



## Board Report

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Agenda Number: 13.

### PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING COMMITTEE SEPTEMBER 20, 2023

**SUBJECT: METROLINK ANTELOPE VALLEY LINE**

**ACTION: PROGRAM FUNDS FOR WEEKDAY SERVICE RESTORATION AND ADDITIONAL WEEKEND SERVICE**

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

CONSIDER:

- A. APPROVING the reprogramming of \$1,682,842 unspent operating budget from FY23 to the Southern California Regional Rail Authority (SCRRA) for the FY24 Metrolink Antelope Valley Line (AVL) service restoration (Option 3), to start on October 23, 2023; and
- B. AUTHORIZING the Chief Executive Officer to negotiate and execute all necessary agreements between Metro and SCRRA for the approved funding.

#### **ISSUE**

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted ridership on the Metrolink Antelope Valley Line (AVL), resulting in service reduction. As ridership continues to rebound on the AVL, SCRRA staff are evaluating the restoration of service to pre-pandemic levels plus additional AVL service on weekdays and weekends. To accomplish this goal, SCRRA staff propose an AVL Service Restoration Project with several options for Metro's consideration to increase ridership, serve new ridership markets, and address equity needs for the Antelope Valley communities.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Metro is a member of the SCRRA, a five-county Joint Powers Authority (JPA) that operates the Metrolink regional commuter rail service (see Attachment A). The AVL historically has been the third busiest line on the Metrolink system, averaging 7,000 riders per weekday pre-pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, ridership dropped precipitously, resulting in the reduction of service from 15 weekday round trips to 11 presently. Ridership is recovering gradually, now averaging 3,000 riders per weekday, an improvement of 220% from April 2020.

The AVL provides a critical lifeline service to residents of the Antelope Valley and Santa Clarita regions. Many Antelope Valley residents live and work in Equity Focus Communities and have lower

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income and non-traditional jobs that require non-traditional, non-peak service opportunities, including weekend, late night, and reverse commute schedules. The AVL serves as a transit alternative to the congested SR-14 freeway and provides a vital link between the Antelope Valley, Santa Clarita Valley, San Fernando Valley, and the greater Los Angeles area. Restoration of AVL weekday service to pre-pandemic levels plus additional weekend service will grow AVL ridership significantly by providing more frequent service options and greater transit flexibility, offering greater levels of multimodal transportation choices in Los Angeles County.

## **DISCUSSION**

In December 2015 Metro provided \$3,000,000 in Measure R local funding as a match to a State Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program (TIRCP) grant to purchase two locomotives for dedicated service expansion on the AVL, including late night and more mid-day and reverse commute services. However, due to the COVID pandemic, the AVL service expansion, planned to be implemented in April 2020, did not happen. Instead, service was reduced from 15 weekday round trips to 8 weekday round trips. As ridership started to recover, service was increased to 11 weekday round trips in April 2022.

In the post-pandemic environment, travel patterns have shifted from the traditional peak hour commuter services to Los Angeles Union Station (LAUS). Metrolink is experiencing more mid-day, off-peak, late-night, reverse commute, and weekend ridership growth. At the June 2023 SCRRA Board meeting, LA County Supervisor and LA Metro and SCRRA Board Member Kathryn Barger requested that SCRRA prepare options for full restoration of weekday service on the AVL and provide them to Metro for consideration in time to implement service adjustments in October 2023. Service restoration would support the steady growth of post-pandemic ridership gains, provide additional public transit service options to Antelope Valley residents, provide access to new mid-day, reverse commute, and late-night markets, provide equity benefits to disadvantaged communities, and fulfill the TIRCP grant requirement to increase service on the AVL.

In response, SCRRA staff created three weekday service restoration and expanded weekend service options which were shared with Metro staff. The primary criteria for evaluating these options are as follows:

- Do the additional trains provide new peak services to/from LAUS?
- Do the additional trains fill in gaps in mid-day service?
- Do the additional trains serve evening, late night, reverse commute, and new markets?
- What are the equity benefits to disadvantaged communities?
- Do the additional trains go from LAUS to Santa Clarita only or all the way to Lancaster?
- What is the projected ridership growth?
- What is the projected cost to Metro to fund the restored service?

All three service restoration options provide strong ridership growth, excellent overall benefits, and more efficient utilization of existing train crews and rolling stock train sets. Each option targets a slightly different market, with the overall goal to restore service to pre-pandemic levels and move scheduling towards pulse clockface hourly service in each direction throughout the weekday. All

service expansion options are consistent with SCRRA's Southern California Optimized Rail Expansion (SCORE) Program, which envisions implementing 30-minute pulsed bi-directional service on the AVL to Santa Clarita and hourly pulsed bi-directional service to Lancaster by 2030.

The following table summarizes the three service restoration options, which are described in detail in Attachment B:

Table 1  
SCRRA Service Restoration Options

| <i>Service Restoration Criteria</i>           | <i>Option 1</i> | <i>Option 2</i> | <i>Option 3</i>  |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Number of new round trips                     | 4               | 4               | 4                |
| New peak service to/from LAUS?                | Yes             | Yes             | No               |
| Fill in midday gaps in service?               | Yes             | Yes             | Yes              |
| Late night service?                           | No              | No              | <b>Yes</b>       |
| New markets served?                           | Minimal         | More            | <b>Most</b>      |
| Equity benefits to transit dependent?         | Yes             | Yes             | <b>Yes/Most</b>  |
| No. of trains to Lancaster (end of line)      | 3 of 8          | 4 of 8          | <b>5 of 9</b>    |
| Projected ridership growth *                  | 35% - 39%       | 31% - 36%       | <b>31% - 39%</b> |
| Estimated Subsidy Increase to Metro (FY 24) * | \$1,317,461     | \$1,839,336     | \$1,682,842      |

*\*Ridership and cost estimates include additional weekend service and armed security*

Additional Weekend Service

SCRRA currently operates six weekend round trips (RT) on the AVL. The post-pandemic environment has shifted traditional peak-hour, weekday travel patterns, resulting in increased weekend ridership recovery. With fewer connecting local bus service trips available in the Antelope Valley on weekends than during the week, the addition of Metrolink AVL service on weekends will better connect residents in the AVL to the greater Los Angeles region, providing much needed transit connectivity.

As part of the Antelope Valley Service Restoration Project, SCRRA performed a comprehensive overhaul proposal of the AVL weekend schedule to adopt pulse scheduling, as implemented during the week, to increase connectivity and provide more frequent service options. As proposed, service would increase from 6 RTs to 12 RTs on the weekends, resulting in near-hourly service from LAUS to/from Santa Clarita, and almost bi-hourly service to/from Lancaster.

Due to crew and equipment limitations, most of the proposed new weekend service would be between LAUS and Santa Clarita only. All new trains originating or terminating in Santa Clarita would be closely coordinated with Antelope Valley Transit Authority and Santa Clarita Transit for timed transfers and efficient connections to complete journeys to Santa Clarita and the Antelope Valley. The AVL weekend service would also be timed to provide efficient 18-minute pulse connections at LAUS to/from the San Bernardino Line. SCRRA estimates the proposed new weekend service will increase ridership by 41% - 44% over current weekend ridership. Costs for the weekend service are

included in the cost estimates provided in Table 1.

### Service Restoration Option 3

All service restoration options provide excellent overall benefits; however, Option 3 is recommended by both Metro staff and SCRRA staff as it accomplishes the following:

- Increases the number of trains traveling all the way to Lancaster instead of originating in/terminating at Santa Clarita.
- Serves new markets, including evening, late night, and reverse trains back to LAUS.
- Provides overall benefits to the most equity focused, disadvantaged communities.

### **DETERMINATION OF SAFETY IMPACT**

Approval of this item will provide funding for additional Metrolink AVL operations that will be operated in compliance with applicable Federal Railroad Administration, California Public Utilities Commission, and other regulatory requirements.

### **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

The total revenues, total expenses, and net costs to Metro, including armed security on the evening and late-night trains, are included in the cost estimate provided in Attachment B. Additionally, the \$1,682,842 requested funding amount is for service from October 23, 2023, through June 30, 2024. The recommended option's (Option 3) annualized costs (\$1,584,977) are estimated to be less for a full year due to strong annualized ridership growth following the start-up of this new service for the remainder of FY 2023-24.

SCRRA has reported that Metro's unspent operations funding is sufficient to fund for this fiscal year. These funds are designated for commuter rail only and are not eligible to be used for Metro bus and rail operations.

### Possible Use of FY 2022-23 Unspent Funds

SCRRA is projecting an underutilization of Operating funding for FY 2022-23. The final amount will not be known until the fiscal year-end audit is completed in late 2023. Available FY 2022-23 unspent Operating funds would be used first to fund the service restoration and expansion. Should the FY 2022-23 unspent funds not be sufficient to fund the entire \$1,682,842 required for service restoration and expansion, new Proposition C and/or Measure M commuter rail funds would be used, as needed, and applied to the FY24 Q3 subsidy.

### **EQUITY PLATFORM**

Approval of re-programming will support the Metrolink AVL commuter rail operations, providing residents, workers, students, and families with a regional public transportation option to access jobs, resources, and services across the greater Los Angeles region. Metrolink enables residents who may not be able to afford to live in high-cost areas to access quality jobs and services in those areas while living in more affordable neighborhoods. These neighborhoods include Equity Focus Communities, such as Lancaster/Palmdale, and the East San Fernando Valley along the Metrolink

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AVL. Riders on the Metrolink AVL have the lowest annual average household income (\$41,000) of any of the seven lines in the Metrolink system. Seven of the eleven stations along the AVL are defined as serving low-income communities. Also, low-income riders who participate in Metrolink's new Mobility-4-All Program, which offers California Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cardholders a 50% discount on any Metrolink ticket or pass, will be able to easily benefit from the increased service on the AVL.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS**

Recommendation A supports the Metro Vision 2028 Strategic Plan goals 1, 4, and 5 as follows:

- Goal 1.2: Invest in a world-class transit system that is reliable, convenient, and attractive to more users for more trips;
- Goal 4.1: Work with partners to build trust and make decisions that support the goals of the Vision 2028 Plan;
- Goal 5.2: Exercise good public policy judgment and sound fiscal stewardship.

## **ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**

An alternative to Recommendation A would be to implement Option 1 or 2 instead of Option 3. This is not recommended since Option 3 performs best in serving new markets, including evening and late night, and provides maximum benefits to equity-focused, disadvantaged communities.

Another alternative is not to go forward with any service restoration at this time. This alternative is not recommended since Metro provided dedicated funding for locomotives for service expansion on the AVL, the TIRCP grant was awarded based on a commitment to expand service, and this action is consistent with the overall SCORE Program. Additionally, the new markets served on the AVL, benefits to economically disadvantaged communities, and strong ridership - all packaged to utilize crews and equipment in a highly cost-efficient manner - are all positive outcomes of Option 3.

Another option is to go forward with weekday service restoration, but not add the weekend service expansion. This is not recommended since the weekend crews, equipment, and service proposal are packaged with the weekday service restoration to achieve maximum efficiencies, ridership growth, and service expansion in the most efficient manner for all seven days of the week. If Metro does not go forward with the weekend service expansion, the overall ridership growth benefits and subsidy impacts would be less efficient for weekday service restoration only.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Subject to Board approval, SCRRA will implement the AVL weekday service restoration and add weekend service effective October 23, 2023. A robust marketing campaign will be implemented to communicate the service restoration and new weekend service on the AVL to the riders. The service will be evaluated for ridership, connections to other services, and overall effectiveness, and can be adjusted in the future.

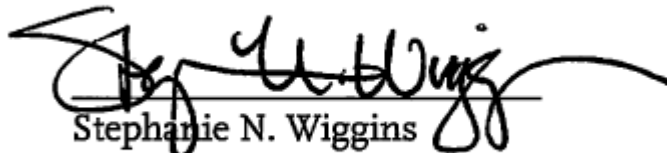
## **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment A - Metrolink Commuter Rail System Map

Attachment B - Antelope Valley Line Service Restoration Project (Options 1, 2, and 3)

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