



San Francisco Transit Riders

Strategic Plan 2023 - 2025

Fighting for a Rider-First City



Our Vision, Mission, and Values

Vision

San Francisco Transit Riders (SFTR) is looking ahead through 2025 to increase our impact, grow our organization, and transform San Francisco's transit into a world-class transportation system. We envision a city with reliable, safe, frequent, and expanding service so the hundreds of thousands of current and future Muni riders can all use public transit to move around the city and the region.

We envision an SFMTA that is responsive to transit rider feedback and plans improvements centered on rider needs. We envision SFMTA and city officials who are open and willing to collaborate on efforts to build a pro-transit culture in San Francisco.

As the only transit rider advocacy organization in San Francisco, our strategy to build a rider-first city is twofold: we will empower everyday transit riders and our partner organizations to raise their voice; and we will work with transit and policy experts, city leaders, and transit agencies to advocate for pro-rider policies.

Mission

San Francisco Transit Riders is the city's only member-led, grassroots advocate for excellent, affordable, and growing public transit. We believe empowering everyday transit riders to speak up for rider-first policies will bring us the world-class transit system we need for an equitable, livable, sustainable, and accessible San Francisco.

Writer Kafui Attah has stated that fights for transportation justice are rarely over transit access alone. These fights invoke the need to protect and enhance community values: vibrant neighborhoods, clean air and water, participatory politics, equitable distribution of resources, and public spaces where we are free to speak, gather, play, create, and organize. The transit improvements we have won reflect the priorities of our members who advocate for improved speed and reliability for riders. In Kafui's words, they have exercised their right "to be at the heart of urban life."

With this understanding in our heart, SFTR will work to gain the trust of riders throughout the city to build political power and a rider-led vision to secure more transit funding and advance transit priorities that directly address community needs. We are ambitious about changing hearts and minds on how public transit service works and ultimately in making transit agencies more accountable to community members. We must understand the ways in which racist systems have harmed underrepresented communities in the past and actively resist making those mistakes again. Only then can we equitably rebuild public transit, increase service, and revamp outdated infrastructure.

As we look ahead through 2025, SFTR plans to increase our impact, enlarge our membership and reach, and fight for San Francisco transit's response to the needs of current and future

riders across the city. We envision a system that is responsive to transit rider feedback and plans improvements with rider needs in mind. We envision a system and city officials who are open and willing to collaborate on efforts to build a pro-transit culture in San Francisco. We are working to build a transit system that leaves no one out, and addresses the perceptions from disadvantaged communities of being left out of transit policy conversations for decades. Overall, we envision a world where transit riders come first, and policy is based on riders' needs. We will do this by community building among riders and transit organizations and agencies. And by empowering residents and riders to shape future transit investments in ways that actually benefit our communities.

Our Values

- **We value rider-centered policies.** We listen to riders; we lead with riders.
- **We value equity.** Equity is central to all our work. Our advocacy for affordable, dependable, frequent, safe, and accessible public transit is focused on redressing past equity failures and championing the needs of the broadest population, with a consistent focus on service and access for communities of concern.
- **We value the pro-transit voice.** We believe in the positive impact and potential of public transit. While there are many problems and challenges affecting public transit, we focus on solutions that strengthen and expand public transit.
- **We value a visionary approach to planning.** We support thriving public transit that is innovative, inspirational, and growing.
- **We value sustainability.** We believe in the environmental, economic, and health benefits of living in active, walkable, transit-rich communities. Public transit is the most sustainable way for people to get around in a dense city. It promotes a vibrant economy and invests in the social good.
- **We value respect.** We respect members, riders, and partners, even when we disagree. We exemplify and teach having empathy for others, and we acknowledge riders' dignity.
- **We value practicality.** We look for short-term pragmatic solutions while pushing for a long-term vision. We demand accountability from our agencies and leaders.

Our Strategic Priorities and Actions

Strategic Priority 1: Organize and empower riders' voice

Riders are at the heart of everything we do, and our members are our lifeblood. In order to improve transit for all, we need to understand what is wrong — from a rider standpoint.

Across the city, there are inherent challenges that currently confront our transit system, which prevents riders from safely and easily taking transit every day. The pandemic and the concurrent pandemic policies stymied ridership growth. The lack of ridership in conjunction with inflation affected SFMTA's budget significantly. Routes were reduced to a core network, severely impacting service to riders. SFMTA's long-standing structural deficit and operator shortages were also exacerbated during the pandemic.

As of June 2023, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) projected a growing deficit of funds to operate transit service (the operating budget) with a hole of \$101 million starting in calendar year 2024 and the need to generate \$272 million a year starting in 2027-2028. There is also a projected need for over \$9 billion in funds for repairs and improvements (the capital budget) over the next 10 years. Transit riders and supporters are the natural leaders for passing new transit funding measures. Our voices also need to be leading the conversation about the transit service and policies that shape them.

Further, we are acutely aware of the concerns from specific groups of people who have historically been left out of the transportation planning process. The community opposition to some pro-transit projects is oftentimes a cumulative backlash against past transportation developments that reflect the impact of several highway projects in the 1950s that decimated BIPOC communities across the city. We at San Francisco Transit Riders focus on addressing historic inequities, investing more heavily in communities that have been left behind, and bringing their residents to the table as a means of repairing harms, while increasing transit access across the entire city. We are aware that communities have in the past been pitted against each other to get the transit they need, and work to mitigate and alleviate those conflicts when possible. Our success with the Prop L campaign was a significant win in that direction.

Lastly, all through the later part of the twentieth century, federal dollars routinely prioritized suburban commuters like BART over urban bus riders, preferring to build urban highways that cut through and pollute poorer neighborhoods in San Francisco. A radically underfunded transit system means travel for transit-dependent people is heavily impacted in the city. Alternatively, residents in historically marginalized neighborhoods such as the Bayview-Hunters Point, the Excelsior and Visitacion Valley have become more reliant on cars, exacerbating pressures on air quality locally and on the region's sustainability.

Then there are well-resourced areas in other parts of the city that are also currently transit-poor. Increased support for transit improvements in these neighborhoods is necessary to make mode

shift possible.

Moreover, the same communities that do not have equal access to our transit system are hit hardest by climate change. By improving transit, we can both address the climate crisis and make strides towards environmental justice.

The waning of the pandemic and a return to pro-transit policies presents a tremendous opportunity to reimagine public transportation in the city and region. To answer this moment, we need to put the needs of transit riders first, with a particular focus on those who feel they have been historically neglected. We are tasked with working to identify and secure new revenue sources to support and expand efficient and equitable transit options. SFTR is taking a proactive stance to support the voices of riders across the city including marginalized and underrepresented communities, support and rebuild transit service levels, restore current and future funding streams for stability and growth, and ensure the safety and security of transit operators. To do this effectively, we are also prioritizing engaging in coalition building and partnering with neighborhood-based organizations to forge relationships with communities across the city.

SFTR's overall membership and engagement efforts are rooted in the idea that the process must be led by riders. To that end, SFTR provides riders with tools to engage in the public process in the form of technical and policy expertise and through surveys, working groups, and community forums. We have much more work to do to build the power and elevate the voice of marginalized communities — part of our core mission.

Therefore, we will continue to expand our membership to become a stronger and more effective voice for transit riders. To do this, we will develop a more robust membership program aimed not only at retaining existing members but also expanding and diversifying our membership. We will capitalize on every piece of outreach and advocacy as an opportunity to bring in more members and work to develop a package of member benefits, including ways that they can take a seat at the table when it comes to transit policy and decision-making. We would also work toward improving overall accessibility to becoming a member by adding a member level accessible by volunteering in some capacity.

We will continue our highly opened and clicked-on newsletter and regular email and social updates including check-ins with our partner organizations for outreach to specific constituencies. As we keep our membership regularly informed on the latest transit developments, we will work to provide greater advocacy opportunities for our current and future riders, including developing volunteer groups around each issue to activate riders to attend meetings, call supervisors or other officials, support voter outreach and education, etc. We're fighting for a public transit system that can live up to its potential and serve all current and future riders, so we will work to make sure that everyone has equal access to transit information, events, and policy discussions. The increase in newsletters and opportunities will help riders craft their own ideas and understanding of what they need from SFTR. Therefore, our staff and Board should also accurately reflect riders. SFTR's staff and Board of Directors is made up of riders, and we will work to constantly expand and diversify our Board to make sure that it represents all riders and communities.

Our actions: *Leading with the riders' wants and needs, we will build working groups to empower and direct riders' energies. We will create a membership infrastructure that not only benefits members but helps organize and empower current and future riders every day. We will grow our email list incrementally to reach more riders, providing an ever-growing community that makes sure every rider's voice is heard, no matter their geography. We will forge partnerships with neighborhood groups in underserved communities. We will address historic inequities, emphasizing our investment in communities that have been left behind, and bringing their residents to the table as a means of repairing harms. We will grow and diversify our Board so that it adequately represents all riders in the city.*

Strategic Priority 2: Fight for transit recovery and set groundwork for expansion

Underfunding and the threat of service cuts will continue to increase the distrust and will alienate riders. We need to address the fiscal cliff approaching in 2024, while the current Lifeline program is largely undersubscribed and hasn't advanced equity metrics. Fares are unaffordable for low-income riders and tickets criminalize poverty. Many low-income folks don't qualify for fare discounts, only 45 percent of those eligible actually use Muni Lifeline. It is a barrier to have to go to the MTA office. Recent parking changes announced in San Francisco are a positive step forward, but we need more to create change and gain trust from communities.

For public transit to be a top choice for San Franciscans to get around, riders need reliable, accessible, safe, affordable, and frequent access to all parts of the city, equally, and at all hours of the day — including evenings and weekends. We want to restore service (bus and LRV lines) and ridership in a way that makes sense for the “post-pandemic” San Francisco. Transit demand may differ, and we want to make sure transit riders are part of the discussion on how service is changed. In the context of the SFMTA's looming fiscal cliff, SFTR understands that the status quo of transit operations is not good enough. There is an urgency to center the voices of riders to address issues like declines in transit speeds. Also post-pandemic, we don't just need to recover, we also need to build service beyond what we have lost.

With our deep engagement at the local and regional levels and funding measures thereof (more discussion about our specific strategies around those in 'Strategic Priority 4'), we will work for the funding for newly envisioned expanded transit service in geographies not currently equally served; increased frequency throughout the city including in equity neighborhoods; expanded operating hours on high-capacity lines; and focused efforts to increase ridership, possibly through free, discounted, or bulk fares. Coming out of the pandemic, SFTR is working hard to advocate for improvements that can raise public transit ridership and inspire more people to ride the bus instead of driving their own vehicles.

For many communities, including the Tenderloin and Bayview, transit is not the number one issue. Communities are engaged in a variety of issues and at any given time transit is easily superseded by other pressing issues like housing and homelessness and lack of food access. Moreover, transit can sometimes be seen in a similar vein as gentrification and can further alienate communities, particularly those that have historically experienced inequities through transportation investments. Therefore, a more intersectional analysis that acknowledges that

these communities are grappling with multiple crises is necessary. Adequate time spent gaining trust and increasing SFTR's cultural competency and hiring staff from these communities is also important.

This intersectional understanding is also important when it comes to health and air quality in regard to transit access. Transit equity priority communities, such as the Bayview-Hunters Point, face higher pollution and other health risks compared to the rest of the city. Bayview-Hunters Point is also more reliant on cars, which exacerbates these disparities. A 2006 survey by San Francisco's public health department found that a whopping 86 percent of children born in the Bayview develop severe asthma before they start kindergarten. Despite investments in the community over the years, the isolation of San Francisco's southeastern neighborhoods challenge the utility of available public transit options, so those who can afford to own a car often choose to drive rather than ride Muni. Meanwhile, those who do rely on transit in the Bayview are often left behind, as transit travel times can be much longer than driving, especially if congestion backs up bus routes or direct transit service to popular destinations is not available. SFTR is fighting for better access to transit in the Bayview, which will result in fewer cars on the road, faster transit times, less pollution, and cleaner air.

This vision and our strong partnerships with community leaders won us a multi-year grant from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to enable and embolden the Bayview-Hunters Point community to continue their resistance to decades of exclusion and neglect. Through our work, we encourage residents and riders to envision and tell us about a transit future for themselves that will benefit everyone in the community. SFTR is excited about the potential to build trust and relationships in the community and to bring our expertise more deliberately to the Bayview.

To move towards environmental justice and equity, we've reached out to merchants and residents in the most transit-dependent regions of San Francisco. Districts 6, 9, 10, and 11, all along the South and Eastern parts of the city, were largely impacted by COVID-related service reductions. We listened to their concerns, and provided testimony at SFMTA Board meetings. In addition to advocating for a system that meets the new demand of ridership, we will actively advocate for projects including the Caltrain Downtown Extension, increased BART capacity, Geary improvements, and Better Market Street.

Our actions: *We need to build service beyond what it was pre-pandemic in areas other than our downtown corridors, and to do so, we will hold SFMTA accountable for engaging riders about proposed transit service changes, while also lobbying city supervisors and the mayor to influence budget priorities and provide a consistent message regarding the necessity of expanded service. We will create a more intersectional analysis that acknowledges that communities are grappling with multiple crises. We will spend time gaining trust and increasing SFTR's cultural competency and hiring staff from these communities. SFTR will continue to advocate for the passing of a budget that significantly funds transit and its operations. We will work for the funding for newly envisioned expanded transit service in geographies not currently equally served; increased speed and frequency throughout the city including in equity neighborhoods; expanded operating hours on high-capacity lines; and focused efforts to increase ridership.*

Strategic Priority 3: Enhance rider experience by improving transit reliability and travel time

Riders need a transit system that's safe, comfortable, reliable, and easy-to-use. They need functioning real-time information and informative signage at every stop. Riders deserve comfortable, functional, accessible vehicles. Above all riders must be – and feel – valued by the SFMTA, with their issues responded to and resolved transparently and in a reasonable amount of time. The system is and should be about serving people.

Therefore, SFTR envisions a customer experience department at SFMTA whose only job is to prioritize the needs of the rider - from bus stop signage, to amenities, to rider-friendly LRV seating, to accessible and clear wayfinding, to clarity around fare boxes and fare payment. The better the experience on Muni — from the walk to the wait to the ride — the more people will come on board.

We support a culture at transit agencies that values the rider as paramount, where the dedication and talents of staff are engaged and leveraged for creative problem-solving to truly serve San Francisco and its transit riders.

Muni's existing on-time performance is on average 58 percent, which means nearly half the time a bus or train is not going to come when expected. In order to give San Franciscans the ability to use and truly count on public transportation, we must work to raise this number. To do that, we must improve operational strategies to ensure we use our existing infrastructure to its full potential, including dedicating more street space to public transit. And to that end, we are also actively advocating for our 30x30 rapid network vision that connects riders to destinations across the city in 30 minutes or less by 2030 with the goal that it can be prioritized in SFMTA Quickbuild projects.

Through 2025, we will educate the public and empower transit riders to speak up for rider-first transit priority projects and operational improvements to make Muni the dependable system it must be to truly compete with less sustainable modes of transportation. Though we seek to remain positive, we value practical and rider-first solutions, and as necessary we will vocally and publicly demand accountability from SFMTA.

Our actions: *We will continue to work to improve on-bus and bus stop signage, and advocate for people-centered service at the highest levels of agency and elected government. We will leverage digital and in-person safe outreach with everyday transit riders, to aggregate rider feedback to inform our ongoing advocacy with SFMTA. We will continue conducting our working groups to develop and push for a riders' vision of a rapid transit network that connects the whole city. We will advocate for pilot programs to improve reliability. This will include transit priority on our streets and at traffic lights and making Temporary Emergency Transit-only Lanes permanent; it may also include bold ideas like implementing the 30x30 transit network.*

Strategic Priority 4: Movement building towards positive transit culture

By using riders' stories, joys, fears, concerns, successes, as well as concrete metrics, SFTR will develop and lead the narrative around transit in San Francisco and beyond. We work with partners to build a community of proud transit riders because we know transit won't improve without a strong, informed advocacy voice. By listening to riders and hearing what they need to make transit a priority, we can get more people on transit, and in turn, they will get their friends and family to ride as well. To grow a positive transit culture, riding transit must be a positive experience for all riders.

As the regional center, San Francisco is necessarily a transit hub for the larger Bay Area, which is also in need of major public transit infrastructure and investment both to serve San Francisco's needs, and to better connect communities and serve current and future riders. With the resources of our members, our Board, and our core values and mission, San Francisco Transit Riders is already taking a leadership role through the Voices for Public Transportation and Survive and Thrive coalitions in building the regional partnerships necessary to move regional transit infrastructure forward and with a plan for a regional measure in 2026.

Further, to meet local needs that may exceed what a regional measure could fund, SFTR initiated the local Transit Justice Coalition in 2022. Complementing our involvement in the regional Voices for Public Transportation coalition, the Transit Justice Coalition is focused on building a powerbase of climate, social, and economic justice allies to demand abundant transit funding that positively affects the most marginalized to transform public transit and allow for dramatic mode-shift in the Bay Area. These spaces allow SFTR to work in partnership with existing constituencies of riders who may not have the technical expertise or access to shape transit investments and policy on their own. It also allows us to cultivate a city- or region-wide transit framework, rather than focusing on route-by-route fights.

At the local level, the initiatives will strive to fill SFMTA's operating and capital deficit, support state of good repair, transit priority investments and service expansion, and invest in transportation demand management (TDM) strategies geared toward convincing the public to make travel behavioral changes by encouraging safe, affordable, and easy-to-use public transportation options for school, work, and play. At the regional level, SFTR is working with SFMTA, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), and other strategic regional partners including the business community to identify funding that supports the findings of the Blue Ribbon Task Force (BRTF). These 27 recommendations, which were proposed and accepted in the Summer and Fall of 2021 are geared to improve safety, access, and service, as well as seamless, coordinated, and standardized fares.

At the onset, San Franciscans mistrust the agencies and their ability to deliver results. The political climate is also tenuous with several competing political priorities. In San Francisco, for instance, successful passage of future funding measures would require a lot of stakeholders to come together and validate the work. Voters are also less interested in taxation, particularly regressive taxes. For a successful strategy, we will lean on community engagement early in the process to get the buy-in from community members, with an emphasis on communities that have historically been left out of transit decision-making. In general, targeted and culturally competent

outreach and education will help increase the visibility and support of our proposed solutions.

Engagement with riders to advance local transit planning priorities is fraught. Besides a long-standing distrust of SFMTA, resources for engagement are seriously limited and there are additional barriers for engagement. Often, technical conversations can be filled with jargon that make them inaccessible to everyday riders. Moreover, communities failing to see outcomes can often experience an overall fatigue that stymies future engagement. To counteract these challenges, there is a need for more resources to provide technical assistance to community members and advocates. By demonstrating success through actual investments in communities we can keep up the momentum of community advocacy.

Opportunities like the Safe Routes to School program can be a good platform for engaging middle schoolers and youth in transit priorities. SFTR is continuing to strengthen relationships with teachers for referrals to address the discontinuity in the program by recruiting the peers of outgoing students. Transit Month is a great time to do this. Since 2015, SFTR has led the charge to challenge elected members and the riding public to ride Muni every day in the month of September. We engage with the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and the Mayor to use transit more often and ride the system, as well as promote the role of transit in our daily lives. The end of Transit Month culminates with our Bay Area Rider's First Awards Event, where we celebrate the accomplishments of transit partners and projects and celebrate the riders and operators who make our system run.

Transit Month demonstrates how our region's transit network can reach a larger critical mass of riders, both essential and casual and it brings out decision-makers in the transportation and governmental world to show their support. We exhibited San Francisco's connections to other regional transit operators and implemented a customer-focused approach to restore transit important to the riders in San Francisco. We will continue to grow Transit Month and engage more community leaders, organizations, and riders across the city, and we will use the time to educate those who are unsure about transit just how easy a mode shift is.

Our actions: *We will work with partners to build a community of proud transit riders because we know transit won't improve without a strong, informed advocacy voice — To grow a positive transit culture, riding transit must be a positive and safe experience for all riders, so we will listen to what is working and what is not to develop policy. We will grow our Transit Justice Coalition and keep working both at the local and regional levels to support funding initiatives. For a successful strategy, we will lean on community engagement early in the process to get the buy-in from community members, especially in communities that have historically been left out of transit decision-making. In general, targeted and culturally competent outreach and education will help increase the visibility and support of our proposed solutions. We will invest in communities so we can keep up the momentum of community advocacy and repair the mistrust that exists in transit authorities and agencies. By engaging youth in a love for transit early, we can teach students and teachers how to ride and how to talk to others about doing the same. Continuing to grow Transit Month and uplift the voice of riders to encourage their communities to hop on board, creating a mode shift among communities.*

Metrics to Track Progress

Local and regional funding measure wins will ultimately be an important metric in tracking progress. Leading up to such policy wins, we will track community sentiment around the priorities and rely on members to help define those priorities. Any policy victories can only be considered a success if they are in line with the needs of riders. To ensure our priorities are in line with the needs of the community, it is critical to evaluate the number of different people, groups, and voters that we engage with during the legislative process.

For community-specific priorities in the Bayview or Tenderloin, it will also be important to track tangible wins in the form of specific investments in the community as well as the level of community engagement and alignment during the course of the process, including whether the technical jargon used in SFMTA's outreach is successfully demystified.

Finally, the success of the Safe Routes to School program can be tracked through the overall number of students and schools engaged and the number of actions taken by students.

Conclusion

At our core, we are fighting for a public transit system that works for all San Francisco and Bay Area residents. By centering the voice of riders in the city, we can finally create a public transit system that is fast, safe, reliable, and easy to use, one that connects every neighborhood in the city, so people everywhere can access all that San Francisco has to offer.

Who We Are

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