

FastPass or Slow Fail?

Taking the Long Way Around on Muni

The Municipal Transportation Agency, which oversees Muni, was less than forthcoming about the way it did business last year. And judging by more recent disclosures, this year's not getting off to a good start, either.



Getting there is half the ulcer. A shot of Market Street leaving downtown at the evening commute hour.

BY ROSEMARY REGELLO

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An audit by the city controller's office has found that six percent of scheduled Muni service did not take place during the fiscal year that ended last July. The ongoing inquiry has also revealed that Muni's bus fleet is in poor repair, a situation MTA critics attribute to an understaffing of mechanics.

Critical of recent revelations about MTA's poor on-time service record, activists have accused the mayor's office of usurping power over the agency to further political ends and basing new transit construction on the needs of big downtown development interests.

In January, MTA Deputy Director Stuart Sunshine was promoted to Mayor Gavin Newsom's senior staff, where he will oversee infrastructure and transportation

policy. Despite his change of employer, nearly half of Sunshine's \$210,000 annual salary will still come from the transit agency.

At a February 20th board meeting, MTA Commissioner Michael Kasolas objected to the unusual pay arrangement, arguing that it will only add to the agency's growing deficit, expected to reach \$75 million this year. However, a majority of board members agreed to continuing paying Sunshine.

According to Tom Radulovich, executive director of the nonprofit group Livable City, the shift of control over Muni's fortunes can be traced to a ballot initiative passed eight years ago. Proposition E merged Muni with the city's parking division to create a new Municipal Transportation Agency.

The measure also stipulated that the MTA would operate mostly independent of oversight from the Board of Supervisors.

The merger was backed by the Chamber of Commerce, the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) and several advocacy groups, including Livable City.

The idea, Radulovich explains, was to empower the new entity to make tough budget decisions considered too volatile for politicians facing re-election every couple of years. Under the new rules, the Supervisors are limited to setting Muni fares, parking fees and fines. They also have the power to reject an MTA budget, but only with a two-thirds vote.

Although Prop. E sounded promising in theory, Radulovich now has regrets.

"What we got was the loss of accountability," he says, "but we didn't really get the independence."

The mayor, who appoints MTA's board of directors, is said

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to be wielding almost dictatorial powers over the agency. Sunshine and other deputies at City Hall communicate orders directly to MTA staffers, while major funding decisions typically receive a rubber stamp from the board.

Adding to critics' concerns, many of the board members have limited or no background in public transportation, and at least one represents an organization that receives a substantial share of its own funding from the city. Making waves could jeopardize future grants or simply result in a short tenure on the board. Commissioner Kasolas, for instance, had to vacate his seat in March when Newsom decided not to reappoint him.

"Fixing Muni doesn't appear to be a priority for the mayor," says Radulovich, who has served on the board of directors for BART for the past 11 years.

In its recent audit, City Controller Ed Harrington found that Muni is getting slower at the rate of one percent per year. The average speed of transit vehicles now stands at about eight miles per hour, far slower than any other major U.S. city. In New York,

buses move at 14 m.p.h.

Slow travel times translate into higher operating costs, since drivers complete fewer runs in the course of a work shift. In his first report issued last July, Harrington claimed that if Muni increased its speed to 10 m.p.h., it could carry an average of 82 passengers per hour per bus, up from the current 62. That feat might reduce operating costs by as much as 20 percent.

No one seems to be listening, however. The proposed budget for 2007-2008 shows a decrease in the Operations and Services division of 2.5 percent, although the MTA again says there won't be any service cuts. By contrast, Finance and Administration is set to receive a 26 percent increase in funding. A section of the budget entitled "Office of the Executive Director" shows an increase of six percent.

The board of directors is set to get a 50 percent boost, even though the commissioners themselves only earn a stipend of \$100 for meeting attendance. While it's not clear how the extra money will be spent, MTA has contracted with a consulting firm to help the board develop a "comprehensive strate-

gic plan that identifies our shared vision for our future success", according to a February 14th memo on the subject.

A new bus storage facility is under construction near the the Interstate 280 interchange at Cesar Chavez. The audit cited lack of garage space as the reason Muni buses are not being maintained.

Pilot Study or Public Relations Gimmick?

In 1999, as part of Proposition E, voters approved a minimum standard of on-time performance of 85 percent to be achieved by 2007. In February, the MTA announced the systemwide average was 70 percent, about the same as it was eight years ago.

In 2005, Deputy Director Sunshine told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the voter mandated goal was "unrealistic in that it failed to take into account such things as weather and roadwork."

The MTA has since graduated to more plausible explanations, citing traffic congestion, inadequate enforcement of double-parking laws, and the need for more dedicated transit lanes.

Nevertheless, MTA chief executive officer Nathaniel Ford says the 85 percent on-time goal is unachievable for the foreseeable future and has set a new goal of 75 percent.

Livable City's Radulovich rejects that lowering of expectations. He points to a recent experiment conducted on the 1-California line as evidence that the voter-approved minimum for performance may not be as elusive as Ford maintains.

During the course of the 3-month study, on-time performance along California Street climbed to 88 percent. Ford told the press



The correct way to board a Muni bus. Back-boarding remains routine on overcrowded routes and sometimes drivers encourage it.

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that the feat was accomplished in part by fully staffing the route with drivers and coaches. Parking control officers were also enlisted to clear out double-parked vehicles, while Muni supervisors monitored bus movement to make sure there was no bunching up.

The 1-line transports an estimated 30,000 riders each day.

Although heralding the experiment's results as a milestone, Ford said the improvements cost \$168,000 for just three months' time. Multiplying a projected annual cost of \$750,000 by 80 bus and rail lines, he concluded that the expense was too high to put the formula into practice system-wide.

(The *San Francisco Examiner* noted that an estimated \$88,000 in parking citations written during the study, if collected, would offset much of that price tag.)

In spite of his gloomy determination, Ford appeared with Mayor Newsom for a photo op on March 2nd, touting a similar experiment now underway along Church Street in Noe Valley. The J-Church is one of Muni's slowest lines, with a 62 percent on-time rate for an estimated 19,000 riders.

The second pilot study will end in July.

Diversionsary Tactics

In an attempt to account for its mounting deficit, the MTA announced in late February that it was experiencing a serious problem of fare evasion from those who ride



Tom Radulovich

fare evasion from those who ride



Bus stop at 6th and Geary at 9:30 a.m. on a weekday. A coach stopped here a few seconds earlier, but many of these riders couldn't get on because it was full.

Muni. A story on Page One in the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran under the headline "No Fare: Cheats on Muni - Passengers who don't pay are costing the S.F. transit agency millions."

According to the article, CEO Ford waved a fistful of confiscated counterfeit monthly FastPasses to demonstrate the point during the MTA's February 20th board meeting. He exclaimed that the MTA budget shortfall could be traced in part to the bogus passes and the more common practice of sneaking onto buses. His staff calculated that Muni was losing as much as \$30 million annually due to the non-payers.

To counter the problem, MTA is in the process of deploying a new corps of "Proof of Payment" officers. By next December, Ford expects to have 64 employees on the payroll. So far, the teams have primarily policed the subway system, inspecting fare passes and transfers. The fine for those caught runs from \$120 to \$500. (Most of that hefty tab, if paid, goes to the courts.)

S.F. Chron Reporter Rachel Gordon noted that Muni fare inspectors issued 9,500 citations last

year. While the actual amount of money collected in fines for 2006 could not be ascertained for this story, the new budget states that the agency anticipated \$50,000 in collections for this fiscal year and \$157,000 in 2007-2008.

The article cites a study conducted in 2004 and 2005, when MTA observers claim they found between 54 and 73 percent of riders at the Civic Center, Montgomery and Embarcadero Metro stations jumping turnstiles, ducking under them or walking through side gates without paying.

In addition, an investigation of the 30-Stockton line found that the average \$377 dollars daily fare box collection on each bus spiked to \$436 when fare inspectors were present. However, part of that difference was traced to broken fare boxes. A letter writer to the *San Francisco Examiner* also pointed out that the cost of employing each fare inspector far exceeds the potential \$60 daily savings on the bus line being monitored.

The MTA has additionally cited the large number of riders who board the back of buses as an obstacle to fare collection. While

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the double-car motor coaches on Geary, Van Ness and Mission streets are routinely subject to back-boarding, it's unclear how many of those riders already carry FastPasses and valid transfers.

It's likely MTA officials factored in the loss of some revenue when it ordered these vehicles from the manufacturer. The longer buses allow Muni to run the equivalent of two coaches along a route for the price of one driver.

Besides the added payroll for the new proof of payment officers, the new budget includes funds to provide the new recruits with two-way radio equipment. A contract was recently negotiated with Motorola. The cost: \$371,000.

Ribbon Cutting versus Cutting the Fat

The much-heralded new T-Third Street light rail commenced service in January, operating along Third Street between downtown and Hunters Point. While area merchants have been kicking up their heels with glee at the new transit corridor, not everyone is smiling.

In particular, Chinatown merchants are peeved by the MTA's lack of progress on the Central Subway Project. The subway will extend rail service from Caltrain to the neighborhood, with other stops at Moscone Center, Market Street and Union Square.

The area encompassing San Francisco's Chinatown is considered one of the most densely concentrated in the United States. Sardined-packed 30-Stockton and 45-Union buses have inched along that pedestrian and car-choked corridor for decades.

In 2002, the Federal Transportation Agency approved \$762 million to help build a new subway line. Yet four years later, the MTA remains stalled on the preliminary

plans. Some Chinese business leaders have accused the agency of pandering to South Beach and Hunter's Point developers who are banking on the new T-Line adding value to the thousands of condominiums coming up for sale this year and next. Commercial developers have broken ground on some of vast acreage in the same area. A major mixed-income housing development is just beginning construction in the old

Hunters Point Shipyard.

Yet the T-Line is already up and running. Last year the MTA hired a consultant, Tom Matoff, to evaluate its plan for the project, which is referred to as the Third Street T-Line – Second Phase.) CEO Ford said the agency needed the input of an independent observer.

Matoff, who is a former planning director for Muni, concluded

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Somebody's getting a free ride, alright...

In the wake of all the dramatic pronouncements about operating deficits, fare evasion and the need for more Proof of Payment inspectors to issue \$500 citations, Mayor Newsom suddenly appeared before the press on March 7th offering free Muni service to all.

"It may be a monumental, terrible idea," he conceded, but he has asked the MTA to look into it anyway.

The MTA anticipates fare revenues of \$138 million this year, accounting for 22 percent of its operating budget. Yet in an interview with KTVU, Newsom claimed this princely sum represented less money than it costs to actually collect.

In addition to cash handling personnel and an accounting division to count it all, the MTA contracts with a security agency to guard the employees who sell FastPasses and cable car tickets out of doors.

The suggestion to make Muni free is not a new one. Some cities offer free public transit as an incentive to reduce traffic in congested downtown districts. Last summer, a consultant pitched the concept to the MTA higher-ups.



Feeling Your Pain. Mayor Gavin Newsom catches a ride on a Muni bus last fall.

The idea was not implemented. Instead, the agency is investing in several million dollars worth of prepaid ticket machines on its new T-line running along Third Street.

As substitutes to the bus fare-boxes, the ticket machines will require regular maintenance and repair, more money-retrieving personnel and security officers to guard them, which will only add more non-service costs to the annual budget.

The mayor told KTVU that there was no actual plan in the works to enact his Free Muni proposal. Random pedestrians interviewed by the station claimed he was just trolling for votes during an election year.

in December that the blue prints merited a lot more thought and revision. He cited problems with the size of the tunnel and the length of the platforms.

At that point, the feds intervened, warning MTA that it would lose the \$762 million if it did not make substantial progress towards boring a hole by September 30th.

CEO Ford has since gone back to his board and asked its members to disregard Matoff's concerns in order to move on the project. Even with the project approved, however, MTA still must line up its share of the funding. Given the current ballooning deficit, the capital drive will likely prove challenging.

Elsewhere in its realm, MTA has proposed construction of what it calls a Bus Rapid Transit system to run down Geary Boulevard, west of Franklin Street.

This project includes the construction of platforms, prepaid ticket machines, electronic signs to indicate when a bus is coming, and "high-quality bus shelters" for riders as they wait between six lanes of traffic. A second option would allow the current bus stops on streetcorners to remain.

In either case, there will be fewer bus stops overall, which may impact elderly riders and those with mobility problems.

A casual survey of patrons on the 38-Geary found the most pressing problem is not traffic or the number of stops but the lack of buses servicing the route. Approximately 55,000 Muni patrons use the 38-line each day. Most of the coach idle time, riders assert, takes place during the time passengers are disembarking or trying to board overcrowded buses.

The Bus Rapid Transit proposal calls for larger, newly designed coaches with wider aisles and exits, as well as lower floors to

facilitate easier boarding. Like a new fleet of motor coaches purchased by MTA to serve its smaller routes, these new buses may include fewer seats to accommodate a higher number of riders.

The Long Journey Home

Radulovich says Livable City continues to encourage MTA to implement simpler and more cost-effective ways to improve service.

In addition to urging CEO Ford to develop a plan for attaining the 85 percent on-time goal set by voters, the group has asked the agency to work with traffic engineers on other measures like moving bus stops to the far side of intersections (after passing through stoplights), constructing curb protrusions that allow buses to stop without pulling out of traffic, and designating more dedicated transit lanes along busy streets.

Moreover, Radulovich thinks the MTA should stop diverting operating funds into capital projects and shore up its external revenue sources before any new construction takes place.

"Politicians," he laments, "like to cut ribbons."

The other half of the MTA equation, he says, consists of reducing the budget in those areas that don't pertain to transit service, rather than those that do.

Presently a wide range of non-service related expenses are under consideration or already approved, according to minutes from recent meetings. Among them:

- ♦ A contribution of \$283,000 for a vocational training program in basic construction skills sponsored by the mayor's office.
- ♦ \$73,000 for a Philadelphia consulting firm to evaluate the "business practices" at city-owned parking garages. The cost includes \$7,000 in travel expenses.

- ♦ A Muni park to be built alongside the new bus storage facility near Cesar Chavez and Interstate 280 at a cost of about \$2 million.
- ♦ Purchase of electronic passenger counters to be installed in buses, even though most of the 17-year-old fareboxes have yet to be replaced.

Freelance writer Tom Wetzel, who reports on public transit issues, says that MTA also rents a lot of private office nowadays, which has added to its overhead. The engineering staff, for instance, was relocated from their free digs, according to Wetzel, at the Presidio bus barn several years ago. It was the height of the dot.com boom, and Wetzel says the agency signed a 10-year contract to rent a suite on Market Street for a whopping \$53 per square foot.

Unless MTA attempts to grapple with its bloated management structure, Wetzel believes San Franciscans will see more fare increases and service cuts down the road.

MTA CEO Ford took over the agency last year and is credited with bringing Atlanta's public transit system out of debt. To do that, bonds had to be refinanced, drivers were laid off and the base fare to ride a bus shot up to \$1.75.

In a detailed analysis of Muni prepared in 2005, SPUR argued that cutting service and raising fares here may only serve to make a bad situation that much worse.

Liveable City is a group dedicated to getting automobiles off the road by making public transit more attractive and streets safer for bicycle riders and pedestrians. For more info, visit their website livablecity.org.

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