

SOLANO TRANSIT CONSOLIDATION STUDY

OPTIONS REPORT ***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

Prepared for

SOLANO TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In February of 2007, the Solano Transportation Authority (STA) initiated a study to examine and evaluate options to improve the delivery and accountability of providing transit service throughout Solano County while considering and addressing local transit issues and needs. The impetus for recommending the STA conduct this study originated from the mayors of the seven cities (Benicia, Dixon, Fairfield, Rio Vista, Suisun City, Vacaville, and Vallejo) and a member of the Board of Supervisors that serve on the STA Board on behalf of the agencies that they represent. This evaluation was initially proposed by individual members at a Board retreat in February 2005 and unanimously approved by the entire STA Board in March 2005 to be added to the STA's Overall Work Program for Fiscal Years 2006-07 and 2007-08.

The transit service for Solano County's seven cities and the County of Solano is provided by six separate transit operators. This approach for providing transit service is somewhat unique for the Bay Area, but it is not uncommon in more rural areas of California for transit service to be provided by individual cities. The transit service provided by the individual transit operators varies widely from the range of transit services provided by Vallejo Transit (Baylink Ferry, Intercity Transit, local transit, intercity and local ADA paratransit, and subsidized taxi) to the specific service provided by the City of Dixon (Dixon's Readi-Ride service).

To guide this effort, the STA Board adopted a set of four goals for the consolidation study:

1. To streamline transit service, simplifying and improve access to transit use for riders.
2. To achieve service efficiencies and economics.
3. To provide a central focus on transit service for the County.
4. To create a robust transit service to meet the growing transit needs of the County.

In addition, the STA Board adopted a set of 13 criteria to evaluate the proposed consolidation options:

1. Cost effectiveness
2. Efficient use of resources – equipment, facilities, personnel
3. Service efficiency
4. Improved governance – Accountability to the public and community
5. Streamline decision-making
6. Ridership and productivity impacts
7. Service coordination
8. Recognize local community needs and priorities
9. Protect local transit service as requested by local jurisdictions
10. Flexibility to meet local changing needs
11. Capacity to deliver new service while maintain existing service
12. Ability to leverage additional funding
13. Implementation needs/requirements (e.g., legal, financial)

Due to rising gas prices and transit service costs, the STA worked with Solano County's transit operators to complete several near term studies and funding agreements to ensure the fiscal stabilization and continuity of countywide intercity transit service in 2006. Following the completion of these tasks, the STA started Phase 1 of the Transit Consolidation Study (the development of options for potential consolidation). These options were developed through an extensive 4-month interview process of Solano County local elected offices, city, county and transit staff and discussions with several policy and technical committees. In addition, two focus group meetings were conducted with transit riders during the four month period.

This report summarizes the initial options that have emerged as part of Phase 1 of the study and is the initial step of defining how the operations would work in the various options. While some of the options involve every operator, others involve as few as two. Some options would preclude other options, but other options can be implemented in conjunction with other options.

During Phase 2 of the study, these options will be compared to the current Solano County system for delivering transit service (status quo) and details of maintenance and storage, management, administrative staff and offices, paratransit operations and policies, governance, operations of service, and financial implications will be analyzed in more detail. To oversee and provide guidance for this second phase of the study, the STA Board has formed a Steering Committee comprised of all eight members of the STA Board (seven mayors and a member of the Board of Supervisors) and the seven city managers and the County of Solano's chief administrative officer.

OPTION 1: SOUTH COUNTY CONSOLIDATION

The communities of Vallejo and Benicia are the ones that are more directly tied to the core of the Bay Area. Both cities also have significant amounts of local travel that occur between each other. The route numbering and structures are also mutually exclusive; there is no duplication.

In this consolidation option, a new operation would replace those provided separately by Vallejo and Benicia. This would be a comprehensive consolidation, establishing a new organization that would handle all aspects of governance, management, service delivery, accounting, funding/grants, service planning, capital projects, maintenance facilities, technology integration of fares and traveler information, and paratransit operations.

Both bus systems today have operations contracted separately through a private operator (MV Transportation, Inc.) for all fixed-route and paratransit bus services. These could be merged into a single contract, or negotiated separately. The City of Vallejo's Baylink Ferry and the accompanying Route 200 operations could be approached in several ways – through the City of Vallejo, through the new transit operator, or through a regional ferry operator (possible if 2007 California Senate Bill 976 is approved).

The South County operation could be initially governed by a Joint Powers Authority or through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This option will assess the results of establishment through an MOU, Joint Powers Authority, and Transit District. In addition to a board, the operation is proposed to have oversight provided through a technical oversight committee.

This option could have these possible advantages:

- Single application and more leverage for regional transit funds
- Direct oversight
- Improved paratransit coordination
- Dedicated transit funding

This option could have these possible disadvantages:

- Increased dependence on current revenue streams
- Transfer of capital facilities and contracts
- Coordination issues with cities
- Potential change in fare structures and policies between cities
- Shift in local contact and control

OPTION 2: SOUTH/CENTRAL COUNTY CONSOLIDATION

One variation of Option 1 is to consolidate the Fairfield-Suisun Transit operations with Benicia Breeze and Vallejo Transit. Because these are the most-utilized transit systems in Solano County, and all currently offer intercity commuter services as well as local services, a consolidation would create the predominant transit operator in Solano County. This option would also enable board participation by Suisun City, which currently is not represented on the Fairfield-Suisun Transit governance.

All three bus systems today have operations contracted separately through a private operator (MV Transportation, Inc.) for all fixed-route and paratransit bus services. These could be merged into a single contract, or negotiated separately. The City of Vallejo's Baylink Ferry and the accompanying Route 200 operations could be approached in several ways – through the City of Vallejo, through the new transit operator, or through a regional ferry operator (possible if 2007 California Senate Bill 976 is approved).

The South/Central County operation could be initially governed by a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) or through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This option will also assess the results of establishment through an MOU, JPA or Transit District. In addition to a board, the operation is proposed to have oversight provided through a technical oversight committee.

This option could have these possible advantages:

- Single application and more leverage for regional transit funds
- Direct oversight
- Paratransit coordination
- Dedicated transit funding
- Governance expanded to Suisun City

This option could have these possible disadvantages:

- Significant dependence on current revenue streams
- Transfer of capital facilities and contracts
- Coordination issues with cities
- Potential change in fare structures and policies between cities
- Shift in local contact and control

OPTION 3: CENTRAL/NORTH COUNTY FIXED-ROUTE AND PARATRANSIT INTERCITY CONSOLIDATION (NOT LOCAL)

Transit in the communities in central and northern Solano County – Fairfield, Suisun City, Vacaville, Dixon and Rio Vista – has primarily been focused on local-service, yet they all have intercity transit service needs. The Solano Paratransit Agreement and the existing Intercity Funding Agreement are examples where inter-city travel needs are currently addressed. In this consolidation option, this “agreement” concept would be expanded to provide a more official consolidated oversight function for both intercity paratransit and fixed-route operations.

Most central and northern intercity bus routes today have operations contracted separately through a private operator (MV Transportation, Inc.) that provides services through Fairfield-Suisun Transit, with Rio Vista also operating limited inter-city service. Intercity paratransit services are provided through the Solano Paratransit Agreement, and operated by Fairfield-Suisun Transit.

This option suggests creation of a new Joint Powers Authority board that could possibly meet in connection with Solano Transportation Authority board meetings. The board size and potential vote weighting would be negotiated. In addition to a board, the operation would likely have oversight

provided through a technical oversight committee. This new organization may have the potential to represent local operators at MTC, depending on local direction. A Memorandum of Understanding would need to be periodically negotiated so that the roles of this organization in relation to the local operators can be updated as appropriate.

This option could have these possible advantages:

- Direct oversight
- Increased paratransit coordination
- Dedicated transit funding
- Governance expanded to Suisun City for intercity service

This option could have these possible disadvantages:

- No reduction in operators
- Increased coordination required

OPTION 4: ALL PARATRANSIT AND INTERCITY FIXED ROUTE CONSOLIDATION

Another organizational option is to consolidate the portions of the transit operations that have seem have the greatest benefit to users through countywide coordination – paratransit service and intercity fixed-route service. This option would create a single operator focused on issues that involve traveling between cities. This operation would also be able to tailor its resources to represent Solano County at the regional funding table for Regional Measure 2 and other regional programs.

This option could enable more direct participation by cities in all service delivery issues for intercity routes. Today, most cities have a number of intercity bus services traveling through them and attracting riders, yet their participation in policy is limited. The actual operator could be a separate agency, or it could be provided by an existing provider or by a consolidated provider as described in Options 1 or 2 of this report.

All intercity bus systems today have operations contracted separately through a private operator (MV Transportation, Inc.). Paratransit operations are provided by local operators for trips within cities by different contractors, and the Solano Paratransit agreement governs all inter-city trips except those in Vallejo and Benicia. The intercity and paratransit services could be operated through a new single contract, or negotiated separately. The City of Vallejo's Baylink Ferry and the accompanying Route 200 operations could be approached in several ways – through the City of Vallejo, through the new transit operator, or through a regional ferry operator (possible if 2007 California Senate Bill 976 is approved).

This option can be initially governed by a new Joint Powers Authority board that could possibly meet in connection with Solano Transportation Authority board meetings. The board size and potential vote weighting would be negotiated. In addition to a board, the operation would have oversight provided through a technical oversight committee. This new organization may have the potential to represent local operators at MTC, depending on local direction. A Memorandum of Understanding or Agreement would need to be periodically negotiated so that the roles of this organization in relation to the local operators can be updated as appropriate.

This option could have these possible advantages:

- Single application and more leverage for some regional transit funds
- Direct oversight
- Improved paratransit coordination
- Dedicated transit funding
- Governance expanded to Suisun City and Solano County for intercity and paratransit service

This option could have these possible disadvantages:

- Significant dependence on current revenue streams
- Either no reduction or increase in the number of operators
- Increased coordination required between local and regional operator
- Paratransit eligibility rule standardization
- Shift in local contact and control

OPTION 5: FUNCTIONAL COUNTYWIDE CONSOLIDATION

One of the issues that has arisen in the canvassing of regional agency representatives and local elected officials has been a concern that some Solano operators do not have specialized skills to support their transit system well adequately. This is a result of having small operations and/or not enough full-time transit staff. The expertise required to successfully operate a transit system has been increasing significantly in recent years. Not only are there issues with the management of operations and interaction with customers and other staff, but there are increasing issues related to funding opportunities and constraints, and mandates (such as the Americans with Disabilities Act). The result is that the skill base to run a transit system is complex, particularly if the staff resources allocated for the system management are small.

One option is to create a single countywide organization to handle many of the administrative, planning and financial responsibilities of the operators, so that transit service managers can focus primarily on service delivery issues. This consolidation would thus be a “functional” rather than “geographical”.

In this consolidation option, the “support staff” concept that is applied at STA would be expanded and formalized to provide a resource for serving local transit operations of all types. It would not directly operate any local transit service; it would just provide support capabilities for the local operators.

The resulting functions would be to monitor, plan, and assist where needed on accomplishing capital purchases; pursue funding opportunities; prepare and implement marketing materials; coordinate regional grants; provide assistance in SRTP development, and surveys and financial planning; and pursue technology integration of fares and traveler information. This agency could also provide assistance in times when local management transitions occur with operations.

The current operations would not change for any local systems, although some staff responsibilities and hours could shift to the new entity. This entity could be nested within the Solano Transportation Authority, or the board could meet in conjunction with the STA board meetings. Transit responsibilities currently assigned to the Solano Transit Consortium role would likely be superseded by the technical oversight committee presented here. The operations of the intercity fixed-route and paratransit services would likely remain the same. A joint powers agreement, or MOU, would then need to be negotiated.

This option could have these possible advantages:

- Common marketing and coordination
- Optimized skill base
- Single application and more leverage for regional transit funds
- Direct oversight
- Governance expanded to Suisun City and Solano County

This option could have these possible disadvantages:

- Significant dependence on current revenue streams
- No reduction in the number of operators
- Increased coordination required between local and regional operators

OPTION 6: FULL COUNTYWIDE CONSOLIDATION

A final option is to consolidate all transit systems for local and intercity fixed-route and paratransit service. This option could create a single, larger transit operator that would represent Solano County at the regional funding table, and have resources and staff to begin to respond to new types of services and technologies in a comprehensive manner. An added aspect of this concept is to enable more direct participation by cities in all service delivery issues. For example, Suisun City has no direct transit operations responsibilities, and does not sit on a board for Fairfield-Suisun Transit. Many cities have a number of intercity bus services traveling through them and attracting riders, yet their participation in policy is limited with those routes.

In this consolidation option, a new operation would replace all local operators -- Vallejo Transit, Benicia Breeze, Fairfield-Suisun Transit, Vacaville City Coach, Dixon Read-Ride and Rio Vista Delta Breeze. The City of Vallejo's Baylink Ferry and the accompanying Route 200 operations could be approached in several ways – through the City of Vallejo, through the new transit operator, or through a regional ferry operator (proposed in 2007 California Senate Bill 976). This would be a comprehensive consolidation, establishing a new organization that would handle all aspects of governance, management, service delivery, accounting, funding/grants, service planning, capital projects, maintenance facilities, technology integration of fares and traveler information, and paratransit operations.

Multiple contracts for bus systems exist today, and there is more than one contractor in use. Although a single contract could be developed for the entire system, it may be possible to have separate contracts for different types of services. There could be some anticipated cost savings from a merged operation, and this will be examined in the evaluation phase.

This option would initially be governed by a Joint Powers Authority that would be established with a Memorandum of Understanding. That agency would likely include a board that would contain representatives from Vallejo, Fairfield, Suisun City, Benicia, Vacaville, Dixon, Rio Vista and Solano County. Vote weighting or number of board members would be developed through negotiations with the various jurisdictions. In addition to a board, the operation would likely have oversight provided through a technical oversight committee.

This option could have these possible advantages:

- Improved allocation of resources through larger pool of vehicles and operators
- Single application and more leverage for regional transit funds
- Direct oversight
- Improved paratransit coordination
- Dedicated transit funding
- Governance expanded to Suisun City and Solano County

This option could have these possible disadvantages:

- Significant dependence on current revenue streams
- Coordination issues with cities.
- Paratransit eligibility and implementation
- Potential change in fare structures and policies
- Significant shift in contact and control from all cities to new countywide agency