

Transit Joint Powers Authority for Merced County

FINAL Short Range Transit Plan 2012-2017



Volume 2: Marketing Plan



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In conjunction with:
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Marketing Plan

Introduction

This Marketing Plan will serve as a companion to the Service Plan component of the Short Range Transit Plan for Merced County. It has been developed based on the market research and outreach conducted in support of the SRTP project, and includes a coordinated set of strategies for insuring the success and maximizing the productivity of the revised service plan.

Marketing Objectives

The strategies included in this plan are designed to pursue objectives consistent with those of the service plan. The primary goal is to increase ridership and productivity of all Merced County transit services. In pursuit of that goal, the Marketing Plan will address a number of specific objectives:



Enhance Ease of Use

One of the most important marketing objectives for The Bus is to make the system easier for new users to understand and navigate. This objective should be pursued through a combination of streamlined routing and schedules, an improved passenger information program and a systemwide signage program.

Increase Awareness and Enhance Image of The Bus Services

The more highly aware the population is of public transit's availability and what it offers, the more likely they are to consider it as an alternative when a need arises. This plan will include strategies to increase overall visibility of the transit network and to make potential riders more aware of what services are available and how to access them. In addition, it will address ways to enhance the system's image through branding and realistic communication of how transit benefits the communities of Merced County.

Educate Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers for key target markets, such as Merced College, UC Merced, social service agencies and disability support organizations, are an important marketing channel for The Bus. Staff persons at these organizations are often charged with identifying transportation options for their constituents and can serve as a "sales team" for transit if they are well educated about transit services and how they work.

Promote Ridership Among High Potential Targets

Encouraging new riders to try transit should be pursued through a combination of community wide communications and targeted marketing focused on key potential rider segments.

Build Customer Relationship

Rider satisfaction, retention and increased frequency of use will contribute to overall ridership growth. Opportunities for building a stronger customer relationship include traditional customer service strategies and attractive fare media, as well as use of new media such as social media and the system website.

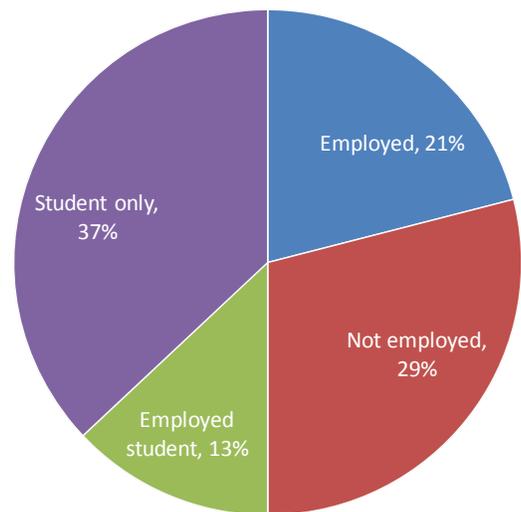
Target Markets

Current Ridership

The previously prepared Summary of Findings provides a detailed profile of transit riders in Merced County. In summary, The Bus riders can be described as follows:

- Young – 44% of The Bus riders are under 25 years old, while only 19% are 50 or older.
- Students, Employed or Both – The chart at the right shows a segmentation of the ridership based on employment/student status. Merced College students alone, make up 28% of the total ridership.
- Ethnically Diverse – About half of riders are Hispanic, while the other half are a mix of Caucasian, African-American and other minorities.
- Transit Dependent – Most riders are dependent on public transportation, lacking either a driver's license a car or both. There is a small segment (13%) of choice riders who use The Bus primarily for commuting.
- Frequent Users – In line with their transit dependence, half of bus riders use the service five or six days a week, while another third ride three or four days.
- Commuters – Commuting to work and school is the dominant trip purpose on The Bus (about 50%). Of all riders, 68% say they use the bus to commute at least one day per week.
- Shoppers – Aside from commuting, shopping is the most frequent trip purpose. Twenty-one percent (21%) of riders were making shopping trips when surveyed.

Employment Status of Riders



As would be expected, Dial-a-Ride users are quite different than the fixed route clientele. They are:

- Older –83% are 50 or older.

- Disabled or Retired – Only a small number of DAR users are employed (10%). Most are disabled and not employed (43%) or retired (41%). Only 6% are students.
- Also Users of The Bus – Only 35% of DAR users say they only use Dial-a-Ride. Forty percent ride The Bus three days per week or more.

Potential Riders

While there is potential to build ridership among populations throughout Merced County, the highest potential targets are those similar to the current ridership base. Potential for growth in ridership exists among the following market segments.

■ Merced College Students

Merced College Students at campuses in Merced and Los Banos make up 28% of the current ridership. The Merced campus has more than 9000 students, the Los Banos campus 1650. Administrators at both campuses value the service highly and are eager to assist MCT in better communicating with students. Among Merced College students, 58% are female, 41% are Hispanic and 77% are under the age of 25.

■ UC Merced Students

UC Merced Students currently make up 7% of The Bus ridership, almost entirely within Merced. The campus currently has more than 4000 students, most of whom live off campus. That population is anticipated to grow by 600 students per year, reaching 25,000 in 2025. Potential consolidation of The Bus and CatTracks services would make this a critical target market. Among UC Merced students 35% are Hispanic and 30% are Asian/Pacific Islander.

■ Secondary Students

Middle and high school students make up 7% of The Bus ridership. These youths, old enough to travel alone but too young to drive or have vehicles, are a viable market for increased ridership. According to the 2010 census, there are about 30,000 middle and high school students in Merced County.

■ Young Workers

Workers under 30 years of age make up 12% of The Bus' current ridership base. Many of these likely work in lower-wage jobs at central locations such as Merced Mall, downtown Merced and the commercial sector in Los Banos.

■ Downtown Merced Employees

Employees who work in downtown Merced (particularly those within walking distance of the Transpo Center) have access to bus routes from destinations throughout the County. Hence they are highly likely to have direct, convenient bus service between their home and work locations and thus to be reasonable prospects for transit usage.

■ Los Banos Residents

Los Banos has a population of just under 36,000. Currently 7% of The Bus riders say they live in Los Banos. Of those surveyed, 3% were traveling between Los Banos and Merced, while the other 4% were making trips within Los Banos.

■ Senior Citizens

According to the 2010 census, Merced County's senior (65+) population is about 24,000. Currently seniors make up only 4% of fixed route riders, but half of Dial-a-Ride users. Since the survey was conducted, The Bus has expanded its senior/disabled fare to all day and has seen a large increase in utilization of this fare category. This may be the first of a variety of strategies for encouraging more seniors to use the fixed route buses.

■ Persons with Disabilities

The 2010 Census says there are about 37,000 persons with disabilities in Merced County. Twelve percent of riders surveyed on The Bus said they have a disability that limits their mobility.

■ Low Income Population

Almost 25% of individuals in Merced County live below the poverty level. Clearly, transit offers families, workers and job seekers in this group an important and affordable mobility option.

■ Latino Population

The 2010 Census finds that 55% of the Merced County population is Hispanic. Hence, this is an important segment within each of the populations discussed above. The census shows that 42% of the population speaks Spanish at home, but only 18% speak English "less than very well." Hence most of the Latino population can be reached in either English or Spanish.

Many of the strategies detailed in the next section of this plan are broad communication efforts which address all or many of these target groups. Others are highly customized efforts to address specific audiences with appeals and information particularly relevant to their needs.

Marketing Strategies

Enhance Ease of Use

One of the greatest barriers to transit use is that it requires thinking...it's much harder than driving or asking someone for a ride. To overcome this barrier MCT needs to make public transit as easy to understand and use as possible.

This begins with creating a route structure that is clear and navigable. That effort is underway with the alternatives analysis. Next we must provide trip planning information in a form that is familiar and intuitive – not requiring potential users to “learn” to use the system through multiple sources and trial and error. That should be the top priority of the marketing program.

Current Passenger Information & Signage Programs

According to current riders, you must learn to use The Bus system through a combination of asking drivers or other riders and trial and error. This is the case for a number of reasons.

Printed Information

- The passenger information guides are not particularly user friendly. A rider must often use multiple schedules to understand the options for getting to key destinations. One extreme example: if I want to travel from Los Banos to Merced there are only five trips per day which do this. However, to see those five trips I have to look at three different schedule brochures. And to see the fare between the two points requires a fourth brochure.
- The route maps on some schedules are not very informative (direction of travel and bus stop locations are not shown) and in several instances they do not reflect actual routing due to changes or long-term detours.
- An updated system map, in print form, has not been available for some time. There is a system-wide map on the website.
- Several workshop participants liked the “old schedule booklet” which provided complete information about the system in a single guide. MCT moved away from this booklet to save printing costs.

Website

- The website is attractive and quite comprehensive – providing information about a variety of topics that are not easily found in the printed guides. It also offers a number of useful features such as the ability to see it in Spanish, a one click schedule finder and an email link for questions or concerns.
- However, the website information is based on the passenger guides and hence has the same weaknesses, requiring the rider to coordinate several sources to see how to make a trip.
- The website is an improvement over the printed guides in that it includes a systemwide map and uses color to make the route maps and schedules a bit easier to read. It also provides printable versions of the maps and schedule which is good.

- Merced College staff and other stakeholders expressed the desire for an automated trip planner on The Bus website.

Bus Stop Signage

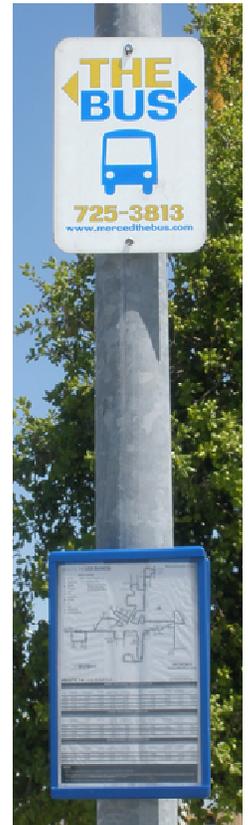
Signage is a key element of a system’s brand and serves two valuable purposes. First, it lets passengers know where to wait for the bus providing a sense of security and certainty that they are in the right place and the bus will stop for them. Second, and equally important, it advertises the fact that transit service is available within a given corridor or to a specific destination. Seeing bus stops signs along the road informs or reminds travelers that they have a transit alternative.

Currently, only a fraction of The Bus stops are signed and buses make “flag” stops anywhere along the route. This has negative impacts both on customer service and operations.

- For passengers, flag stops increase uncertainty. For a new rider, standing along the road at an unsigned location, trusting that you are on the route, it is a safe place to stop and that the driver will in fact see you and stop, requires a huge leap of faith.
- Flag stops offer particular challenges for disabled riders. For example sight-impaired riders have to flag the bus but can’t see it coming. One wheelchair-bound passenger at the Atwater meeting said she has tried to flag down the bus and several times the bus driver did not stop. It was generally agreed that having signed/designated stops will reduce problems both for drivers and passengers.
- For drivers, flag stops increase stress and make it harder to operate service according to schedule. Frequent flag stops (often multiple stops in a single block) slow the route and make buses run later.

Many of the stops that are signed have information panels such as the one shown at the right. These are filled with prints of the paper schedules for routes serving that stop.

MCT is currently planning to revise its signage and flag stop policy to address this issue. This section will provide support for that move.



Recommended Strategies

Printed Passenger Guides – Three Options

The revamping of The Bus routes likely to come out of this SRTP process will require that the passenger guides be entirely revised. It is recommended that MCT move to a printed schedule system that is more in line with how riders use the system. The simplest solution would be to *return to a single county-wide bus book*, streamlined to reduce its overall size (for example by combining Weekday and Saturday maps to show alternate routings using a second color) while increasing the quality of the information provided. This guide would include:

- Countywide System Map
- System Map for City of Merced
- Route map and schedule for all routes
- Fare, Paratransit and Bike Information

Another concept might involve *three passenger guides*, each from the point of view of a particular geographic ridership segment:

- Merced Guide - Include information about all local Merced routes.
 - City of Merced System Map showing all routes operating within the city of Merced
 - Detail maps for Transpo, Merced Mall, Merced College and UC Merced
 - Route map and schedule for local Merced routes
 - Relevant fare, paratransit and bike information
 - Small systemwide map showing countywide service with reference to website or other guides

This guide would be distributed at Transpo and at key locations throughout Merced (Merced Mall Info Booth, Merced College Information Desk, UC Merced, etc.) and would satisfy the information needs of a large segment of the ridership which travels primarily within Merced.

- Los Banos Guide – Include information about local Los Banos routes and Los Banos to Merced service.
 - Route map and schedule for local route(s) and route from Los Banos to Merced
 - Small systemwide map showing countywide service with reference to website or other guides
 - Relevant fare, paratransit and bike information

This guide would be available at Transpo and broadly distributed within Los Banos.

- Rural or Intercity Guide – Include information about all intercity routes
 - Systemwide map showing all intercity and deviated rural routes, with detail maps for individual communities
 - Detail of Merced showing the routing of intercity routes within Merced and highlighting the transfer to local routes at Transpo (refer to Merced guide for Merced route info)
 - Route maps (showing designated bus stop locations) and schedules for intercity routes (including Los Banos to Merced route) and deviated rural routes.
 - Complete fare chart, paratransit and bike information

This guide would be available at Transpo and broadly distributed within the rural communities outside of Merced and Los Banos – Atwater, Winton, Dos Palos, Delhi, Livingston, Planada, and La Grand.

The final alternative is to *stay with a system of individual schedules* (there should be fewer than in the past as route variations are simplified and combined under the new structure) and also publish a system map/passenger guide which provides an overview and complete fare information. The disadvantages of this system are:

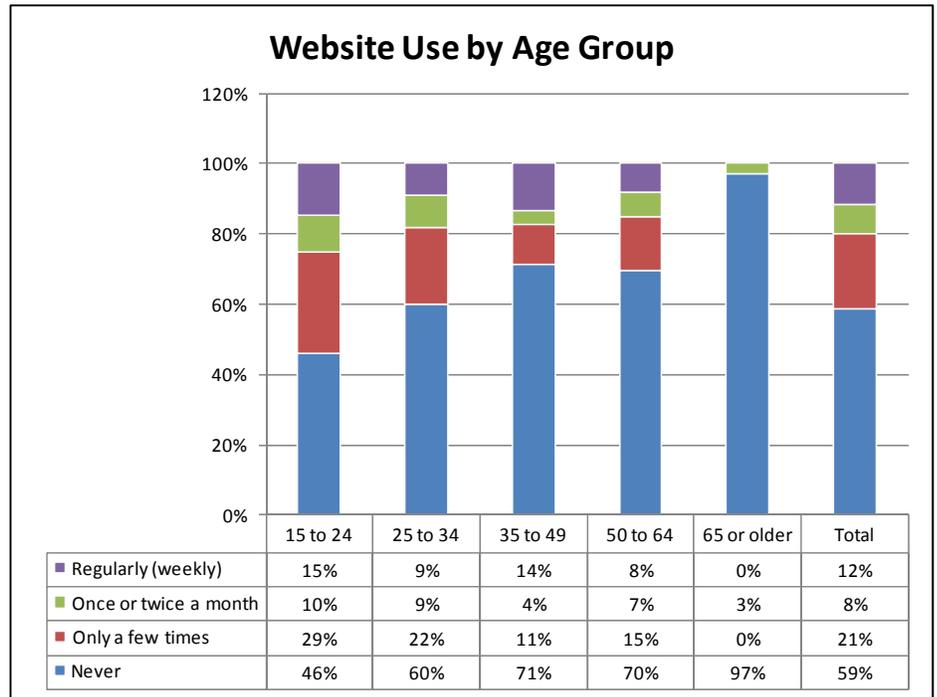
- The costs of producing, printing and maintaining inventory of a large number of publications
- Passenger inconvenience – they must reference multiple brochures to plan most trips

- The limitations of distribution - few locations will provide space for the complete set of guides, hence riders must go to Transpo to get complete information about the system.

Website

Only about 12% of riders use The Bus website regularly (weekly), but about 40% of riders have used it at least a few times. Among young riders (15-24), well over half have used the website and a quarter use it once a month or more.

Given the youth of the ridership and the large number of students who use The Bus, the website has the potential to be the system’s primary passenger information tool.



The current website is quite comprehensive and well organized. There are a few additions to the website which would dramatically increase its usefulness.

Trip Planner

Virtually everyone who uses a computer at all is familiar with how to use a trip planner to get driving directions. Getting transit directions should be as easy. By submitting route and schedule information to Google Transit, Merced County can become part of Google Transit and be integrated into the Google Maps system. This will allow passenger to get transit trip information in two easy ways:

- Using a trip planner form which should be a central feature of The Bus homepage
- From Google Maps, when someone gets directions for a trip, they can click on the transit icon to get transit directions for making that trip



In addition to allowing passenger to plan their own trips, this will make it easy for gatekeepers, such as social service case workers, to plan trips for their constituents. An example of a transit website with a Google Trip Planner as a central feature is at www.trinitytransit.org.

It is highly recommended that MCT become part of Google Transit and make the trip planner form a central element of its website homepage.

Real Time Information

In the very near future, MCT will fully implement AVL on its vehicles and will have real time information available for any given bus stop. This is another feature that should be added to the website – an easy bus stop lookup that will return next bus information for all routes serving that stop.

An example of a transit website which features both a trip planner and bus stop lookup on its homepage is at www.cumtd.com. Since MCT is planning to add stop numbers to its bus stop signs, you would want to give the option for

looking up a stop using either the stop number or the location such as Trimet's Transit Tracker – www.trimet.org.

Fare Calculator

A final feature which needs to be added to The Bus website is a simple fare calculator that would allow a person to determine the fare from community to community. If purchasing an All Day Pass is the least expensive way to make the trip, that is the response that should be returned.

Real Time Information – By Phone, Text or QR Code

Under the new Bus Stop signage plan (discussed below), all bus stops will have a unique four digit number which will be posted at the stop. This will allow riders to access real-time information for that stop via phone, text message or on the internet. An increasingly high percentage of the population carries a cell phone (particularly among the young population that makes up the majority of The Bus ridership). The bus stop numbers will allow them to call for next bus information or to scan a QR Code at the bus stop (using their smart phone) to access that information via the internet.



Bus Stop Signage

Merced County Transit is already moving forward with plan to upgrade bus stop signage. The following is recommended from a customer perspective:

- Move to a designated stop policy within Merced and Los Banos. Sign all bus stops, insuring that all destinations have a stop within reasonable proximity (one block if possible).
- Sign all significant boarding locations along rural routes. Allow flag stops at other locations, but to the extent possible make most flag stops unnecessary.
- At the right is a preliminary bus stop sign concept developed for The Bus. The 12" X 18" flag sign includes the following elements of information:
 - The basics – system logo, phone number, website and international bus symbol.
 - Bus Stop Number.
 - Decals showing what routes serve that stop (route number, name, destinations and days operated - could be expanded to include hours of service).
- The small secondary sign at eye level would include:
 - Bus stop number in print .
 - QR Code linked to real time information for that particular stop.
 - Bus Stop Number and possibly phone number in Braille.



Displays at Major Stops and Transit Centers

The implementation of the signage scheme discussed above would significantly reduce the need for information panels at individual bus stops. However, major bus stops and transfer points should continue to have effective visual displays showing a system map, scheduled departure times for each route serving that stop and fare information. Destinations which should have enhanced information displays include:

- Merced Mall



- Merced College – Merced and Los Banos Campuses
- UC Merced
- Los Banos Hospital

These displays should be mounted in large information cases affixed inside the shelters at these locations.

Transpo, the system's hub, should be a special focal point for the provision of passenger information including:

- Systemwide Map .
- Clear Schematic showing exactly where each route boards (this is a point of confusion for many passengers, especially those with sight impairments or other disabilities).
- Signage at each bay showing which buses are scheduled to depart from there and at what times.
- Electronic information panel showing next bus departure times.
- Signage directing riders inside for passes, passenger guides and personal assistance.

Increase Awareness and Enhance Image of the Bus Service

Branding

Branding is marketing at its most basic as it is how we identify a product or anything associated with it. The key to effective branding is consistency.

The Bus was rebranded in 2005 in conjunction with the previous marketing

plan. While all of the newer buses carry the current branding (shown at the right), there are still quite a few vehicles with the old graphics. Ideally, these mis-branded buses would be rebranded unless they are very near retirement.

The new bus stop signage program will, of course utilize the current branding and will increase visibility of the system countywide as currently unsigned bus stops are signed.

Bus shelters are an important element of a system's brand and visibility and Merced has taken the effective measure of making bus shelters a common blue that is consistent with the branding. Consistent use of color to identify transit facilities should continue to be utilized.



Campaign for Roll Out of System Changes

In the near future, MCT will be making a number of major changes which will make The Bus more convenient and easier to use, and possibly change the eligibility for using Dial-a-Ride. These changes should be packaged to form the focus of a public relations and advertising campaign to let current riders know what to expect and encourage potential new riders to give The Bus a try.

Key messages to incorporate into the campaign include:

- New routings throughout Merced – need for all riders to re-plan their trip.
- Streamlined routing – easier and faster.
- More frequent bus service in major corridors and to key destinations.
- Real Time information –so you know exactly when the bus is coming.
- Easy On-line Trip Planner.
- New fares – increased base fare.
- Local All Day Pass – unlimited boardings, free transfers.
- Changes in Dial-a-Ride services, fares and eligibility.

Different sets of communications efforts will be required to reach current riders and the community as a whole.

Current Bus Riders

- Large display at transit center.
- Bi-lingual on-bus posters and informational handouts (4-6 weeks in advance of change).
- New passenger guide distribution (2-3 weeks in advance of change).
- Extra staff at transit center to provide information (week before and after change).

Current Dial-a-Ride Riders

- Mailing to all ADA Certified individuals.
- Handout to all Dial-a-Ride users (4-6 weeks in advance of change).
- Expedited Certification Process for current users who qualify for ADA service.

Community Wide

- Series of News Releases leading up to change.
- Bilingual Print and Radio Ad Campaign promoting service improvements.

A recommended timeline for communicating the service changes included in the recommended SRTP plan follows. These actions are also integrated into the overall Action Plan at the end of the SRTP document.

News Release Calendar

During the coming year, MCT will be implementing a variety of changes that will greatly enhance transit service in the County. In addition to the changes called for in the SRTP, there will be the implementation of AVL and the provision of real time information to riders. To maximize positive news coverage during this transition period and beyond, a systematic news release calendar is recommended.

- Identify those activities each month which are news worthy.
- Prepare and distribute news releases on a regular timely basis.
- Follow-up with local media contacts to insure that releases are going to the appropriate individuals.
- Hold media conferences to discuss key milestones (e.g. the adoption of a new service plan)

On-Going Advertising

Creative Approach

While funds for media advertising will be limited, as they are available it is important that they be used effectively. MCT has attempted to show the diversity of people using transit through the use of “people” photos on schedule covers. However, the stock photos used are clearly that...stock photos...and do not ring true as actual transit users. Similarly, they are not specific to transportation and thus convey little about the nature of the service being promoted.

Advertising for The Bus needs to convey three important points:

- The benefits which the transit service offers potential users – economy, reliability, convenience, ease of use and environmental benefit
- The fact that “people like you” are already riding the system and benefiting from it.
- A call to action that is easy to follow – e.g. using Google Transit to plan a trip.

One way to accomplish this is by using actual transit users to tell why and how they use transit. By identifying and involving current users who are demographically and psychographically similar to the target groups you hope to attract, you can convey the information in a very credible, relevant manner.

The ad shown here is an example of a testimonial ad used by MBTA in the Morongo Basin. MBTA created a series of these ads – print and radio – featuring different types of riders who represented their various target groups. The ads and commercials communicate on several levels:

- They show that “people like you” ride the bus already and like it.
- They provide the opportunity to discuss the personal benefits of transit – I save money, I save time, it’s easy, etc.
- They showcase the communities served by MBTA.
- They even speak to individuals not interested in using transit by communicating who is in fact benefiting from the system – workers, students, seniors, etc.

“I ride MBTA to work – and I save over four hundred dollars a month.”

“I was tired of paying so much for gas to drive my truck from Yucca Valley to Twenty-nine Palms to work. Now I catch the Route 1 bus and I get there in about 45 minutes and always on time. I probably save a hundred dollars or more a week by riding. I’m able to go back and forth all month long for \$30.”

Jason Chavez
Jiffy Lube Employee
Twenty-nine Palms Resident

Where can MBTA take you?
Yucca Valley
Joshua Tree
CMC
29 Palms
Marine Base
Landers

Find out how we can get you around the Morongo Basin and to Palm Springs, and ask about money-saving monthly passes like Jason uses. Visit our website or call (760) 366-2395.

www.mbtabus.com

MBTA
MORONGO BASIN TRANSIT AUTHORITY

Target markets which would be the focus of testimonials might be: Merced College Student, UC Merced Student, Merced Mall employee, Senior, Latino Family, High School student, Commuter to Downtown Merced, and so on.

Another effective approach would be to focus on the trips that can be easily made using transit. The ad at the right is an ad for Trinity Transit that takes this approach, highlighting the ability to travel to a key destination.

The Bus might for example create ads that feature:

- The communities which are connected by The Bus.
- Ease of getting to Merced College from anywhere in Merced or the County.
- Economy and convenience of riding The Bus to Merced Mall – for work for shopping.
- Ease and economy of traveling between Los Banos and Merced by bus.
- Direct service to UC Merced.
- Evening service to key destinations (Merced College, Merced Mall, UC Merced).

Trinity Transit

Need a Ride to Redding?
From Weaverville, Hayfork, Lewiston or Douglas City

Mondays through Friday, Trinity Transit offers two round trips between Weaverville and Redding, with connecting service to and from Hayfork and Lewiston. It's an easy, low cost way to go shopping at Mt. Shasta Mall, visit the doctor or connect to Amtrak and Greyhound for longer trips.

Check out low fares at www.trinitytransit.org and use Google Transit to plan your trip.

Trinity Transit connects you to the County, the Coast, Redding and the Region
(530) 623-LIFT (5438) www.trinitytransit.org

Media

Local media available to MCT for advertising and public relations include newspapers in Merced and Los Banos, a large number of radio stations and community and campus websites. While the development of a specific media campaign is beyond the scope of this plan, following is a list of the key media recommended for consideration.

Local Newspapers

- Merced Sun Star
- Los Banos Enterprise

Local Radio

- KHTN-FM (#1 – 8.5 share)
Contemporary 'HOT' format. Primary Audience 18-34. "50% of the Valley's young Latino audience tunes to HOT 1047."
- KUBB-FM (#2 – 7.0 share)
Country format.
- KABX – FM (#3 – 5.4 share)
Oldies format.

- KHOP – FM (#4 – 5.0 share)
Regional Mexican.
- KLOQ-FM (#4 – 5.0 share)
Contemporary Hits format.

Note: Radio Merced (Mapleton Communications) owns five local stations, reaching various demographics, including the #3 and #4 stations. They might be a potential promotional partner.

Community Websites

- www.mymerced.com
- Newspaper and radio station websites

Campus Newspapers and Websites

- Merced College website – www.mccd.edu
- Merced College Facebook Page
- Blue Devil Report – Merced College Student Newspaper
- UC Merced Website – www.ucmerced.edu
- UC Merced Facebook Page
- UCMercednews.blogspot.com

Spanish Language Media

- There are several Spanish language radio stations rated by Arbitron for the Merced area. The top three:
 - KHOP – FM (#4 – 5.0 share)
 - KOLB – FM (#9 – 3.1 share)
 - KOND – FM (#11 – 2.7 share)
- Telemundo (KNSO)
From Fresno but has a Merced office and strong Merced viewership.
- *Vida en el Valle*
A weekly Spanish language newspaper with a Merced edition with circulation of almost 16,000.

Educate Gatekeepers

Many organizations serve as gatekeepers for potential transit riders. These include social service agencies, schools and colleges, youth programs, support organizations for the disabled and medical services. These organizations, and particularly their front line employees, are often charged with identifying transportation options for getting their clients to programs, appointments, training, classes, interviews and jobs. As a result, they have the potential to serve as “salespeople” for public transit. In interviews conducted as part of the outreach for the SRTP, it was noted that many such gatekeepers are eager for more information and more interaction with the MCT, so that they can better educate their constituents about how transit can meet their transportation needs. To capitalize on this potential, MCT should consider the following three element program.

Establish and Maintain Gatekeeper Network

Create a list of gatekeeper contacts that can be reached via e-mail. This list should include:

- Social Service Agencies
- Disability Support Programs
- Secondary Schools
- Colleges and Vocational Schools
- Senior Centers and Senior Complexes
- Youth Programs
- Medical Clinics

These individuals should be provided with regular updates about changes in transit services and programs. When appropriate, E-mails can include an 8 ½" X 11" PDF flyer for printing and posting or distributing to co-workers and/or clients.

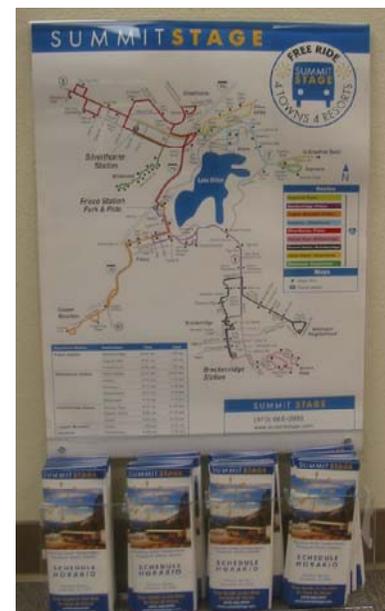
Conduct Travel Training with Gatekeeper Staff

Many gatekeepers are not familiar with the transit system and have trouble planning trips for their constituents. They welcome the idea of transit travel training for their staff people – an overview of the transit network and how it works, combined with detailed guidance on trip planning and the opportunity for an interactive discussion and Q&A session. Travel training sessions can be delivered in various ways:

- Organization specific staff meetings
- Social service council meetings
- Meetings hosted by MCT to which various individuals are invited
- As a webinar in which a variety of organization are invited to participate

Provide Tools for Use in Travel Training Constituents

- Transit displays for lobbies at social service offices, clinics and other high traffic locations.
- Supplies of passenger guides.
- Customizable PowerPoint presentation about how to use the transit system and plan trips.
- Customized handouts, posters or articles for distribution through internal channels.



Promote Ridership among High Potential Targets

The more specific and targeted a marketing appeal is, the more likely it is to generate behavior change. This is especially true in public transit, where a high level of information is required before a potential customer “tries” the product. If we provide potential riders with information and appeals that are relevant to their needs, we are more likely to capture their attention and get them to consider transit as an option.

By working in partnership with “gatekeepers” for key market segments, there are opportunities for MCT to implement highly targeted promotional efforts to generate increased ridership among key potential target groups. A few of these are obvious and can be implemented immediately. Others will require the development of relationships with relevant gatekeepers.

Merced College – Merced & Los Banos Campuses

Administrators at both Merced College campuses are eager to work in partnership with MCT to promote transit use among their students. Aspects of a targeted program might include:

- On-campus transit information display – highlighting routes serving the campus
- Schedule and information distribution by “Switchboard” staff
- On-campus pass sales location (selling customized semester-pass)
- Link on college website and Facebook page
- Email messages to students (from the College) encouraging them to try transit, promoting availability of the semester pass, and other relevant appeals.
- Post information on “big screens” at beginning of semester
- Ads/articles in student newspaper

Key Messages to communicate to students are:

- Ease of getting to campus by bus
- Economy of commuting by bus – low cost of semester pass
- No need to search for or pay for parking
- Lots of students already riding bus

UC Merced Students, Staff and Faculty

There are similar opportunities for working through UC Merced channels to market to their students, staff and faculty.

Outlying Communities

The Bus serves a number of small communities with small population bases. It would be ideal if each of these communities could have one central location where a transit information display is placed and maintained and passes are sold. This might be a market, a post office, a community center or some other highly frequented location within the community. This would serve to establish greater visibility for The Bus , as well as making transit information easier to access.

Other Targeted Programs

Other target segments offer potential for targeted programs IF appropriate relationships can be developed with gatekeepers for these segments. For example:

- Middle and high school students are a natural target for direct marketing through the schools – both to encourage commute ridership and weekend/summer ridership for recreation.
- Merced Mall businesses employ hundreds of workers who have great transit service to their destination. Employers might be engaged to promote transit use among their work force through distribution of targeted flyers, posting of information in employee break rooms and other direct communications efforts.
- City and County workers with offices in Downtown Merced likely have direct transit service from wherever they live. Targeted communications (via interoffice mail or e-mail) can show them how the revised service plan will make transit an easier way to commute to work.
- Senior Citizens who attend activities at the Senior Centers or live in senior specific apartment complexes which are served by transit can be targeted with transit information displays, customized information materials and personal presentations.

Build Customer Relationship

Social Media

Social media offers an opportunity for a transit system to establish a more personal relationship with its customers. MCT is already using Rider Alerts and Twitter to communicate timely messages to riders who follow them. MCT may wish to consider establishing a Face Book page to provide an opportunity for two way communication. This would be particularly useful in advance of the service change as it would allow riders to ask questions and provide feedback on the new system design.

During future planning efforts, having a regular Facebook fan base can aid efforts to recruit participation in public workshops and outreach efforts.

Rider Alert: Check here for rider alerts and news updates.

▶ [Read More](#)



Twitter: Receive real-time service announcements by following The Bus on Twitter!

▶ [Click Here](#)



Customer Service

During outreach for the SRTP, some riders expressed the need for a more effective complaint process. They said that if they follow the standard process to complain, nothing happens. The Bus website includes an e-mail link and phone numbers for questions and comments. Perhaps a special number and/or link for complaints is needed with a formal process for recording, research and reporting the resolution of these contacts.

Fare Media

Fares and fare media are an important part of MCT’s relationship with its customers. They are also, of course, a critical component of the average fare equation and the farebox recovery ratio.

Here we will discuss the current fare media and the spectrum of fare media most likely to meet the needs of MCT’s various ridership segments. The final pricing of these media will need to be determined based on their likely impact on average fare and farebox recovery.

Current Fare Media

■ **Cash Fare**

According to the on-board survey findings, more than half of The Bus riders pay their fare in cash.

The base fare for The Bus of \$1.00 for local trips is quite low. However, the policy of requiring a full fare for each boarding, doubles the functional fare for many local Merced riders (37% say they transfer). Long distance fares can be as high as \$10 one-way, but most rides are \$6 or less and with the Systemwide Day pass no fare is really more than \$6.00.

■ **Dial-a-Ride Cash Fares**

Dial-a-Ride fares are essentially the same as fixed route fares. A local DAR trip is \$2 – the same as a local fixed route trip requiring two buses. This is atypical – DAR fares are generally double fixed route fares to reflect the higher cost of operation. The equal fares provide no incentive for riders to choose fixed route over Dial-a-Ride.

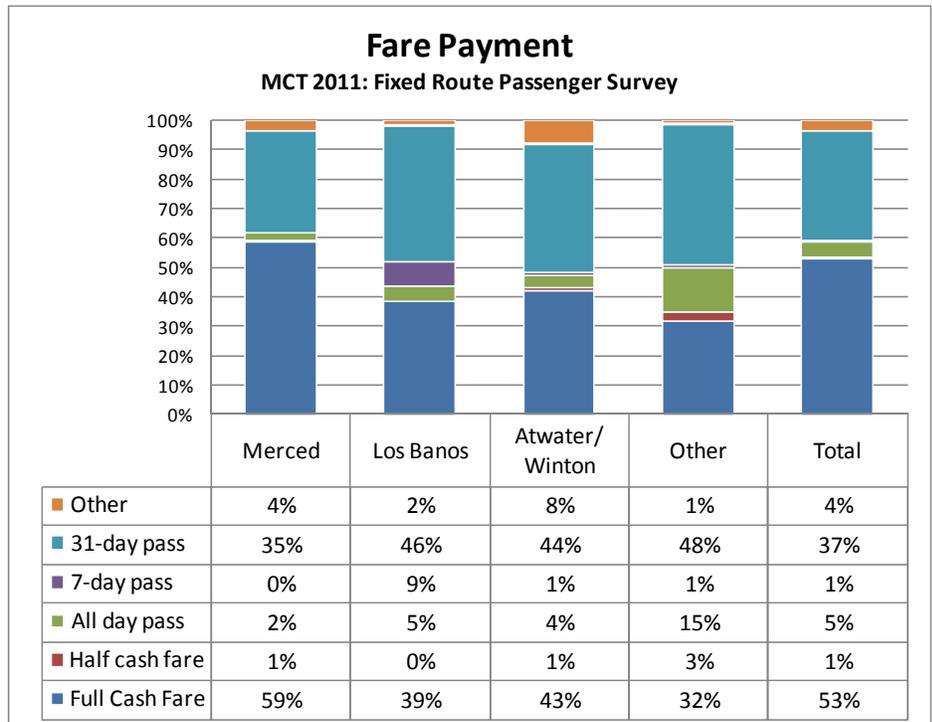
■ **Half Fare**

Until recently The Bus half fare for seniors and persons with disabilities was only offered from 10 am to 2 pm on urban fixed routes. Now this fare is available throughout the day and boardings within the fare category have increased dramatically. It remains to be seen how much of this ridership is replacing DAR demand.

■ **Monthly Pass**

In the passenger survey, 37% of riders said they use the unlimited ride 31-day pass. Most of these are riders who use the bus four or more days a week. Currently MCT offers both a Fixed Route monthly pass (\$45) and a Dial-a-Ride monthly pass (which is also good on fixed route (\$55).

NOTE: It is very unusual for a system to offer any kind of unlimited ride pass on DAR, since every trip made increases cost. The objective is more often to limit rather than expand the number of trips. On fixed route buses, unlimited ride passes are generally seen as a way to fill excess capacity while



benefitting the system's most frequent users. MCT not only offers this low cost monthly pass for Dial-a-Ride users, but also includes DAR in its unlimited ride All Day and 7-Day passes.

- Seven Day Pass

Only 1% of riders surveyed said that they used the 7-Day pass, despite the fact that this would seem to be an attractive fare medium for low wage workers. There appears to be little awareness for the Seven Day Pass and it is not clear where to purchase it.

- Systemwide All Day Pass

The systemwide Day Pass is priced at \$6. It is very attractive for long distance travelers (\$6 is less than the one-way fare for many inter-community trips) and essentially reduces the maximum fare for any trip to \$6 (rather than \$10 as quoted on the fare brochure). Despite this, it is used by only 4% of riders. This is likely because it provides little value for local riders who would have to use six buses in a day before breaking even.

Recommended Fare Media Menu

To match fare media to the needs of riders, encourage utilization of fixed route services whenever possible, provide equity in the fare system and reward loyal passengers, a revised system of fixed route fares and fare media are proposed are part of the SRTP. Fare media would include:

- Cash and Half Fare

Increase the base fare to \$1.50. Increase the half fare to \$.75 and continue to make it available at all times. The fare increase might be accomplished in one or two increments.

- Local Day Pass (Merced & LB)

Offer a local day pass in Merced and Los Banos, which would be valid for unlimited boardings within that community. Price the Local Day Pass at \$4.00. This would facilitate transfers and eliminate the penalty for those who must transfer.

- Systemwide Fixed Route Day Pass

Continue to offer a system-wide day pass good on all Fixed Routes only. Price would likely increase to \$8.00.

- 7-Day Pass

Continue to offer a 7-Day Pass good on all Fixed Routes only. At the current price of \$20, the pass would be a reasonably good deal for local travelers and a very good deal for inter-community travelers.

- Monthly Pass and Half-Fare Senior/Disabled Monthly Pass

Offer a 31-Day unlimited ride pass (good on fixed routes only) at two fare levels – full fare and half fare. The current monthly pass breaks even at 45 rides or 22.5 round trips. Using a factor of 40 rides or 20 round trips, the full fare monthly pass would be priced at \$60.00 and the half-fare pass at \$30.00.

- Semester Pass for Merced College Students

The ultimate goal would be to establish a pre-paid program with Merced College. However, this will take time. In the short term, consider offering a Semester Pass good for unlimited rides on fixed routes from the first to the last dates of the semester. This could be priced as a 4-month pass with an additional discount for advance payment....possibly \$180. The pass would be sold on campus in Merced and Los

Banos such that students could purchase it at the beginning of the semester when they get their financial aid.

Fare Media Sales Outlets

The Bus' website says that you can purchase monthly passes and day passes on the bus. It also gives five locations where monthly passes can be purchased. It does not say where 7-Day passes can be purchased.

Pass sales locations include:

- Merced Transportation Center - 710 W. 16th Street, Merced
- Merced County Transit Office - 880 Thornton Road, Merced
- Merced City Hall - 18th St. & "N" St., Merced
- Merced Mall - Information Booth
- Los Banos Community Center - 645 7th St., Los Banos

Transpo, the Merced Mall and Los Banos Community Center are excellent sales outlets. It would be useful to establish a broader network of sales outlets and/or to sell passes on the website. This would avoid the need for riders to spend time and money making an extra trip just to get their pass.

It needs to be made clear how the 7-Day Pass can be purchased. On the bus and at Transpo would be a minimum to make this a viable medium. The retail outlets would be useful if it is to be marketed to workers as a "work-week" pass.

Additional Pass Outlets might include:

- Merced College – Cashier or Bookstore
- Raley's Grocery Stores - Merced
- Save Mart or Food 4 Less – Los Banos
- Major social service programs
- Senior Center

Marketing Strategies for Consolidation

If UC Merced's Cat Tracks is consolidated with The Bus, a number of specific marketing issues will need to be addressed.

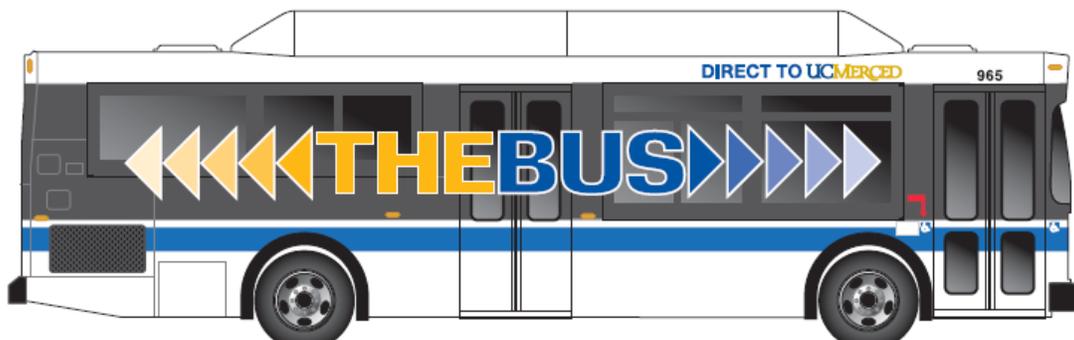
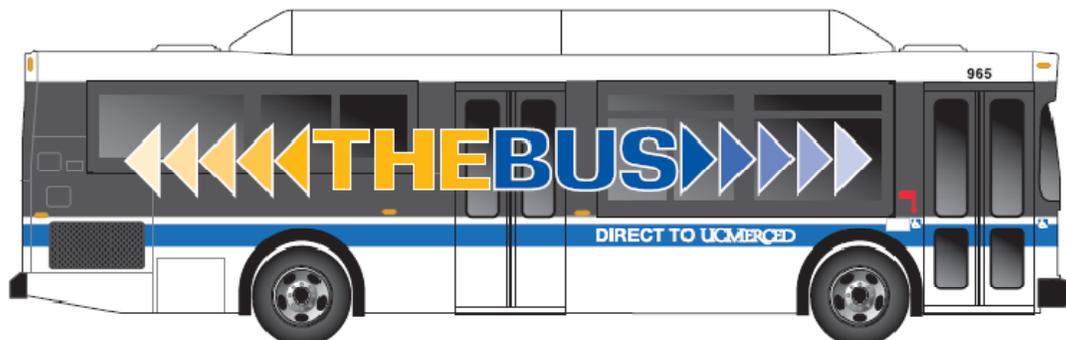
Branding

Under a consolidated system, it is anticipated that there would be co-branding of routes serving UC Merced.

A variety of possibilities exist, including:

- Retain existing The Bus brand on all buses. ADD UC Merced designation to buses on routes that go to campus.
- Retain existing The Bus brand, but add "destination line" to logo (using UC Merced logo) on all buses.
- Retain The Bus name, but create entirely new vehicle graphics (wrap) that incorporates UC Merced identity (and possibly other destinations)
- Go through a branding process to create an entirely new brand that is acceptable to both TJPAMC and UC Merced. This would include a new name, logo, vehicle design and signage.

Based on costs/advantages of each option, it is recommended that The Bus brand be retained and that a UC Merced designation be added to buses on routes that serve the campus. This designation might say something like "Direct to UC Merced" using the UC Merced logo as shown in the illustrations below.



The advantages of this approach are that it involves minimal expense and can be implemented quickly. In addition, it retains the core branding which is familiar to riders, while convey the important information regarding which routes now serve the UC Merced campus. It will require that a subset of the fleet be dedicated to routes M, C1, C2 and possibly 8. However, these routes will likely require the higher capacity vehicles, making this a reasonable approach.

Passenger Information

The Bus website will be an important information sources for UC Merced transit users. MCT may wish to create a dedicated landing page for UC Merced students which can be linked from the UC Merced website. This page would highlight those routes and services of particular relevance to UC Merced students, staff and faculty. For example, a small version of the system map graphic might highlight those routes with direct service to the campus and provide links to those schedules/route maps as well as information about the connection from Amtrak to UC Merced.

Similarly, The Bus/UC Merced may wish to consider the production of a UC Merced “centric” passenger guide for distribution on campus and to all incoming students. Like the landing page, this guide would highlight routes and services of particular relevance to UC Merced students and commuter while referring them to the general website or passenger guide for broader transit information.

Transition Marketing

During the transition from separate systems to a single integrated system, it will be important to make UC Merced students, staff and faculty fully aware of the changes and how them will be impacted. Ideally, the transition would occur at the start of Fall semester. All incoming/returning students should received information via advance mailings. In addition, the transition should be promoted via on-campus and residence hall displays, notices on the UC Merced website and e-mails to staff and faculty.

On-campus Communications

Even if The Bus becomes the operator for all transit services to UC Merced, the University will still have critical role in promotion of the service. The Bus and UC Merced staff should work together to develop an optimal mix of campus-based communications strategies to inform students, staff and faculty about the services and to encourage maximum utilization. Communications strategies which should be consider for on-going use include:

- On-campus transit information displays at key location such as the Kolligian Library, Administration Building, Parking and Transportation Services and the Residence Halls.
- Electronic communications including links on the UC Merced website and e-mail notices to communicate service changes or other key events.
- Communications to incoming students before they arrive at UC Merced, to let them know what their transportation options will be. These communications might be electronic or hard copy.
- At-the-stop information displays (possibly real-time information) at the Kolligian Library bus stop.

Budget and Staffing

Budget

An industry rule of thumb is that a transit agency should spend 1-2% of the operating budget on promotional marketing activities (not including provision of basic passenger information and staffing). This would require an annual marketing budget of between \$100,000 and \$200,000 for The Bus. During the first year of implementation, start-up costs for promotion of the revised system are likely require a budget at the higher end of this range, while in later years a smaller budget will suffice.

A sample budget for the first year of the SRTP, might look like this. Those costs which are start-up costs (e.g. revamping the passenger information program) are highlighted and would be lower in later years when only maintenance efforts are required.

<i>The Bus Marketing</i>	<i>Planning</i>	<i>Production</i>	<i>Printing</i>	<i>Media</i>	<i>Total</i>
Develop Detailed Campaign & Media Plan	\$10,000				
Revamp Printed Passenger Information Bus Stop Displays (Transfer points)		\$25,000 \$5,000	\$20,000		
Update Website incl Google Trip Planner		\$15,000			
System Change Campaign (print/radio)		\$7,500		\$60,000	
Gatekeeper Outreach					
Targeted Programs		\$2,500	\$5,000		
Total	\$10,000	\$55,000	\$25,000	\$60,000	\$150,000

Staffing

Implementation of the recommendations included in this plan, particularly those which involve gatekeeper outreach and targeted programs, will require staff support beyond what is currently available. It is estimated that a staff commitment of 20-25 hours per week would be appropriate for the tasks involved in implementation of the marketing plan. These would include:

- Maintain The Bus website
- Conduct Social Media Marketing
- Oversee distribution of passenger information and maintenance of information displays

- Outreach to Gatekeepers
- Targeted marketing efforts (Merced College and UC Merced Students, Secondary Students, Seniors, etc.)
- News Releases
- Oversight of campaign development and production
- Media Buying/Planning
- Promotional Activities and Events

If possible, sharing a marketing staff person with Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System would offer a number of advantages and economies. Many of the tasks to be performed for each system would be similar and the systems share a number of stakeholders, bus stops and information distribution sites.