

# Sonoma County Transit

## FY 2023 Abbreviated Short-Range Transit Plan



**DRAFT – December 2022**

The preparation of this report has been funded in part by a grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) through section 5303 of the Federal Transit Act. The contents of this SRTP reflect the views of Sonoma County Transit, and not necessarily those of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) or MTC. Sonoma County Transit is solely responsible for the accuracy of the information presented in this SRTP.

# Sonoma County Transit

## FY 2022-23 Abbreviated Short-Range Transit Plan

Sonoma County Transit's abbreviated Short-Range Transit Plan (SRTP) was prepared in accordance with guidelines set forth by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and meets requirements by the Federal Transit Administration for Short-Range Transit Planning purposes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted transit operations, ridership and overall operating and farebox revenue. The decrease in ridership, farebox revenues and changes in travel patterns have created planning and operational challenges for all transit operators. In light of today's operating environment, MTC has restructured the SRTP planning process for FY 2022-23 to help plan through this period of uncertainty.

The revised approach of the FY 2022-23 SRTP narrows the scope to a five-year planning period with a focus on financial and service planning. Unlike SRTP's prepared in the past, all Bay Area transit operators are required to prepare an SRTP to facilitate a regional understanding of transit priorities and plans for the next five years. This reduction in the scale of the plan is intended to facilitate the development of a more narrowly focused SRTP for the upcoming five-year period rather than the 10-year timeline considered in traditional SRTPs.

Sonoma County Transit's FY 2022-23 SRTP addresses MTC's request for information consisting of responding to questions regarding its pre-pandemic state of service, the current state of service and the development of three possible scenarios going forward over the next five years. While this year's effort is less than that of prior years, it's anticipated that a full SRTP will be prepared in FY 2023-24.

### **Pre-Pandemic State of Service – FY 2018-19**

#### [What did operations look like before the pandemic?](#)

In FY 2018-19, Sonoma County Transit operated 95,776 revenue vehicle hours. Transit service operated seven days a week with 27 routes operating on weekdays and 13 routes operating on Saturday and 5 routes operating on Sunday.

Weekday ridership for FY 2018-19 averaged 3,316 passengers, while Saturday and Sunday ridership averaged 1,161 and 915 riders, respectively.

Over the past ten years, Sonoma County Transit's highest ridership year was in FY 2012-13 at 1,364,547 passenger trips provided. Although ridership had dropped to 906,863 in FY 2018-19, ridership for FY 2019-20 was increasing. That increase continued through January 2020 with an annual estimate of 925,000 passenger trips. The increase in ridership was due to a healthy economy, economic recovery from local fires and floods and a stable level of service.

During FY 2018-19, weekday peak number of buses deployed (during the school year) equaled 38. Saturday service used 12 buses and Sunday service used 8 buses.

#### [How much service was available?](#)

As noted above, annual vehicle revenue hours for FY 2018-19 was 95,776. Approximately 341 on school year weekdays, 113 Saturday and 83 on Sundays. A total of 27 routes were operated on weekdays, while 13 operated on Saturday and 5 operated on Sundays.

## Where, when and how was service deployed?

Sonoma County Transit's service consists of local and intercity routes. Local service is provided within the cities of Rohnert Park/Cotati, Sonoma, Sebastopol, Windsor, Healdsburg, Cloverdale, and the unincorporated Russian River communities of Guerneville and Monte Rio and the Sonoma Valley.

Intercity services provide connections either in downtown Santa Rosa or downtown Petaluma to local services operated by Santa Rosa CityBus or Petaluma Transit and regional services provided by Golden Gate Transit and SMART.

## What did ridership levels and travel patterns look like?

In the year before the pandemic, ridership was flat comparing FY 2018-19 with FY 2017-18 and continued relatively unchanged when comparing the first half of FY 2019-20 with FY 2018-19 and FY 2017-18.

At the time, Sonoma County Transit operated 27 routes on weekdays, 13 on Saturday and 5 on Sunday. Average weekday ridership, during the school year, was approximately 3,316 passengers. Local routes represented 13% at 118,749 annual riders, the remainder of the service (intercity routes) represented 86% or 788,114.

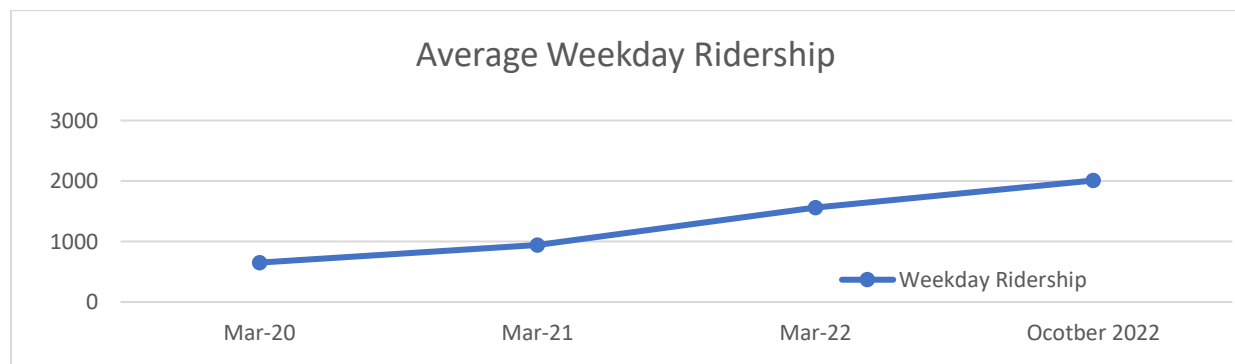
Sonoma County Transit's main intercity routes transport approximately 76% of total ridership. The main intercity routes that cross the county north/south (44/48 and 60), and east/west 20 and 30, have the greatest amount of service and provide service to the largest populations within Sonoma County.

## Current State of Service – FY 2022-23

### How have service and operations changed since the pandemic?

In March 2020, when service was dramatically reduced due to the pandemic, lack of demand, and funding uncertainty, service was reduced, and ridership decreased approximately 80% from February to March 2020 after the pandemic and stay at home orders were issued.

In March 2020, Sonoma County Transit's level of service decreased to 56% of its pre-pandemic level. Service gradually increased in August 2020, August 2021 and in August 2022 to approximately 85% of the pre-pandemic level of service. During this period average weekday ridership increased as shown in the chart below:



Between current ridership in October 2022 and the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, ridership grew approximately 308%, but remained 44% below its pre-pandemic level.

### What were the priorities, goals and processes that informed decisions to adjust service or for budgeting decisions in FY 23?

Largely due to robust growth in sales tax revenues and an influx of federal operating assistance, Sonoma County Transit's priorities have been to bring back service based on expressed ridership demand and to sustain that level of service based on five-year funding projections.

### How much service is available now?

With recently revised schedules implemented on August 14, 2022, Sonoma County Transit's annual level of service is approximately 85% of its pre-pandemic level. For the current fiscal year, the adopted budget assumes that 90% of the pre-pandemic level of service (in terms of in-service hours) will be implemented.

While ridership has increased, it has not increased to the level initially anticipated in 2021. Based on current trends, it's anticipated that Sonoma County Transit will reach its pre-pandemic level of ridership in FY 2024-25.

### How has the distribution of service changed by geography? Time of day? Mode?

Overall, the distribution of services is very close to its pre-pandemic levels, however redundant routes such as 22 (Sebastopol to Santa Rosa) and 46 (SSU to Santa Rosa) have been suspended and made up for by core intercity routes 20 (West County/Santa Rosa) and 44/48 (Petaluma, Cotati, SSU, Rohnert Park and Santa Rosa). Route 38 service between Sonoma and the San Rafael Transit Mall continues to be suspended due to its pre-pandemic low ridership.

Overall, the span of weekday transit service has been shortened on the core intercity routes (20, 30, 44/48 and 60) by times ranging from 1 to 2.5 hours. It's anticipated that these times will be reduced during FY 2023-24 as demand rebounds and driver availability increases.

Fixed-route service as of September 2022 had approximately 65% of its pre-pandemic ridership with a distribution of travel very similar to that prior to the pandemic. On paratransit, in September 2022, ridership equaled approximately 60% of its pre-pandemic levels. Paratransit resources have been limited due to a lack of drivers, but the current level of service continues to address passenger demand. It is anticipated that paratransit ridership will grow in early 2023 as many worksites for the disabled have indicated they will reopen. Like fixed-route, paratransit trip distribution is similar to its pre-pandemic level, however trip demand remains approximately 60% of its pre-pandemic level.

### Describe changes to ridership and travel patterns since the start of the pandemic.

As noted above, ridership has grown approximately 308% between its post-pandemic low in March 2020 and October 2022. While this number remains approximately 44% below its pre-pandemic level, ridership is slowly rebuilding. Weekday ridership is highest Monday through Wednesday and falls off on Thursday and Friday. Reasons for this are variable workdays/hours, availability of alternative transportation on these days, work from home options, etc.

Weekend ridership has rebounded at a higher percentage rate than weekday ridership. When comparing October 2022 with October 2018, Saturday ridership was approximately 80% of its

October 2018 levels while Sunday ridership was approximately 74%. When comparing local versus intercity routes for the same period, local ridership represented 24.8% of total ridership in October 2022 versus 14.8% of total ridership in October 2018. October 2022's local ridership compared very closely to 2018's local ridership at 13,981 (2022) and 13,763 (2018). However, overall ridership in October 2022 was 56,259 vs. 92,507 in October 2018.

[How have equity priority communities been considered in service planning of changes?](#)

Service levels to equity priority communities have been increased as a percent of Sonoma County Transit's overall level of service in FY 2023 versus FY 2019.

[How has the operating budget changed?](#)

The impacts of the pandemic, inflation, labor costs and the cost of fuel has increased Sonoma County Transit's hourly cost per revenue hour between FY 2018-19 and FY 2020-21. As service was reintroduced in FY 2021-22, costs were spread among more hours thereby causing a decrease in the cost per revenue hour. However, the cost per revenue hour increased 22% from FY 2017-18's \$135.32 to \$165.01 in FY 2021-22.

The chart below illustrates the cost per revenue hour and the number of revenue hours operated since FY 2017-18 (fixed-route service):

Fiscal Year	Cost per Revenue Hour	Number of Revenue Hours
FY 2017-18	135.32	92,142
FY 2018-19	138.53	95,776
FY 2019-20	154.33	84,129
FY 2020-21	176.73	66,442
FY 2021-22	165.01	82,837

While service was restored in FY 2021-22, the cost per revenue hour remains higher than in FY 2017-18 and FY 2018-19. This is due to economies of scale as service was reduced, the fleet size was maintained, yet operated at a lower level.

**Scenario Planning Concepts – FY 2023-24 through FY 2027-28**

**Scenario 1 - Robust Recovery Scenario:** There is adequate funding to return overall revenue to 100% of pre-pandemic levels, with escalation.

[How would priorities and goals change with revenue constraints? What would inform or trigger service change decisions?](#)

This scenario provides \$14,800,000 for fixed-route operations in FY 2024 and increases to \$16,080,00 in FY 2028. Over the five-year period, an approximate 2.2% increase in overall revenue is anticipated. While revenue is increasing, Sonoma County Transit's cost per revenue vehicle hour is expected to grow at least 3.5% over the period. Under today's operating conditions, with high fuel, labor and overall inflation, this estimate is conservative.

Because the hourly rate increases at a higher annual rate than revenue, the number of revenue vehicle hours decreases from 99,926 in FY 24 to 94,610 in FY 28, an approximate 5.6% decrease. However, in each year, the number of revenue service hours is higher than the 91,800 hours included in Sonoma County Transit's FY 2022-23 budget.

Service is anticipated to be close to today's service with limited growth in service hours associated with the provision of intercity service. All 19 routes would continue to operate as they do today, with minor expansion occurring on intercity routes 20, 30, 44/48 and 60.

#### How much service would be available?

As projected, fixed-route service would be up to 99,926 revenue service hours in FY 2023-24 and drop approximately 5.6% to 94,610 revenue service hours in FY 2027-28. While this plan only considers projected operating revenue, the reduced service hours projected under this scenario may be made up from TDA/STA funds that could be used for operations rather than capital purposes.

In any case, under this scenario, revenue service hours in each of the five years exceeds the projected number of service hours budgeted in FY 2022-23 (91,800).

#### How would the development of service change by mode? Geography or route? Time of day or week?

The projected split of revenue between fixed-route and ADA paratransit remains constant with an 80%/20% split with fixed-route receiving the largest share. This percent split between the two modes has been Sonoma County Transit's split for many years.

While we don't expect any increase in local shuttle services, we do expect minor service additions to intercity routes on weekdays. This is largely to support expansion in the evening and very early morning service for commuters and students commuting to the Santa Rosa Junior College (SRJC) campuses in Santa Rosa and Petaluma.

Historically, with 20% of its operating resources dedicated to paratransit, paratransit needs are anticipated to be met as long as unforeseen increases in the hourly rates do not occur.

#### How would equity priority communities be considered?

Equity priority communities would not be affected in terms of local service. However, a separate analysis would be conducted as part of Sonoma County Transit's expansion in intercity route hours to ensure that any expanded hours of service would occur equally to equity priority communities.

#### How would these revenue constraints impact staffing and budgeting?

In accordance with our financial projects included in attachment A, a total of five fixed-route and two paratransit positions would be eliminated over the five-year period. This estimate is based on ratios established in pre-pandemic year FY 2018-19. It's likely that due to anticipated turnover and retirements that no employees would be terminated should this funding scenario come to fruition.

#### How would different service levels impact fleet requirements or spare ratios?

Since the pandemic began in March 2020, Sonoma County Transit's spare ratio has increased beyond FTA's required 20%, due to a reduction in overall service hours and implementing a more productive runcut than what was employed on the past. While in fall 2023 Sonoma County Transit peak buses operated is 31, we anticipate operating 38/39 buses in maximum service between FY 2023-24 and FY 2027-28. The fleet total is 49 buses.

The actual number of buses in the fleet will likely be higher than projected due to delayed retirement of CNG buses as SCT transitions to an electric-powered fleet. During this period of transition, a higher than FTA's recommended spare ratio will continue to be in place during the five-year planning period.

**Scenario 2 – Revenue Recovery, with Fewer Riders:** Farebox revenue remains stagnant (20 – 50% below pre-pandemic levels) for the next five years.

[How would priorities and goals change with revenue constraints? What would inform or trigger service change decisions?](#)

MTC's revenue projections under this scenario assume that operations revenue recovers, ridership remains at levels between 20% and 50% below its pre-pandemic levels. While SCT assumes operation of its current 19 routes, the level of service will be less as the annual increase in service hour costs exceeds the projected annual fund estimate.

Revenue vehicle hours under this scenario range between 97,765 in FY 2023-24 to 92,728 in FY 2027-28. Again, because we assume that the cost per revenue hour will increase faster than annual revenue, the number of revenue vehicle hours would decrease over the five-year planning period.

However, during the five-year period, all years have more service than what is budget for FY 2022-23 at 91,800. It's likely that weekday intercity service would be adjusted to accommodate this reduction in service hours over the five-year period. Local routes would retain their existing levels of Monday through Saturday service.

If the state continues to stay its farebox recovery requirements during the five-year planning period, SCT would be able to maintain service and use TDA/STA funds in lieu of farebox revenue to meet budget. If farebox recovery ratios are reinstated during the five-year period, service may have to be reduced to meet farebox recovery ratios required by TDA law.

[How much service would be available?](#)

Based on projected revenue, revenue vehicle hours would be 97,765 to 92,728, or approximately 5.5% over the five-year period according to our projections, based on funds available in this scenario.

[How would the development of service change by mode? Geography or route? Time of day or week?](#)

While resources would continue to be divided at 80% for fixed-route and 20% of paratransit, weekday services would be preserved with any reductions in service coming to Saturday local service and weekend intercity routes. Given the small decrease in projected revenue vehicle hours, it is anticipated the shortfall could be made up with prior-year unclaimed TDA funds.

[How would equity priority communities be considered?](#)

Equity priority communities would see some reduction in service, primarily weekend local and intercity services. Although future analysis would be necessary, we anticipate that the proposed reduction would not affect equity priority communities greater than the system as a whole.

### How would these revenue constraints impact staffing and budgeting?

Based on the reduction in vehicle revenue hours for both fixed-route and paratransit, a total of 6 positions would be reduced going from 136 in FY 2024 to 129 in FY 2027-28. It should be noted that the combined fixed-route and paratransit budget for FY 2022-23 provides funding for 128 employees.

### How would different service levels impact fleet requirements or spare ratios?

The projected combined fixed-route and paratransit fleet will be reduced from 79 vehicles in FY 2023-24 to 77 in FY 2027-28. Given that the current fleet exceeds FTA spare ratio requirements, two retired buses during this period would not be replaced.

As noted in scenario one, the actual number of buses in the fleet will likely be higher than projected due to delayed retirement of CNG buses as SCT transitions to an electric-powered fleet. During this period of transition, a higher than FTA's recommended spare ratio will continue to be in place during the five-year planning period.

**Scenario 3 – Some Progress:** Federal relief funds are eventually exhausted and total revenue available to the agency is 15% below pre-pandemic levels for the next five years.

### How would priorities and goals change with revenue constraints? What would inform or trigger service change decisions?

In this scenario, the annual number of service hours would fall below the currently budgeted amount for FY 2022-23 at 84,802 versus 91,800. The number of revenue vehicle hours would decrease over the five-year period to 80,490 and represent an approximate 15% decrease in revenue vehicle hours in FY 2027-28 versus SCT's budgeted revenue vehicle hours in FY 2022-23.

Realizing such as significant decrease in hours, SCT would need to consider making service reductions during the weekday, in addition to, those reductions presented in scenario two on Saturday local service and on weekend schedules.

With the continued goal of zero trip denials, paratransit service would also be reduced to match changes to fixed-route service. It's projected that approximately 30,569 in revenue service hours would be provided in FY 2023-24 versus 32,323 hours budgeted in FY 2022-23.

### How much service would be available?

It's projected that the MTC supplied revenue estimate would provide 84,802 revenue service hours in FY 2023-24 and 80,490 in FY 2027-28. For paratransit, 30,569 revenue service hours would be available in FY 2023-24 and 29,015 in FY 2027-28.

### How would the development of service change by mode? Geography or route? Time of day or week?

As noted above, this scenario would require service reductions on weekdays and on weekends. It's estimated that mid-day service would be reduced on fixed-route to keep the beginning and ending service hours similar to today's level of service. Local shuttles would operate a shorter day on Saturdays and weekend revenue service hours on intercity routes 20, 30, 44/48 and 60 would be reduced approximately 10% in comparison with today's level of service.



### How would equity priority communities be considered?

Equity priority communities would see some reduction in service across all routes in the SCT system. Although future analysis would be necessary, we anticipate that the proposed reduction would not affect equity priority communities greater than the system as a whole.

### How would these revenue constraints impact staffing and budgeting?

Based on the reduction in vehicle revenue hours for both fixed-route and paratransit, a total of 6 positions would be reduced going from 118 in FY 2023-24 to 112 in FY 2027-28. It should be noted that the combined fixed-route and paratransit budget for FY 2022-23 provides funding for 128 employees. This would be a significant reduction in workforce that could not be handled only by attrition.

### How would different service levels impact fleet requirements or spare ratios?

The projected combined fixed-route and paratransit fleet will be reduced from 79 vehicles in FY 2023-24 to 72 in FY 2027-28. Given that the current fleet exceeds FTA spare ratio requirements, seven retired buses during this period would not be replaced.

As noted in the first scenario, the actual number of buses in the fleet will likely be higher than projected due to delayed retirement of CNG buses as SCT transitions to an electric-powered fleet. During this period of transition, a higher than FTA's recommended spare ratio will continue to be in place during the five-year planning period.

## Conclusion

Over the next three years, Sonoma County Transit is projected to continue to slowly regain its pre-pandemic level of ridership, while operating approximately 90% of its total in-service hours operated pre-pandemic. TDA and STA funds are projected to remain flat in FY 2023-24, but regain a 3.5% increase each year thereafter. The only federal assistance available for operations beyond FY 2024-25 will be preventive maintenance assistance at \$1.28M annually. The remaining operating assistance will be from TDA, STA, Measure M and fare revenues. Fare revenues are anticipated to remain below the pre-pandemic levels through FY 2025-26.

Driver availability for both fixed-route and paratransit service is anticipated to be a challenge through FY 2023-24 and as such, will limit short-term growth in transit services.

At the projected level of service through FY 2025-26, Sonoma County Transit will continue its efforts to electrify its fleet using state TIRCP funds largely for this purpose. In FY 2022-23, approximately \$6M in TIRCP funds were received to assist with the purchase of 40' electric coaches and charging equipment. In early 2023, Sonoma County Transit, will submit another request for TIRCP funds to assist with the purchase of 13 additional vehicles for delivery in FY 2025-26. If successful in securing these funds, Sonoma County Transit's fleet will be approximately 68% electric by 2027.

It is anticipated that Sonoma County Transit will prepare a full Short-Range Transit Plan Update in FY 2023-24 that further considers its operations funding and long-range planning for service expansion and progress towards fleet electrification.