

# 11 KEY FINDINGS

This section summarizes the key findings from this report for improving the Ride the S network.

Solutions or recommendations are not prescribed at this stage. Some findings will have quick and easy solutions; others will take more time and/or require securing additional funding. In the next stage of the planning process, we will work with stakeholders to develop solutions the community supports. Recommended phasing and order-of-magnitude costs will also be developed for the longer-term recommendations.

## FIXED ROUTE

- **Route naming:** Following the consolidation of MAX and StaRT services into Ride the S, there are some routes that sound very similar and can cause customer confusion. One example is “Route C” and “StanRTA to BART”. Both routes serve BART stations but have different origins in Stanislaus County. Route renaming or renumbering could improve customer wayfinding and marketing of existing services.
- **Consistent passenger materials:** Former StaRT fixed route schedules read vertically like a train schedule, while former MAX route schedules read horizontally. Utilizing a consistent format for schedules can reduce confusion and improve the customer experience.
- **Duplicative service:** There are a few corridors with more than one bus route operating along it. One example is the segment from the Downtown Transit Center to the Vintage Faire Mall. On Saturdays, both Route 60 (a former StaRT route) and Route 41 (a former MAX route) provide service on the same alignment. Another example is along McHenry Avenue, which sees service from Routes 22, 23, 35, 37, and Route 60. In some cases, buses from different routes also arrive at almost the same time. There is an opportunity to examine corridors with overlapping service to identify if an alignment or scheduling change can improve coverage and frequency, while reducing duplication.
- **On-time performance on weekends:** On-time performance for local routes is worse on weekends than on weekdays. In examining the running times for individual routes, it appears many routes have significantly shorter running times on weekends, which directly impacts the on-time performance. Examples include:
  - Route 22: 72 minutes Monday through Friday, 60 minutes on Saturday, 62 minutes on Sunday

- Route 23, 90 minutes Monday through Saturday, 60 minutes on Sunday
- Route 25: 134 minutes Monday through Saturday, 118 minutes on Sunday
- Route 31: 75 minutes Monday through Saturday, 61 minutes on Sunday
- **Big one-way loops:** Large loops are inconvenient from a passenger experience as all passengers utilizing a stop on the loop must ride through the entire loop to complete their trip. There are several routes with large loops that could be opportunities for alignment changes to reduce the size of the loop, including: Routes 21, 26, 28, 29, 32, 33 and 61
- **Schedules for routes with loops:** Timepoints on schedules are meant to help people estimate when a bus should arrive. However, on a handful of routes, the schedules are unclear about what happens after the bus gets to the loop. As the schedules are currently written, it is unclear if the bus has a layover in the loop as the timepoints are not consistent in both directions.  
As an example, Route 23's last timepoint on the outbound schedule is marker E. However, the first timepoint of the inbound schedule is marker D and skips from D to C (there is no marker E). It is unclear to passengers if marker E is served in the inbound direction and if so, what time they should be at the stop. There are other routes with this a similar issue including: Routes 23, 32, 44, and 61.
- **Consistent alignments:** Having clear, consistent alignments makes the system easy for riders to use, especially those that are new riders. Routes that have different alignments on different days of the week or unclear alignments on a map can confuse riders. Examples include:
  - Routes 40 and 60 having different alignments on Saturdays
  - Route 44: In the direction of Blaker/Hackett, there is a deviation from Hatch Road between Central Avenue and Moffett Road that is shown as a couple of dashed lines on the printed schedules but there is no notation of what the dashed line means and when the deviation takes place
- **Service to Ceres Walmart:** A new Walmart recently opened in Ceres that is currently served by Route 15, but with infrequent weekday and Saturday service (service every 90 to 105 minutes). Like other Walmarts, this location will generate lots of shopping trips and provide employment opportunities for members of the community. There is the opportunity to improve service on Route 15 and potentially adjust service so one or more routes can layover at the Walmart.
- **Routes with low ridership:** Ride the S has several low ridership routes. Each of these presents opportunities for alignment, scheduling, or other changes which can improve the utilization of these routes. Low ridership routes include:
  - Route 35, which has less than 1 average boarding on each trip in both directions
  - Routes 24 and 28, which primarily serve schools but operate all day service with low ridership

## FLEXIBLE SERVICES

- **Overlapping services:** A lot of the flexible service areas overlap with each other, which is not only confusing for riders but also can potentially require more resources than are needed. There is an opportunity to examine changes to the service areas to reduce overlap and customer confusion.
- **Limited window for shuttle pickups:** The published shuttle schedules set precise times when the shuttle must depart for intercity service. There is very little time allocated for pickups and drop-offs, which inherently may be suppressing demand. In the next phase of the project, we will analyze trip denial data for all flexible services to determine the level of suppressed demand.
- **Trip requests being honored outside of designated zones:** Analyzing the origin-destination data reveals that trip requests are being honored for destinations outside the designated zones. Trips outside of a designated zone erodes credibility of the boundaries and introduces inefficiencies and higher costs for operating the service. As an example, the Newman Dial-A-Ride provides service between Gustine and Crows Landing; however, many trips take place between Newman and Patterson. The circumstances behind these trip requests need to be examined to determine if the boundaries need to be changed or changes need to be made to the suite of services provided in an area.
- **High cancellation rates:** Almost all of the flexible services have a cancellation rate of 15% or higher. Cancelled trips degrade service for passengers who are already on the vehicle, while also introducing inefficiencies in the service and driving up costs for providing the service. The root cause of these high cancellation rates should be investigated further, and corrective action taken where appropriate.
- **Route 35:** Route 35 has an operating model that is unlike any of the other services Ride the S operates. The combination of being partially a Dial-A-Ride service and partially a deviated fixed route, coupled with the limited hours of operation, may explain its low ridership. There is an opportunity to adjust this service to reduce customer confusion and increase ridership.

## PARATRANSIT

- **Prep work for new paratransit provider:** Previously, MAX, StaRT, and Turlock Transit had the same contractor who operated paratransit service. Following the merger, Ride the S brought in a new contractor to operate the paratransit service. There are currently unresolved questions on how transfers should take place between Ride the S and Turlock Transit, including which agency individuals should be booking their trip with and what the transfer policy will be. A formal policy should be developed to help clarify these operational procedures.
- **Possible errors in the membership list:** In reviewing the list of persons eligible for paratransit service, some possible issues were identified that may need to be corrected. They include:

- There are individuals on the eligibility list who have expired memberships
- There are individuals who have memberships expiring in 2050, which is past any renewal period currently available
- **Rider guide updates needed:** A rider guide which explains how to ride MAX's paratransit service is available online but only explains how to ride the former MAX paratransit service. The rider guide should be updated to include new branding and information on the new Ride the S system. This rider guide can also be used to clarify the confusion surrounding what the required fare is.

## FLEET AND FACILITIES

- **Zero emissions vehicle plan:** Ride the S does not currently have a Zero Emissions Vehicle Plan. Regardless of whether the agency decides to choose electric or hydrogen vehicles, significant planning will be required to meet the 2029 deadline, which requires all new bus purchases to be zero emissions. This planning effort will also need to consider facility needs as current facilities do not have the space to handle charging stations for electric vehicles.
- **Vehicle capacities in fleet inventory:** Ride the S's fleet roster does not include seating and standing capacities for each vehicle type. This lack of information will hinder any efforts to reallocate vehicles to different routes to better meet demand. It is possible that the HASTUS scheduling software may already have this information which can be exported and added to the fleet inventory.
- **Revenue vs. non-revenue vehicles in fleet inventory:** In addition to missing vehicle capacities, the fleet inventory does not denote whether a vehicle is a revenue vehicles or non-revenue vehicle. If non-revenue vehicles are not included in the replacement schedule, fleet needs may not be fully represented.
- **Bus stop inventory:** The most complete bus stop inventory comes from the GTFS feed. The placement of a stop on a block (nearside, farside, midblock) is couched in a field called "bus\_stop\_location." This is also where the route direction is hidden. Changes are suggested to the inventory to make it easier to verify and filter information.
- **Customer experience at bus stops:** As a byproduct of the merger between StaRT and MAX, Ride the S now has bus stops with different signage, branding, and amenities. Updating relevant signage and refreshing the branding at bus stops should be prioritized to ensure a consistent customer experience.
- **Bus stop optimization and investment plan:** In addition to providing a consistent customer experience at bus stops, there is an opportunity to look at bus stop spacing, and amenities provided at stops. Closely spaced stops slow down service and could be potentially removed to improve speed and service reliability. In terms of bus stop amenities, Ride the S currently does not have an official policy on installing amenities. Codifying a policy would help the agency be methodical and consistent in its installation of amenities in its service area. Both

bus stop spacing and installation of amenities could be accomplished with a bus stop optimization and investment study.

- **Partnerships:** Vintage Faire Mall is a major trip generator and network connection point. As currently scheduled, the routes are moved during the holiday shopping season because of the traffic volume and for safety purposes. Ride the S and Vintage Faire Mall do not currently have a Memorandum of Understanding for service changes during the holidays, and there is an opportunity to consider alternatives to routing at the mall to be functional all year.

## FARES

- **Confusion with new fare structure:** The implementation of the new fare structure brought unintended confusion among riders who had used a Dial-A-Ride service under the former providers MAX and StaRT. The primary issue has been around who pays a reduced rate and who pays a paratransit fare. From a rider perspective, the difference between a reduced fare and a paratransit fare may feel like semantics. Dial-A-Rides and shuttles are open to registered paratransit riders and general public riders, but paratransit fares are higher.

## OTHER

- **Consistency of service hours:** Prior to the merger, StaRT and MAX both had different hours of operation across their various modes. Both agencies also observed different holidays. Following the merger, Ride the S kept these legacy hours of operation. However, these discrepancies must be addressed, and a set of observed holidays needs to be agreed upon.
- **Website updates:** Merging StaRT and MAX into a single system has not been without its challenges. The MAX website is getting an update to serve as the new webpage for Ride the S, but there are still updates that need to be made to improve consistency and reduce confusion. Examples include an updated system map, as well as a more streamlined flow requiring fewer clicks to access key information.
- **Performance monitoring and reporting:** This document included performance and productivity metrics from quantitative data sources from the former providers, MAX and StaRT. Some data sets needed extensive cleaning and manipulation to get it into a usable format for service planning. Going forward as one agency, data collection will be easier as the number of systems will be streamlined. However, this is a time to think through what data is being collected, what its purpose is, and how it can be formatted to reduce the amount of time needed to process the data for service planning work. Doing this will also help ensure more regular monitoring of the system so that service changes or policies can be done more easily with the available data.
- **Knowing who is riding:** There is no recent survey data about who is riding any of Ride the S's services. A survey effort should be considered to gather this information as service planning is difficult without it. If a survey is administered,

this would also be a great time to ask other questions including how people pay, what improvements should be prioritized, and their overall experience with the system.

- **Perception of safety:** Transit agencies around the country deal with real and perceived safety issues that potentially impact ridership. Safety concerns while waiting for the bus, or on the vehicle itself, can deter individuals from riding, particularly at night. Learning more about where and why people feel unsafe can help Ride the S to address them. Depending on the concerns identified, infrastructure improvements (e.g., lighting, cameras) or service changes could be considered. There are also opportunities to work with human service agencies in the county to provide help to people having mental health crises at major transit facilities such as the Modesto Transit Center or Vintage Faire Mall.
- **Resource allocation:** Now that Ride the S has the tools it needs to compare the relative sizes of its local, intercity, and regional travel markets, there is an opportunity to consider to how it allocates resources between them to meet demand.