

# 1 INTRODUCTION

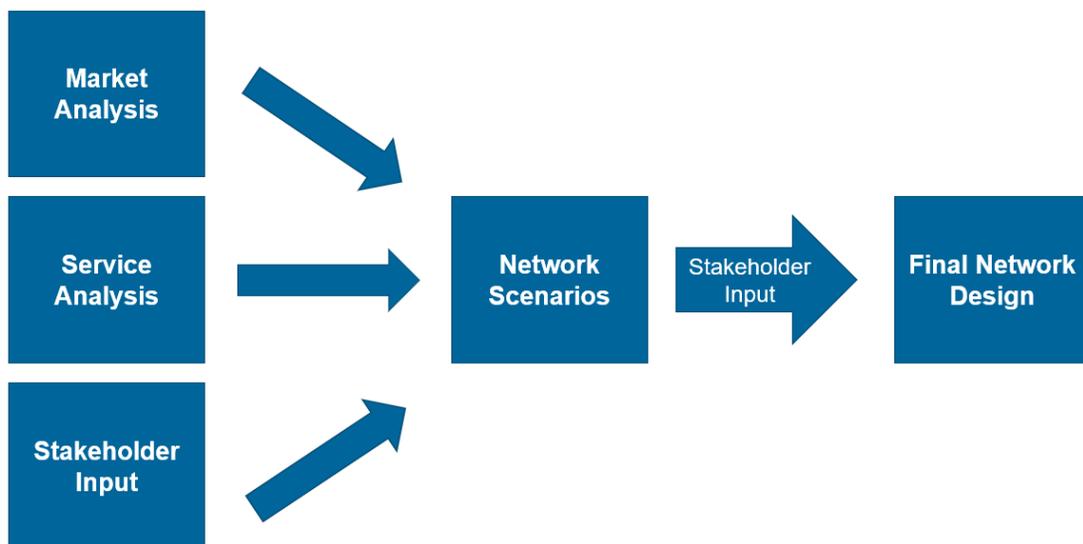
## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Stanislaus Regional Transit Authority was formed on July 1, 2021 with the merger of Modesto Area Transit (MAX) and Stanislaus Regional Transit (StaRT). Known initially as StanRTA, and now newly branded as “Ride the S” or “The S”, the system includes traditional fixed routes and commuter services, along with demand response services and ADA paratransit. The former StaRT services provided transit service in the suburban and outlying areas of Stanislaus County while MAX provided service for the cities of Modesto and Ceres. Both offered commuter style service.

Following the merger of StaRT and MAX, all routes continued to operate with no changes. The outcome of this project will be three plans, each with a different planning horizon, to help guide the new agency on how best to serve the people in the service area.

This first phase of the project is to develop a Comprehensive Operational Analysis (COA) of the transit network. The COA is designed to identify improvements that can enhance the customer travel experience and improve operating efficiency in the near term.

Figure 1 Process for a Comprehensive Operations Analysis



The second phase will include a Short-Range Transit Plan that has a five-year outlook, and a Long-Range Transit Plan with a ten-year outlook. Each will build on the data and findings gathered in this Existing Conditions Report.

## IMPACTS OF COVID-19

The analyses in this report rely on a combination of pre-COVID<sup>1</sup> and during COVID (August and September 2021) data. COVID-19 continues to impact public transportation operations throughout the county and around the world. The pandemic has several implications for this study, including:

- **Uncertainty of trends moving forward** - Planning during COVID-19 is challenging because trends that existed before March 2020 may or may not continue. Societal changes such as working from home, remote learning, and changes in how we socialize have modified the way people travel. At this point, it is hard to tell what is temporary and what is a trend, particularly as the pandemic wears on.

In addition, policies implemented by transit agencies during COVID, such as going fare-free to reduce the interaction between drivers and riders, as well as to stimulate ridership, are hard to read for long-term implications.

- **Uneven ridership recovery for transit** - Like other transit agencies, Ride the S also experienced a decline in ridership during the pandemic. Nationwide, fixed route ridership has taken a steeper dive than paratransit ridership at many agencies; however, ridership continues to be below pre-pandemic levels. The uneven and uncertain recovery will make planning future services more challenging.
- **Labor shortage** - A shortage of drivers has impacted transit agencies of all sizes across the country. The fear of catching COVID-19, coupled with a wave of retirements as well as workers who are out sick or quarantining, has made finding and retaining staff very challenging in the public transit sector as well as many other industries. Any staffing shortage makes it difficult to operate service as scheduled, much less expand service beyond what is out there today.

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<sup>1</sup> Pre-COVID data predominantly came from the Stanislaus Council of Governments (StanCOG) 2019 Transit Efficiency and Innovations Study, which included recent data for StaRT and MAX services