



Board Report

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Agenda Number: 26.

**OPERATIONS, SAFETY, AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE  
APRIL 17, 2025**

**SUBJECT: RESPONSE TO MOTION 49: EXPANDING THE LIFE PROGRAM THROUGH TECHNOLOGY**

**ACTION: APPROVE RECOMMENDATION**

**RECOMMENDATION**

CONSIDER:

- A. RECEIVING AND FILING an update on the Low Income Fare is Easy (LIFE) Program in response to Board Motion 49, Expanding the LIFE Program Through Technology Motion; and
- B. AUTHORIZING the Chief Executive Officer to negotiate and execute all agreements, contract awards, including contract modifications, in an amount not to exceed \$600,000 for software development and/or integration to expand the LIFE Program Through Technology.

**ISSUE**

On July 25, 2024, the Metro Board passed Motion 49 by Directors Mitchell, Sandoval, Solis, Najarian, Dupont-Walker, and Bass related to the Low Income Fare is Easy (LIFE) Program and required staff to report back on opportunities to expand its enrollment strategies through cross-agency collaboration.

**BACKGROUND**

At its June 2024 meeting, the Board approved TAP Plus ), which will expand and upgrade the capabilities of Metro’s fare payment system to match the features available at other transit systems around the country and the world. These improvements will include acceptance of credit and debit cards as payment on buses and at rail stations, as well as a new account-based system that makes it easier for current and new customers to sign up and use TAP while making it easier for riders to access free fares and discounts like GoPass and LIFE program.

At its July 2024 meeting, the Board approved Motion 49 (Attachment A), Expanding the LIFE Program through Technology Motion by Directors Mitchell, Sandoval, Solis, Najarian, Dupont-Walker and Bass. This motion directed the Chief Executive Officer to:

- 1. Include social benefit cards as fare media as part of Phase II account-based system launch of

TAP Plus.

2. Coordinate with relevant federal, state, and County agencies, such as the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, to make necessary technical and system upgrades to TAP in order to:
  - a. Enroll members into LIFE upon qualification without undergoing an additional LIFE application
  - b. Enable social benefit cards (when upgraded to contactless EMV - Europay, Master card, Visa) to be used in lieu of Metro fare media to access the Metro's system and LIFE's free and discounted rides.
3. Report back with an update on the LIFE program enrollment strategy and TAP system upgrades, including a progress update on the above that includes but is not limited to:
  - a. Social benefit programs identified for automatic LIFE enrollment, including availability of a social benefit card
  - b. Technical and system upgrades along with supportive state or federal legislative actions required to enable utilization of social benefit cards as fare media by respective social benefit programs
  - c. Capabilities and upgrade requirements to Metro's TAP system to use social benefit cards.
  - d. A plan to implement automatic LIFE enrollment and social benefit card utilization as fare media
4. Include a specific section outlining progress on enabling TAP system compatibility with social benefit card utilization as fare media in all future board reports on TAP Plus upgrades.

On August 6, 2024, a similar Board motion was passed by the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors requesting that the Department of Public Social Services work with Metro to determine feasibility of cross technological enhancements to support Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cardholders.

## **DISCUSSION**

Staff from Metro and the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) met to evaluate possible options and technological upgrades needed to deliver cross-department enhancements to support LIFE auto enrollments and use of EBT cards on buses and trains. These meetings have continued monthly for the last six months between various Metro staff from TAP, LIFE Program, and Information Technology Services (ITS), and staff from DPSS and the Office of Los Angeles County Chief Administrative Office.

The following items were considered:

1. With the launch of TAP Plus, the Metro fare system will be able to accept debit and credit cards. However, in order for an EBT card to be used to enable free or discounted fare, it card would need to be registered for the LIFE discount in Metro's system. Due to DPSS policies, the EBT card cannot be registered into a third-party system.
2. Metro staff from Customer Experience and TAP evaluated DPSS social benefit programs and cards (CalWorks, CalFresh, Medi-Cal) as potential options for automatic

LIFE enrollment and utilization as a payment method on the Metro system.

- a. Automatic enrollment through these social benefit programs would require Metro and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to establish data-sharing agreements. DPSS and CDSS staff have determined that they cannot legally share data with Metro under the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) rules; data sharing is only allowed for the purposes of determining SNAP eligibility. Additional issues included concerns with privacy rules and fraud prevention. As such, Metro is unable to implement auto-enrollment for eligible EBT customers, and EBT cards cannot be used as a form of fare media. Instead, DPSS and CDSS customers have to fill out a separate LIFE application and utilize their LIFE-enrolled TAP card to access a discounted or free fare.

DPSS has volunteers working onsite in 21 of their 26 offices to register DPSS clients into the LIFE Program. Twelve of these offices are actively enrolling clients, nine are experiencing staffing/volunteer changes, and Metro staff are working with the other five to begin offering the service.

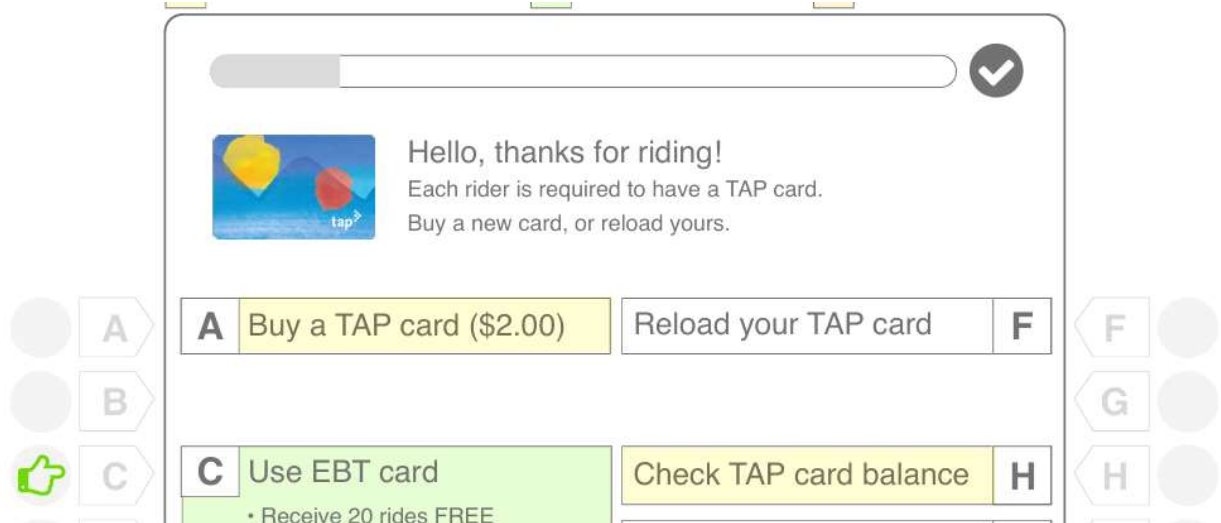
When a new LIFE user applies at a DPSS office, they are notified via e-mail or phone within 3-5 business days that their application has been approved or if additional items are needed. Once they receive approval, customers can begin using their existing TAP card, whether plastic or virtual, immediately. If they have requested a new TAP card through the LIFE registration process, it may take up to 7-10 business days to be mailed to them or their DPSS office. Metro has offered to provide the volunteers in the DPSS offices with blank TAP cards to use as for the registration process to ensure the shortest wait time, but DPSS has declined, due to not wanting to store items with cash value.

### Resolution

Understanding these barriers, Metro staff determined an alternate path forward to support future integration with a social benefit card. This approach includes verification of valid EBT cards for LIFE discounts on *taptogo.net* and at Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs).

Similar to existing programs offered by Metrolink at ticket vending machines and Metro Bikeshare at their website, Metro can offer valid EBT cardholders a one-time, free LIFE 20-Ride benefit on a TAP card. When receiving this benefit, EBT customers will also be encouraged, to sign up for the standard LIFE application process via a website link or QR code on the receipt, to continue receiving monthly benefits. Customers utilizing the one-time benefit will receive a complimentary new TAP card at the TVM. Customers will also be able to enter an EBT card and TAP card number on *Taptogo.net* to receive the one-time benefit.

This is a one-time benefit that would encourage LIFE enrollment to receive ongoing benefits, because without LIFE registration, Metro will lose important data about user demographics that is gathered through that process. This solution is expected to be implemented by winter 2025.



The cost of software development to make this change at the TVMs is estimated at \$600,000. This amount is included in the amount already budgeted for TVM upgrades. Metro is working with Cubic to get a change notice with the more specific details regarding the portion of cost for this recommendation,

### **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

The preliminary cost for software development to integrate social benefit card verification at Metro Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) is estimated in an amount not to exceed \$600,000 and will be covered by the Life-of-Project (LOP) budget of Project # 207143 - TVM Software Upgrades under Cost Center 3020 - TAP. If implemented, this new benefit is anticipated to support more than a million qualifying EBT cardholders. Ridership may increase on bus and rail and add unanticipated costs to Metro and the LIFE Program budget.

#### Impact to Budget

The source of funding is Proposition C 40%, which is eligible for bus and rail operating or capital expenses.

### **EQUITY PLATFORM**

Discount and reduced fare transit programs, like LIFE, are Metro’s investment in social mobility and an important tool to assist in the fight against income and health inequality. These programs, which include enrollments, outreach, partnerships with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), and taxi vouchers for individuals with short-term/immediate transit needs, make Metro more accessible to riders facing financial and other barriers, while providing financial relief from the ever-rising cost of living.

TAP upgrades such as instant verification of valid EBT cards at TVM machines and on taptogo.net are designed to further support low-income households who are receiving necessary social service

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benefits through DPSS but are not yet invested into social mobility programs like LIFE. This resolution will provide short term financial relief while also encouraging EBT card hold users to sign up for LIFE to receive longer term benefits, making Metro and its transit partner agencies accessible to more riders and at the same time reducing transportation burdens where possible. This effort also aligns with Pillar 3 “Focus and Deliver” of Metro’s Equity Platform Framework to operate in a manner by removing barriers and increasing access to opportunity for all.

### **VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED OUTCOME**

VMT and VMT per capita in Los Angeles County are lower than national averages, the lowest in the SCAG region, and on the lower end of VMT per capita statewide, with these declining VMT trends due in part to Metro’s significant investment in rail and bus transit.\* Metro’s Board-adopted VMT reduction targets align with California’s statewide climate goals, including achieving carbon neutrality by 2045. To ensure continued progress, all Board items are assessed for their potential impact on VMT.

As part of these ongoing efforts, this item is expected to contribute to further reductions in VMT. This item supports Metro’s systemwide strategy to reduce VMT through customer experience activities that will improve and further encourage transit ridership, ridesharing, and active transportation by facilitating use of the TAP system and reducing barriers to transit for low-income residents and social benefit recipients. Metro’s Board-adopted VMT reduction targets were designed to build on the success of existing investments, and this item aligns with those objectives.

\*Based on population estimates from the United States Census and VMT estimates from Caltrans’ Highway Performance Monitoring System (HPMS) data between 2001-2019.

### **IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS**

These programs support Metro’s Strategic Plan Goal 3) Enhance communities and lives through mobility and access to opportunity, and Goal 4) Transform LA County through collaboration and leadership. Metro will continue to work toward providing accessible and inclusive services for the residents of Los Angeles County.

### **ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**

The Board could choose not to proceed with the recommended solution. Staff does not recommend such an action as it would impede on the agency’s ability to achieve Board-directed goals to continue to enhance and expand services, as well provide a level of service for all of Los Angeles County residents.

### **NEXT STEPS**

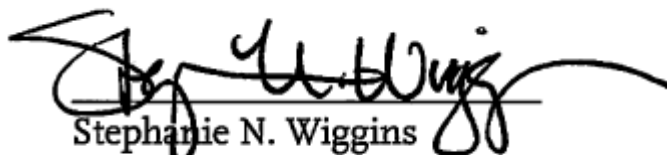
Upon Board approval, staff will proceed with the recommended solution to integrate verification of social benefit cards at the Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) and on *taptogo.net*. Staff will also continue to work with Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) and other social service agencies to consider other options to expand the LIFE program to reach riders across Los Angeles County.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment A - Board Motion 49, Expanding the LIFE Program through Technology

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