

Memorandum



To: Angela Calvillo, Clerk of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors

Through: For Julie Kirschbaum, Director of Transit *Emily Williams*
Sean Kennedy, Transit Planning Manager

From: Jeffrey Tumlin, Director of Transportation *Jeffrey Tumlin*

Date: October 26, 2020

Subject: COVID-19 Muni Rail Service Adjustments and Associated Stop, Street and Parking Changes – August 22, 2020 and Fall 2020 – Project Sponsor CEQA Appeal Response

INTRODUCTION

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) submits this memorandum in support of the Statutory Exemption determination (No. 2020-007183ENV) for the COVID-19 Muni Rail Service Adjustments and Associated Stop, Street and Parking Changes – August 22, 2020 and Fall 2020, also referred to as the COVID-19 rail service changes. It is a response to two letters of appeal to the Board of Supervisors regarding the Planning Department’s issuance of a Statutory Exemption under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the project. The letter addresses topics other than those related to CEQA, which are separately discussed in the Planning Department’s appeal response memorandum.

BACKGROUND

On February 25, 2020 Mayor London Breed issued a Proclamation Declaring the Existence of a Local Emergency (COVID-19 Local Emergency Proclamation), finding that the COVID-19 pandemic posed a threat to the lives, property or welfare of the City and County and its residents. On March 16, 2020, San Francisco’s Health Officer issued a Public Health Order in response to the COVID-19 Emergency, requiring that residents shelter in place, with the only exception being for essential needs and trips. Shortly after San Francisco's shelter in place order was issued in March, the SFMTA implemented and has continued to operate the COVID-19 Muni Core Service Plan, operating limited transit service, allocating limited resources to the locations where they are most needed. Muni Metro light rail service was closed on March 30, 2020 following the Public Health Order to minimize risk to front-line staff and the community and redirect custodial resources to other facilities.

In order to respond to changes in travel demand as conditions under the health order change and transit trips are expected to increase, the SFMTA proposed to modify the COVID-19 Muni Core Service Plan by scheduling the return of a modified Muni rail service on August 22, 2020, followed by an additional J Church rail service adjustment in the Fall of 2020. To improve subway functionality and reduce train delays –an important overall goal, but particularly critical in the short term to shorten the amount of time riders spend on a train and in the subway and prevent overcrowding on trains to reduce COVID-19 exposure – the SFMTA proposed that some Muni Metro rail lines operate only on the surface and outside of the subway.

Prior to COVID-19, the Muni Metro subway experienced unacceptable levels of crowding and delay. The COVID-19 rail service changes address the structural issue underlying this delay by reducing the number of Muni Metro lines and trains that move through the subway, while maximizing the length of each train to

increase capacity and ensure adequate space for social distancing. Under the rail service plan, the J Church will terminate at Duboce Avenue and riders traveling downtown will need to transfer to the T, M or S lines at Church Station or the N Judah at Duboce and Church. In addition, the L Taraval and K Ingleside lines will be combined into an interlined LK Taraval-Ingleside line and riders on those lines will need to transfer to the T, M or S lines at West Portal Station to connect to downtown destinations. The S line would be a high-frequency shuttle in the subway that would replace the Metro lines that were removed from the subway. These Muni rail service changes necessitated temporary street, parking, and stop changes, mainly to support transfer points at West Portal and on Church Street at Market Street and at Duboce Avenue, where riders would transfer between surface rail and subway rail lines.

Overall, this project would support physical distancing, reduction of delays that increase risk of potential COVID-19 exposure, and more essential trips.

This rail service plan would provide transit service during the health emergency and is temporary in nature. Any stop, street, and parking changes implemented as part of these rail service changes will expire 120 days after the termination of the City's COVID-19 Local Emergency Proclamation. An overall transit service plan for the city following the termination of the City's COVID-19 Local Emergency will be presented to the SFMTA Board of Directors and any service associated stop, street and parking changes that requires SFMTA Board of Directors approval to be made will be sought.

While Muni Rail Service was restored on August 22, 2020, it had to be temporarily suspended on August 24, 2020 based on two unforeseen problems:

- Faulty overhead wire equipment
- An employee in the SFMTA Transportation Management Center (TMC) – the nerve center of SFMTA's rail system – tested positive for COVID-19. Through contract tracing, additional team members needed to be quarantined, leaving the TMC short staffed.

After the initial halt in rail service, the SFMTA determined that it would be prudent to delay resuming rail service to address the faulty overhead wiring in a wholistic manner and to address other maintenance issues. All rail lines are currently being substituted by shuttle buses and it is anticipated that surface rail service would start to resume by January 2021. Work to resolve the maintenance issues in the subway is currently anticipated to extend until approximately March 2021.

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 rail service changes are intended to provide additional space and reduced travel times for people making essential trips on Muni.

San Francisco's response to the pandemic has stressed the importance of social distancing, or maintaining adequate space between individuals, to control the spread of COVID-19. Muni vehicle capacity is currently reduced to enable social distancing. To improve subway functionality, prevent overcrowding on trains, and reduce train delays to reduce COVID-19 exposure, some Muni Metro rail lines would operate only on the surface as part of the COVID-19 rail service changes. This new surface operation would also allow the

SFMTA to exclusively run 2-car and 3-car trains in the Muni Metro subway, which would increase capacity to support social distancing among riders.

As part of the rail service changes, the SFMTA implemented a new temporary service plan to increase capacity and reduce delay in the subway by readjusting which train lines enter the Market Street and Twin Peaks tunnels, as described above. Devoting the tunnels to the higher capacity routes would allow the SFMTA to use the space in the subway much more efficiently and is anticipated to drastically reduce the variability in travel time within the subway, a key improvement during the current pandemic.

Given the recent reductions in both service levels and vehicle capacity, it is more critical than ever that delays be avoided, to reduce both unsafe overcrowding and "pass-ups" due to the train being full. It is also essential that transit travel times be reduced to limit the amount of time passengers must remain on vehicles. Finally, avoiding delays/reduced transit travel times allow more service to be operated using the same, limited resources, further reducing overcrowding.

Elements of the rail service changes were contemplated before the COVID-19 emergency to address longstanding reliability and crowding challenges in the Muni Metro subway. With the onset of the pandemic, it became imperative that these issues be addressed immediately on a temporary basis to prevent overcrowding and lengthy travel times that would increase the risk of potential COVID-19 exposure.

The Muni rail service changes necessitated temporary street, parking, and stop changes to support transfer points at West Portal and on Church Street at Market Street and at Duboce Avenue.

In order to accommodate safe, accessible, and seamless transfers required by the new temporary rail service, the SFMTA needed to implement temporary street, parking, and stop changes to support transfers between surface and subway rail at West Portal and at Church Street/Market Street and Church Street/Duboce Avenue (Rail Transfer Projects).

J Church

It was anticipated that the J Church would return to service in two phases. In Phase 1, beginning in August 2020, service would terminate on Church Street, immediately south of Market Street. In fall, Phase 2 would include extending the J Church north to Duboce Avenue. The phased return to service was needed so SFMTA could install temporary accessible boarding islands to accommodate the J Church terminating on Church Street at Duboce Avenue. Both phases would include a series of temporary street, parking, traffic, and transit passenger loading changes to accommodate the new service pattern.

During Phase 1, the J Church would terminate on Church Street at Market Street, and parking and traffic changes would be implemented on or around Church Street between Market and 15th streets, including the following:

- Restricting most private passenger vehicles on Church Street between 15th and Market streets to provide a safe space for J Church riders to board and disembark the light rail vehicles as they make

the transfer between the J trains and Church Street Station (Local traffic may still access this block of Church Street, including residents, business owners, and customers.)

- Portions of the curbside travel lanes on Church Street would be converted to J Church passenger loading zones to increase safety and support physical distancing for transferring riders.

The above private vehicle restriction and passenger loading zones were planned to support physical distancing for the high volume of passengers that were anticipated to use this temporary terminal stop on Church Street at Market Street. These changes were implemented in early August 2020 to support the return of rail service on August 22, 2020.

In Phase 2, it was anticipated that the J Church would terminate on Church Street at Duboce Avenue, and parking and traffic changes would be implemented on or around Church Street between Duboce Avenue and 15th Streets, including the following:

- A new inbound temporary accessible boarding island would be constructed on Church Street in the northbound direction south of Duboce Avenue to provide a direct transfer to the N Judah for J Church riders
- A new outbound transit stop and temporary accessible boarding island would be constructed on Church Street in the southbound direction just south of Market Street to provide a more direct connection to Church Street Station

To accommodate the new outbound transit stop and temporary accessible boarding island, it was anticipated that the southbound private passenger vehicle restriction on Church Street between 15th and Market streets from Phase 1 remain in place. But as stated in the Statutory Exemption, it was anticipated that SFMTA may elect to reopen the block to all northbound traffic if it determined that there is enough space for passengers to safely board and get off the train at the inbound stop at Church and Market streets.

As described above, rail service was temporarily suspended on August 24, 2020. During this bus substitution period, the J Church bus initially terminated on Church Street at Market Street, but it has since been extended to Church Street at Duboce Avenue, consistent with the planned extension of rail service in Phase 2 of the project. Based on the reduced volumes of passengers transferring at the Church and Market streets stop resulting from the route extension to Church Street at Duboce Avenue, the SFMTA determined there may be enough space for passengers to safely board and get off at the inbound Church and Market streets stop when rail service resumes, anticipated to start by January 2021. As such, the SFMTA does not expect the original northbound closure to be needed to advance transit purposes.

The northbound curb lane closure on Church Street between Market and 15th streets as part of Phase 1 provided an opportunity for businesses to set up outdoor dining through the city's Shared Spaces program. The SFMTA is currently accommodating Shared Spaces in the closed northbound traffic lane while the lane remains closed for transit purposes in Phase 1 of the project. To avoid disruption to existing users of the Shared Space, the SFMTA intends to keep the northbound curb lane closed until at least December 2020, when current Shared Space permits expire.

The use of the curb lane by businesses for outdoor dining and sales under the City's Shared Spaces program has become an important resource for some of the businesses on the block. The City is evaluating those issues and the northbound curb lane closure under the Shared Spaces program, separate from the transit project.

West Portal

The changes at West Portal to support the LK transfer includes transit passenger loading zones and wheelchair-accessible stops on Ulloa Street just west of West Portal Avenue to provide an accessible connection to West Portal Station for passengers on the LK line who will be traveling to downtown via the M Oceanview or S Shuttle. The changes also include associated bus zone relocations to create room for the new wheelchair-accessible platforms. These changes were installed in early August 2020 in advance of the August 22, 2020 return of rail service.

Informational outreach about the return of rail service was extensive, and emphasized the need to significantly reduce chronic rail delays within the subway for emergency public health reasons.

The COVID-19 rail service plan was developed based on COVID-19 emergency public health considerations. Given the importance of the return of rail service, staff implemented public communications tactics aimed to reach as many people citywide as possible, including communities near rail routes, bus routes that connect to rail routes, limited-English proficient communities, Muni dependent communities, essential workers and customers with disabilities.

- **Digital Communications:** Over the course of two months preceding the return of rail, staff published five blog posts detailing the new rail routing, bus service restoration, rail transfer point accessibility at West Portal and Church and Market streets, and announcing a new temporary rail map. These were developed as a series to maintain a drumbeat of information and public attention. The rail return blog garnered SFMTA's highest readership to date – over 34,000 unique page views. Staff emailed information on the new rail configuration and frequencies to SFMTA's digital mailing list of 65,000 subscribers. Staff also launched a project-specific website – [SFMTA.com/RailRecovery](https://www.sfmta.com/RailRecovery) – detailing information and linking to a form for community feedback.
- **Mass Distribution:** SFMTA staff worked with the city's Joint Information Center to distribute nearly 20,000 pieces of informational materials citywide, including multilingual handouts and posters. The SFMTA also deployed over 800 staff ambassadors to distribute an additional 15,000 handouts to customers at bus and rail stops, neighborhood pop-ups, community-based organizations and businesses. In addition, 2,000 extra-large car cards in six languages were installed in buses systemwide, announcing the return of rail and directing customers to [SFMTA.com/RailRecovery](https://www.sfmta.com/RailRecovery).
- **Equity Outreach:** Outreach emphasized equity, including pop-ups and informational materials drop-offs in Muni Service Equity Strategy neighborhoods, in-language newspaper ads in community newspapers and in-language public service announcements through community radio and television channels.

- **Accessibility Outreach:** To communicate the accessibility components of the new rail configuration, staff developed animations, over 600 wayfinding signs at accessible access points and an accessibility-focused blog post. The SFMTA also reached out directly to Lighthouse for the Blind and the Mayor's Office on Disability, keeping them informed about the upcoming changes and accessibility communications actions.
- **Evaluation and Feedback:** Through SFMTA.com/RailRecovery, staff directed customers to an online feedback form to register comments about the new rail configuration. The SFMTA received a total of 66 rail service related customer comments pertaining to schedule, frequency, delays, pass-ups, crowding, or service gaps. Additionally, when rail service resumes, staff will deploy a focused evaluation survey to gauge the public's reception of the COVID-19 rail service changes and solicit feedback to inform if further changes are needed and whether to pursue permanent changes to the rail network.
- **Meetings and Presentations:**
 - **7/9/20: SFMTA Citizens Advisory Committee, Transportation Work Group.**
 - **7/10/20: Senior and Disability Action, SF Transit Riders.**
 - **7/16/20: Multimodal Accessibility Advisory Committee.**
 - **7/21/20: Central City SRO Collaborative.**
 - **7/25/20: SFMTA Board.** Staff presented the rail service change plan to the SFMTA Board and received feedback from both Board members and members of the public.
 - **7/29/20: La Voz Latina Community Center**
 - **Board of Supervisors:** SFMTA has been working closely with Board of Supervisors members to address rail transit needs and concerns within their districts.

Community-based organizations, stakeholders and neighbors will be involved in shaping the process for evaluating and adjusting the COVID-19 rail service changes in real time. Based on public feedback and ongoing, on-the-ground data monitoring, the SFMTA can tweak or even remove elements of the COVID-19 rail service changes to meet the needs of the community and Muni customers.

The Rail Transfer Projects underwent extensive outreach prior to and after implementation.

Prior to implementation of the Rail Transfer Projects, and building on the extensive city-wide messaging program developed for the rail service changes noted above, SFMTA staff undertook additional targeted outreach for the transfer points that included merchants, residents, community groups, advocacy organizations, neighborhood organizations, and elected officials. This effort focused particularly on proposed changes to parking and loading, as well as to vehicular and pedestrian travel patterns.

Staff held virtual open house meetings focused individually on both of the transfer locations to explain the projects in detail, answer questions from the community, and solicit feedback. Meetings were advertised through multilingual signage at the Rail Transfer Projects locations, multilingual mailers, emails and on social media. To provide broad access, participants were able to join online or by phone.

To inform the public of the proposed rail transfer improvements, SFMTA staff produced direct-mail pieces that were delivered to over 5,000 addresses in the project areas, hung posters in the locations where the projects were proposed, sent e-mails to hundreds of individuals and organizations, created project websites with documentation and details, and promoted methods for public feedback that included both phone and email. Each of the projects held virtual community meetings at which information about the Rail Transfer Projects was presented, and members of the public provided feedback and asked questions.

Among the groups SFMTA engaged with during the outreach and planning of the Rail Transfer Projects were Senior and Disability Action, the Multimodal Accessibility Advisory Committee, the Transportation Working Group, Walk SF, the SF Bike Coalition, and the San Francisco Transit Riders. To ensure that all riders have an accessible transfer, accessibility enhancements were designed both for the West Portal area and at Church and Market streets.

To promote information and gather feedback on the West Portal LK Transfer changes, SFMTA staff leveraged ongoing relationships with individuals and organizations in the West Portal neighborhood and along the L Taraval route based on existing work in that area. Staff met regularly with the West Portal Merchants and the Greater West Portal Neighborhood Association as well as Supervisor Norman Yee office leading up to the implementation of the West Portal LK Transfer changes. Staff also conducted door to door outreach in the impacted areas where changes in loading zones, bus zone relocation, and parking removal were proposed. In addition to the two virtual community meetings held, individual outreach to property owners was also conducted to solicit feedback and address concerns.

For the J Church Transfer changes, all merchants on Church Street from 15th Street to Duboce Avenue were contacted either by phone, email, flyers left at locations, or in-person (for those businesses that were open). In addition to the virtual community meeting, staff met virtually with property owners, neighborhood organizations, merchants and residents. In coordination with Supervisor Rafael Mandelman's office, SFMTA worked with neighborhood stakeholders to develop a project design that met the need for transit operations and customer safety, as well as being responsive to merchant and resident needs. The SFMTA has made numerous adjustments to the project to address stakeholder feedback, including updating signage to more clearly welcome local pickup and delivery, adding short term parking spaces, adjusting enforcement strategies, supporting local merchants in their applications for Shared Space permits, and not implementing a proposed left turn restriction into the Safeway parking lot on Church Street.

The COVID-19 rail service changes were authorized by the Director of Transit and the associated Rail Transfer changes were authorized by the San Francisco Transportation Code.

Due to the urgent need to restore rail service to reduce crowding on the city's transit network, the COVID-19 rail service changes and associated Rail Transfer changes were approved on a temporary emergency basis. The Director of Transit had authority to approve these temporary transit service changes on August 19, 2020 through a series of service bulletins as summarized in service bulletin 2020-OB-0696.

The City Traffic Engineer also has authority to approve certain temporary emergency traffic modifications pursuant Section 201 of the San Francisco Transportation Code. Section 201(a)(5) of the Transportation Code allows the City Traffic Engineer to “(i)nstall or remove any temporary Traffic Control Devices on any Street for the purpose of controlling Parking or traffic during emergencies, special conditions or events, construction work, short-term testing, or when necessary for the protection of public health and safety. Such temporary Traffic Control Devices shall be removed when they are no longer required following the emergency, condition, or event.” As a result, the associated parking and street changes as part of the Rail Transfer changes are authorized under the San Francisco Transportation Code and were approved by the City Traffic Engineer, as needed, on August 12, 2020. In response to the J Church Transfer changes, a portion of Church Street was closed to vehicular traffic under the City Traffic Engineer’s emergency authority. It was anticipated that the SFMTA Board would affirm this temporary street closure on September 15, 2020; however, due to the fact the rail service did not resume as anticipated, that affirmation was delayed. In the interim, the Shared Spaces program has issued permits to several businesses to occupy portions of the street through December, 2020. As a result, this portion of Church Street has remained closed to vehicular traffic.

The rail transfer changes are needed to support the August rail service changes and are not part of the TETL project.

The Rail Transfer Projects were partially identified in the Transportation Recovery Plan: COVID-19 Emergency Temporary Transit Lanes and COVID-19 Emergency Temporary Bikeways (TETL) project. Following SFMTA’s finalization of its modified Muni Rail Service plan after approval of the TETL project, it was determined that the Muni Rail Service plan and associated stop, street, and parking changes including the Rail Transfer projects were outside the scope of the TETL project’s environmental review. The SFMTA formally clarified that distinction between the TETL project and the Muni Rail Service plan including the Rail Transfer Projects in a letter submitted to the San Francisco Planning Department on August 7, 2020.

As a result, the rail service plan and Rail Transfer Projects received their own environmental clearance separate from the TETL project (Case No. 2020-005472ENV). The Rail Transfer project changes were not approved via the TETL project’s delegated authority.

Quick, responsive action that can be iterated upon is imperative during this public health crisis.

During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, the SFMTA has moved quickly to ensure continued transportation safety. The COVID-19 rail service changes are an opportunity to respond to emergency transportation challenges and ensure transportation safety and public health during this unprecedented time. The COVID-19 rail service changes use temporary measures to protect transit riders from crowding and reduce risk of exposure to COVID-19.

Accordingly, we ask that the San Francisco Board of Supervisors uphold the use of a California Environmental Quality Act Statutory Exemption to allow for the continued implementation of the COVID-19 rail service and associated stop, street and parking changes.