Thursday, May 11, 2023

The Honorable Toni Atkins
Senator President Pro Tempore
California State Senate

The Honorable Nancy Skinner
Chair, Senate Budget & Fiscal
Review Committee

Re: Request to Protect Public Transit in FY 2023-24 State Budget
Dear President Pro Tempore Atkins, Speaker Rendon, Chair Skinner and Chair Ting:

On behalf of the Survive and Thrive Coalition and the undersigned organizations, we write in advance of Governor Newsom’s May revision to thank you for the attention you have already given to the transit fiscal cliff issue this year, and to ask for your support to avert the fiscal cliff facing California’s transit agencies in order to prevent cuts, rebuild ridership, and put transit on a path to thrive. A robust and reliable transit system is necessary to achieve the state’s climate, clean air, mobility, equity, and economic recovery goals and provides tens of thousands of good-paying union jobs.

Residents of all income levels depend on transit to access jobs and other destinations, offering a cleaner, healthier, more affordable travel alternative to congested freeways and roads that harm productivity and erode our overall quality of life. Cutting transit service would turn today’s transit riders into tomorrow’s freeway traffic, adding to household travel costs and exacerbating environmental injustices by virtue of increased vehicle pollution. Frontline workers and frontline communities — working people, renters, youth, seniors, low-income people, people of color, and people with disabilities — represent the core of current transit ridership and stand to lose most if California allows transit agencies to fall off the fiscal cliff.

We cannot afford to lose transit in California.

As advocates, transit agencies, and community-based organizations from across the state, we support the California Transit Association’s funding request and policy recommendations to provide $5.15 billion in multi-year funding over five years to address the near-term operating deficits faced by California transit agencies. These sources include: additional appropriation of diesel sales tax revenue, cap and trade discretionary funds, and maintaining and expanding flexibility to convert transit capital funding to transit operations. As it relates to flexibility within Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program funds, we support this as an option that may help address the transit operating deficits in some, but not all, areas of the state; some regions like the Bay Area are depending on state transit capital funding to leverage billions of dollars in federal funds and complete generational safety and mobility projects. Regions should retain discretion as to whether they exercise this option.

We are also proposing additional revenue options to fully meet the statewide need to prevent service cuts and regrow ridership. These sources include: increasing the Transportation Improvement Fee and reallocating to transit a portion of the state’s increase in federal highway dollars, which are at historic highs under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The magnitude of this crisis requires us to consider all available options—but we recommend the Governor and legislature prioritize funding sources that preserve and even accelerate California’s commitments to equitable pollution reduction and minimize financial burdens on low-income Californians.

**Long Term Financial Stability, Near Term Improvements and Accountability**

California’s transit agencies are fully committed to accepting new state performance and financial accountability measures in return for state investment. Our broad coalition believes this additional oversight by the state is appropriate and supports the creation of new accountability measures in return for this investment. Accountability is necessary to ensure the state’s multi-year commitment not only sustains vital transit service but also helps initiate, accelerate and scale rider-focused improvements to rebuild ridership and help put transit agencies on a clear and
expedient path to fiscal stability. These could include safety and cleanliness improvements, wayfinding, fare coordination and affordability, transit pass discount programs for students and other special categories of riders, efforts to address workforce shortages, transit priority, and administrative resource sharing and collaboration. The Legislature should consider requiring transit agencies to demonstrate the steps operators are taking to measurably attract and retain new riders, adjustments made to their service to meet demand, as well as agencies’ latest ridership figures and operating deficits. The Legislature could also ask the State’s transportation and key partner agencies to outline steps they are taking in the form of investments and policies to support transit agencies' continued recovery and growth and change their policies as necessary.

The Legislature should also consider creating a statutory, multi-jurisdictional framework for consistently documenting and measuring improvements that increase the number of people taking public transit, which is important for revenue recovery and long-term financial stability, as well as delivering on transit’s climate, air quality, mobility, equity, and economic benefits.

In closing, we’d like to express our appreciation for your strong leadership and support of public transit over the last several years and once again thank you for acknowledging the importance of this issue. We hope to work with each of your offices, the Newsom Administration, transit agency partners and other stakeholders on a multi-year Transit Recovery Package incorporated in the FY 2023-24 State Budget.

Sincerely,

Andrew B. Fremier
Executive Director, MTC

Robert Powers
General Manager, BART

Jeff Tumlin
Director of Transportation, San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency

Mike Hursh
General Manager, AC Transit

April Chan
General Manager/CEO/Executive Director, SamTrans/San Mateo County Transportation Authority

Michelle Bouchard
Executive Director, Caltrain

Steve Adams
Transit Manager, Union City Transit

Bryan Albee
Transit Systems Manager, Sonoma County Transit
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Jason Baker
Senior Vice President,
Silicon Valley Leadership Group

Daniel Barad
Associate Director, Sierra Club

Rashidi Barnes
Chief Executive Officer, Tri Delta Transit

Tilly Chang
Executive Director, San Francisco County Transportation Authority

Sean Charpentier
Executive Director, City/County Association of Governments of San Mateo County

Bill Churchill
General Manager, County Connection

Eddy Cumins
General Manager,
Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit

Jack Deutsch-Gross
Policy Director,
Transform

Ian Griffiths
Policy Director, Seamless Bay Area

Tim Haile
Executive Director, CCTA

Jared Hall
Transit Manager, Petaluma Transit

Daryl Halls
Executive Director, Solano Transportation Authority (Solano Express)

Johannes J. Hoevertsz
Director, Sonoma County Department of Public Infrastructure

Caro Jauregui
Co-Executive Director, Cal Walks

Beth Kranda
Executive Director, Solano County Transit

Tess Lengyel
Executive Director, Alameda County Transportation Commission
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Arturo E. Aguilar  
Chairman, California Conference Board Amalgamated Transit Union

Eli Akira Kaufman  
BikeLA

Stephen Baiter  
Executive Director, East Bay Economic Development Alliance

Matthew Baker  
Policy Director, Planning and Conservation League

Shiloh Ballard  
Executive Director, Silicon Valley Bike Coalition

Steve Birdlebough  
Chair, Sonoma County Transportation and Land Use Coalition

Eugene Bradley  
Founder, Silicon Valley Transit Users

Kevin Buchanan  
Volunteer Lead, SLOCo YIMBY

Adam Buchbinder  
Policy Lead, Silicon Valley Democratic Socialists of America (SV DSA)

Sheri Burns  
Executive Director, Silicon Valley Independent Living Center

Jordan Panana Carbajal  
Legislative Advocate, California YIMBY

Patrick Chaffey  
Chair Housing Working Group, Silicon Valley Democratic Socialists of America (SV DSA)

Mike Chen  
Volunteer Lead, Northern Neighbors

Rita Clement  
Transportation Co-Chair, San Diego 350

Ellie Cohen  
CEO, The Climate Center

Corinna Contreras  
Policy Advocate, Climate Action Campaign

Janet Cox  
CEO, Climate Action California

Maxwell Davis  
Volunteer Lead, Urban Environmentalists

Zack Defazio Farrell  
RideSD

David Diaz, MPH  
Executive Director, Active San Gabriel Valley

Scott Epstein  
Policy and Research Director, Abundant Housing LA

Amie Fishman  
Executive Director, NPH Northern California

Christine Fitzgerald  
Community Advocate, Silicon Valley Independent Living Center

Laura Foote  
Executive Director, YIMBY Action

John Ford  
Executive Director, Commute.org

Alexa Forrester  
Co-Lead, Bikeable Santa Rosa
Rosanne Foust
President and CEO,
San Mateo County Economic Development
Association (SAMCEDA)

Robert Fruchtmann
Volunteer Lead,
San Francisco YIMBY

Glen Garfunkel
Co-chair, Climate Reality Project,
Silicon Valley

Steve Gelb
Transportation Co-Chair,
San Diego 350

Solange Gould
Co-Director,
Human Impact Partners

Vinita Goyal
Executive Director,
San Francisco Transit Riders

Sara Greenwald
Transportation Committee Member,
350 Bay Area Transportation Committee

Chris Guenther
Co-Lead,
Bikeable Santa Rosa

Elizabeth Hansburg
Cofounder & Director,
People for Housing Orange County

Josh Hawn
President,
Common Ground California

Heather Hood
VP and Market Leader Northern California,
Enterprise Community Partners

Brandi Howard
President & CEO,
East Bay Community Foundation

Michelle Hudson
Co-Leader,
San Mateo Climate Action Team

Rafael Jaime
President,
UAW Local 2865

Lavie Kakol
Democratic Socialists of America,
San Francisco

Mikey Knab
Director of Policy,
Climate Action Campaign

Tarrell Kullaway
Executive Director,
Marin County Bicycle Coalition

Gary Latshaw
Co-chair, Silicon Valley Chapter of the
Climate Reality Project

Adina Levin
Executive Director, Friends of Caltrain

Jeremy Levine
Volunteer Lead, Peninsula for Everyone

Bryn Lindblad
Deputy Director, Climate Resolve

Glenn Loveall
Volunteer Lead,
Napa-Solano for Everyone

Liza Lutzker
Coordinating Committee Member,
Walk Bike Berkeley

Kevin Ma
UUCPA Green Sanctuary Committee
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title and Organization</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jerry Maldonado</td>
<td>Vice President of Programs, PolicyLink</td>
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<tr>
<td>Richard Marcantonio</td>
<td>Managing Attorney, Public Advocates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Martin</td>
<td>Community Engagement Program Manager, Center for Independent Living</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steve Marzo</td>
<td>Volunteer Lead, South Side Forward</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jonathan Matz</td>
<td>California Senior Policy Manager, Safe Routes Partnership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ashley McClure, MD</td>
<td>Climate Health Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jodie Medeiros</td>
<td>Executive Director, Walk San Francisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda Millstein, MD</td>
<td>Climate Health Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomiquia Moss</td>
<td>Founder and CEO, All Home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cynthia Murray</td>
<td>CEO &amp; President, North Bay Leadership Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Debbie Mytels</td>
<td>Chair, Peninsula Interfaith Climate Action (PICA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jane Natoli</td>
<td>Volunteer Lead, Grow The Richmond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia Nichols Gonzalez</td>
<td>Organizing Manager, California, Mothers Out Front CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marven E. Norman</td>
<td>Executive Director, Inland Empire Biking Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nassim Nouri</td>
<td>Coordinating Committee Member, Green Party of Santa Clara County</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ryan O'Connell</td>
<td>Principle, How to ADU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zayda Ortiz</td>
<td>Center for Independent Living Berkeley (CIL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse O'Sullivan</td>
<td>Policy Counsel, Circulate SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristina Pappas</td>
<td>President, SF League of Conservation Voters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maia Piccagli</td>
<td>Mothers Out Front SF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amee Raval</td>
<td>Policy and Research Director, Asian Pacific Environmental Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah Redwood</td>
<td>Director of Legislative and Community Affairs, Extinction Rebellion San Francisco Bay Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany Rodriguez</td>
<td>TDM Manager, San Jose State University, Associated Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Rothman</td>
<td>Member Coordinating Committee, 1000 Grandmothers for Future Generations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Rudolph, MD</td>
<td>Center for Climate Change and Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jared Sanchez</td>
<td>Senior Policy Advocate, CalBike</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rafa Sonnenfeld  
Volunteer Lead,  
Santa Rosa YIMBY

David Sorrell  
Northern California Chapter of the  
Association for Commuter Transportation

Arnold Sowell, Jr.  
Executive Director, NextGen California

Brian Stewart  
Founder, Electrify Now

Annie Stuart  
Steering Committee Member, 350 Petaluma

Jack Swearengen  
Chair, Friends of SMART

Neal Sweeney  
President, UAW Local 5810

Jean Tepperman  
Sunflower Alliance

Laura Tolkoff  
Transportation Policy Director, SPUR

Milo Trauss  
Volunteer Lead, Progress Noe Valley

Igor Tregub  
Alameda County Democratic Party

Hoai-An Truong  
Mothers Out Front Silicon Valley

Marc Vukcevich  
Co-Director of State Policy, Streets For All

David Watson  
Mountain View YIMBY

Christy Wegener  
Executive Director, Livermore Amador Valley Transit Authority, Tri-Valley Wheels

Cheryl Weiden  
Steering Committee Member, 350 Silicon Valley

Lauren Weston  
Executive Director, Acterra

Kristel Wickham  
President, Democratic Club of Sunnyvale

Sam Wilkins  
California State Conference Chairperson, Transport Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO

BK Williams  
Steering Committee Co-Chair, Richmond Progressive Alliance

Jimar Wilson  
VP and Market Leader Southern California, Enterprise Community Partners

Janelle Wong  
Executive Director, San Francisco Bicycle Coalition

Chris Wright  
Senior Vice President, Advance SF

Ellen Wu  
Executive Director, Urban Habitat

Silicon Valley Youth Climate Action

Sonoma County Climate Activist Network (SoCoCAN!)

cc: The Honorable Gavin Newsom, Governor  
The Honorable Maria Elena Durazo, Chair, Senate Budget Subcommittee No. 5  
The Honorable Steve Bennett, Chair, Assembly Budget Subcommittee Committee No. 3  
The Honorable Lena Gonzalez, Senate Transportation Committee Chair  
The Honorable Laura Friedman, Assembly Transportation Committee Chair  
The Honorable Toks Omishakin, Secretary, California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA)
Members, Senate Budget Subcommittee No. 5
Members, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 3
Leanne Eager, Chair, California Transportation Commission
Carl Guardino, Vice Chair, California Transportation Commission
Chad Edison, CalSTA Chief Deputy Secretary for Rail and Transit
James Hacker, Deputy Cabinet Secretary
Tanisha Taylor, CTC Interim Executive Director
Mark Tollefson, CalSTA Undersecretary