homeless students in 2019-20 to 481 in 2022-23)

The number of foster youth, students with disabilities and students from low-income households have also all increased by between 2% and 3%

San Diego agency sued for siphoning foster youth money

For years, California child welfare agencies have been pocketing federal money meant for foster youth. While it's perfectly legal now, one family is going to court to fight for the funds they say belong to the children, reports Jeanne Kuang of CalMatters' California Divide team.

California's 50,000 foster youth include some of the most vulnerable people in the state — about a quarter of them stay in shelters or become unhoused right after exiting foster care. As adults, they often fall into poverty or become homeless.

There are various benefit programs to support individuals or their caretakers financially: One Social Security program helps children who have disabilities and come from low-income families, another is for children who have had one or both parents die and there's another for parents who died in military service.

When a child gets these Social Security benefits, their parents can receive the money on their behalf. When a child's in state custody, county child welfare agencies can take on that role. The state requires counties to use the money in the child's best interests. But as Jeanne reported last July, one allowable use is offsetting costs for providing foster care — meaning counties pocket the children's benefits to reimburse themselves.

A few states and cities have stopped the practice, but California has been slow to do the same. In her latest story, Jeanne follows families who are fighting to get their children's funds back and details a new bill, authored by Assemblymember Isaac Bryan, a Culver City Democrat, that would prohibit this practice and require agencies to use the money on the children directly.

Patricia Baca, a foster parent for her two grandchildren: "They've been traumatized, they've been taken from their family and now they've lost a parent... This is their money, and you're stealing it."

Despite rain, wells keep drying up



In much of California, there seems to be water everywhere, with record mountain snowpack, reservoirs nearly full and floodwaters still sloshing. But for many households in the San Joaquin Valley, there's not a drop to drink.

In the past month, the state's My Dry Well site received reports of 26 newly dried wells in the Central Valley. In the past year, 711 new dry wells were reported. In all, at least 2,500 domestic wells in the San Joaquin Valley are at risk of running dry under current rates of groundwater overdraft, according to the State Water Resources Control Board. Many of the wells are in disadvantaged Latino communities.

Tami McVay of Self-Help Enterprises, a San Joaquin Valley nonprofit, said her organization has been receiving about 30 calls a week to report dried wells. The state gave Self-Help about \$30 million to provide water tanks, bottled water and new wells to residents who have no water for drinking, bathing or other purposes.

At a Tuesday meeting, Paul Gosselin, a groundwater expert with the California Department of Water Resources, noted that "a large number of people ... are without safe, reliable drinking water." The problem, he said, will get worse in the summer, "at a time when it's going to be perceived that we have an abundance of water."

California's groundwater crisis is a reminder that water percolates slowly into the ground, and that a single wet winter cannot totally recharge depleted groundwater basins.

"Recovering from the past two droughts and agricultural overpumping is going to take years of storms like the ones we've had so far," said Nataly Escobedo Garcia of the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, based in Fresno.

California enacted a landmark law nine years ago to protect depleted groundwater. But the law gives water suppliers until 2040 or longer to achieve sustainability and stop impacts of overdrafts from worsening.