

YOUR TICKET TO RIDE!
A Grand Jury Report on Mendocino Transit Authority

May 12, 2009

Summary

Mendocino Transit Authority (MTA) serves a population of 90,000 over 2,800 square miles. Each year, its 36 passenger vehicles travel 881,000 miles over 12 routes that include connections to Lake County Transit in Ukiah, Santa Rosa City buses, AMTRAK, Greyhound, Sonoma County Airport Express and Golden Gate Transit. MTA was established in 1976 as a Joint Powers Agency by the County of Mendocino and the incorporated cities of Fort Bragg, Point Arena, Ukiah and Willits. Routes, fares and general information are available online at www.4mta.org.

Three years into implementing a five-year Short Range Transit Development Plan (SRTDP), MTA has become a poster child for the benefits of planning, on-going assessment and feedback as effective management tools. The Grand Jury found well-maintained facilities and vehicles, systematic training and low turnover among staff. Low fares, user-friendly routes and schedules, courteous drivers and clean, safe vehicles all contributed to an overall increase of 2.9% in ridership in 2007-08. For 2008-09, ridership is up 8.3% through November over the same period last year.

MTA's primary operating funding comes from a county-wide 1/4% sales tax authorized by California's 1971 Transportation Development Act (TDA). This public funding is mandated by law to ensure transportation for those with limited mobility. For Fiscal Year 2006-07, farebox revenue accounted for 17.6% of operating costs, comfortably exceeding the 14.7% minimum requirement. Even with increased costs, the farebox ratio in 2007-08 was 14.9%. MTA strives to serve seniors and the disabled, to coordinate routes and schedules with schools and colleges, and to reach residents of low income and remote communities. The agency bases service on monthly ridership data and an annual review of unmet transportation needs.

In addition to operating its own fleet, MTA provides purchasing and maintenance services for Senior Center buses, Mendocino County Bookmobile and Animal Care and Control mobile pet clinic, and vehicles operated by the Department of Veteran's Affairs. MTA near-term plans include: converting to more fuel-efficient/alternative energy vehicles, establishing a regional transit center in Ukiah, coordinating commuter van and car pools, and transforming the outdated maintenance and administration center in Ukiah into a model facility for efficient, affordable, *green* transit operations.

Methods

Grand Jury members reviewed documents, conducted site visits and interviews and rode buses on several routes to assess the condition and location of bus stops and

the quality and timeliness of service. Schedules, routes and fare information were obtained from the Mendocino Transit Authority website.

Background

MTA was established in 1976 as a *Joint Powers Agency*, an independent body chartered by the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors and the city councils of the County's four incorporated cities: Fort Bragg, Point Arena, Ukiah and Willits, to provide county-wide transit services.

MTA receives its primary funding from the 1971 Transportation Development Act (TDA). This revenue comes from a 1/4% Mendocino County sales tax that is allocated, each year, to transit and other transportation programs by the Mendocino Council of Governments (MCOG). MCOG is also a Joint Powers Agency with a board of directors composed of seven elected officials appointed by the county and the four city councils.

In March 2004, MTA received a Transit Technical Planning Grant to develop a Short Range Transit Development Plan (SRTDP). The completed plan was adopted by the MTA board of directors in April 2005 and has become the blueprint for MTA operations and assessment through 2010. MTA's Mission Statement and Goals are contained in the SRTDP. The mission is: ***To provide safe, courteous, reliable and affordable transportation service.***

The SRTDP sets annual goals for service, marketing and system improvements for each of the five years from 2005 through 2010. The Grand Jury's numbered findings are organized to provide an overview of the MTA structure, facilities and operations and to document progress toward the following goals, as specified in the SRTDP.

- *Provide affordable, reliable and efficient transit service that effectively meets the local transportation needs of those residents of, or visitors to, MTA's service area who have limited mobility options. Where practical, also serve the needs of those who choose transit for some, or all, of their local travel needs for environmental or lifestyle reasons.*
- *Provide a regional link to local destinations and to inter-city transportation alternatives and destinations outside Mendocino County.*
- *Operate as efficiently and economically as possible, in order to maximize the amount of service provided. Ensure the financial stability of MTA.*
- *Support county and local land use planning, economic development, travel demand management, congestion mitigation and environmental goals, where practical.*

Findings

Structure, Staffing and Facilities

1. The MTA governing board consists of seven members: three county appointees and one member appointed by each city. Typically, three or four board members are elected officials.

2. Board meetings are open to the public. Dates and locations are published on the MTA website. Meetings rotate among the four member cities.
3. For eight of the twelve monthly meetings, video conferencing equipment in Fort Bragg is used to connect participants on the coast with those in Ukiah. This has greatly improved participation. Staff reported that the \$20,000 investment in telecommunications equipment has been recovered through savings in time and travel costs.
4. The General Manager reports to the board of directors and supervises a team of four line managers: Transportation, Maintenance, Marketing/Planning and Finance/Personnel.
5. The Transportation Manager oversees five supervisors who manage and support drivers and dispatchers.
6. The Maintenance Manager has two mechanics; two helper mechanics, and a cleaner to maintain the entire fleet of more than forty passenger and service vehicles.
7. The Marketing/Planning Manager and Finance/Personnel Manager, each have one full-time and one part-time assistant.
8. The Marketing/Planning Manager responds to complaints from the public and works closely with the General Manager on planning and grant writing.
9. MTA management decisions and strategies are based on financial and ridership data that are reviewed at monthly board meetings. Public release of annual information is often delayed by an overly cumbersome process for developing the agency's annual report.
10. MTA employs approximately 60 individuals, most of them full time. About 50 of these are drivers. The agency has been unionized (Teamsters Local 624) since January 1, 2006.
11. The initial collective bargaining agreement, signed in March 2006 resulted in a 12% pay increase for drivers and 10% for mechanics retroactive to January 2006. Even so, a parity study conducted at that time indicated that MTA drivers still earn less than their peers in other nearby and rural districts.
12. Drivers and dispatchers select their shifts by seniority. Several employees split their time between driving and dispatching.
13. Turnover is low and most promotions are from within the organization.¹
14. MTA typically hires and then trains its own drivers. People skills are viewed as a paramount requirement for drivers. All drivers must meet formal government requirements.
15. The small number of administrative staff makes it difficult to cover all duties when an employee requires a prolonged absence. This is being addressed by cross-training.
16. MTA headquarters in Ukiah includes the administration offices, shop and maintenance facilities, a yard for vehicle storage, bus washing and fueling stations, with one 10,000 gallon tank for gasoline and another for diesel fuel. Use

¹ The 2006/07 Annual Report states that as of 6/30/07, 69.5% of the employees had worked for MTA more than seven years (average was 14.3 years), and the most senior employee had 27 years of service.

of these facilities to service or store private vehicles is not permitted. The area is protected by a perimeter fence and a security system.

17. The 2.4 acre Ukiah facility has served MTA since 1982 and is in need of major renovation or replacement. Plans cannot be finalized until decisions have been made about the transition to alternatively fueled vehicles.
18. In December 2008, the MTA Board approved funding for a feasibility study of alternative fueled vehicles and an assessment of related facility needs. In January 2009, the Board authorized the General Manager to negotiate a contract with the identified consulting firm to proceed with this work.
19. MTA substations include a recently renovated District-owned facility in Fort Bragg and leased facilities in Willits, Point Arena, Laytonville and Anchor Bay.
20. The anticipated major funding source for renovation or replacement of MTA headquarters is the new "Public Transit Modernization, Improvement and Service Enhancement Account" funded by voters in 2006 as part of Proposition 1B.
21. MTA is also working to locate a multi-modal Transit Center in or near the city of Ukiah to consolidate all ground mass transportation services (MTA, Lake County Transit, Greyhound, Amtrak Throughway Bus, any private taxi service and any future Airporter).
22. Additional grant funding has been secured to conduct a study of commuter transit needs and to hire a bilingual Mobility Manager to promote and coordinate car pools and computer van pools. The study is currently underway; MTA expects to hire the Mobility Manager in the spring of 2009.

The MTA Passenger Fleet

23. The MTA Fleet includes:

- 9 heavy-duty diesel buses (35 and 43 passenger), all equipped with emission control devices,
- 2 medium-duty diesel buses (29 passenger),
- 13 large cutaway-chassis Ford Vans (20 passenger),
- 10 paratransit cutaway-chassis Ford Vans (7 passenger),²
- 1 Dodge Sprinter (13 passenger) equipped with a highly efficient diesel engine, and
- 1 trolley that is used for holiday shuttle service and is chartered for special events.

24. All heavy-duty and one of the medium-duty buses are equipped with emission control devices. The California Air Resources Board requires that alternatively fueled engines be used when the heavy-duty buses are replaced. These replacements are scheduled to begin in 2011.

25. In 2006-07, MTA replaced one 20 passenger van and two Senior Center vans. 2007-08, replacements included two paratransit vans, five large vans and one Senior Center van. In 2008-09, MTA has replaced two more Senior Center vans

² "Paratransit" vehicles are specially equipped to serve disabled individuals.

- and the Trolley. A paratransit van has been replaced by a gasoline powered Dodge Sprinter that has nearly doubled the miles per gallon.
26. All passenger vehicles are equipped with wheelchair lifts and one or two wheelchair tie-down locations. Vehicles are also equipped with bicycle racks, except for paratransit vans.
 27. Regular preventive maintenance allows MTA vehicles to run reliably and well beyond the normal expected life span.

Personnel and Passenger Safety

28. Drivers complete a vehicle inspection procedure at the beginning of each shift.
29. A recently installed radio system has greatly enhanced driver access to the dispatcher and to emergency services.
30. There is no nationwide standard for preventable accidents but MTA's consultant recommended a goal of 1.0 preventable accident per 200,000 miles. In FY 05/06 and 06/07 MTA was at or below this benchmark. In 07/08 MTA buses traveled about 769,000 miles and had 11 preventable accidents for a rate of 2.9 per 200,000 miles. The driver responsible for 3 of these incidents is no longer an MTA employee.
31. MTA has installed digital security cameras on all passenger vehicles that will document activity in and immediately around the bus. Funding for this project came from the statewide Proposition 1B Safety and Security bond issue and a federal capital grant.
32. Drivers receive training to handle emergency situations and difficult passengers.
33. Drivers do not carry cash to make change. Fares are deposited in on-board metal vaults to which drivers do not have access.
34. A 2007 grant provided funding for ten new shelters and twenty new benches that have been installed throughout the county. Solar power lights shelters where night service is offered. A new shelter for the Town of Mendocino received unanimous local support for a design that is consistent with historic preservation standards. This shelter will be constructed as soon as the required permit is secured from the county Department of Planning and Building.

Service and Fare Structure

35. MTA provides regular service throughout Mendocino County and connects with Lake County Transit in Ukiah. One route operates in Sonoma County and connects with Santa Rosa City Buses. Service connections are also in place with AMTRAK, Greyhound, the Sonoma County Airport Express and Golden Gate Transit.
36. Low fares, user-friendly routes and schedules, courteous drivers and clean, safe vehicles all contributed to an overall increase of 2.9% in ridership in 2007-08. For 2008-09, ridership is up 8.3% through November over the same period last year.

- 37. Routes, schedules and fares are posted on the MTA website and hard copies are available on the buses, at MTA headquarters, and at libraries and other locations throughout the county.
- 38. The MTA website is a valuable resource for passengers and for those who assist seniors and disabled individuals to access needed transportation.
- 39. Table I (below) provides information on general public fares and passes.

Table I

	One-Way Fares*	Monthly Pass**
One Zone	\$1.00	\$20
Two Zones	\$1.75	\$35
Three Zones	\$2.50	\$50

* Those over 62 travel for half price. Two children age 6 or under ride free with one passenger age 16 years or older. Disabled individuals also travel for half price with an authorized photo-ID discount card. Information on discount cards and on Dial-A-Ride services and fares is available by calling 1 (800) 696-4MTA or (707) 462-5765.

** Punch passes are \$10 for 16 punches and are charged at the rate of one punch per zone traveled.

- 40. When reviewed by the Grand Jury, the MTA website did not provide information on Dial-A-Ride fares. Also missing was the procedure for securing the authorized photo ID card required for disability discounts.
- 41. MTA provides regular service to clinics and many county agencies. Clinics and social service agencies purchase MTA passes and distribute them to low-income clients.
- 42. Routes and schedules are based on regularly monitored ridership data, transportation needs assessment studies, and an annual review of unmet transportation needs identified by members of the communities served.
- 43. During 2006-07, for example, MTA adjusted and, eventually, discontinued Routes 40, 52 and 54. It enhanced Routes 65 and 95, running Route 65 earlier and on the same schedule every day to make a more timely connection with Golden Gate Transit. MTA also included Golden Gate Transit connection times in its schedules and added luggage racks to connecting buses.
- 44. MTA has seven bus schedules that are revised three times a year in response to school and college schedules and seasonal time changes.
- 45. Enhancing service to Hispanic/Latino neighborhoods and providing students with evening service to Mendocino College are two of MTA's stated goals that have been achieved.
- 46. Dial-A-Ride services are available to the general public at fares that begin at \$4 for travel within a single zone. A computer-assisted Dial-A-Ride dispatch system became fully operational in 2007-08.
- 47. During hours when the MTA office is closed, an automated phone system gives the late and early departure times from locations on all routes. A recent review of

this service revealed a significant volume of calls. The MTA website also provides a wide range of MTA information.

48. MTA strives to post current signs at each bus stop showing when buses depart from that location and their destinations. The grand jury found that accurate, complete information was not consistently available at all stops.
49. Funding has been secured for a commuter study to better address the needs of low-income workers.
50. In rural areas, drivers are trained to be flexible about drop offs and pick ups, when flagged from a safe location.
51. Additional “hands on” services for the handicapped and frail elderly are provided in cooperation with Anderson Valley, Redwood Coast, South Coast, Ukiah, Willits, and Indian (Ukiah) Senior Centers.
52. Dial-A-Ride, curb-to-curb, programs are offered in Fort Bragg and Ukiah.
53. A new Flex-Route program is being offered in Willits that combines regularly scheduled service with Dial-a-Ride service by appointment.
54. Racks are provided for two bicycles on all scheduled passenger buses. When racks are full, it is sometimes possible to transport a bicycle in an unoccupied wheel chair area.
55. Cyclists can miss a bus or be required to leave a bus if the handicapped space is required by a disabled individual. While this is a rare event, it may deter some potential riders. Data are being collected on incidents when cyclists cannot be served.
56. MTA distributes Transportation Development Act funds to Senior Centers to support specialized transportation services including service to senior meal programs. Senior Center transportation includes assistance “door-through-door” rather than the “curb-to-curb” service offered by Dial-A-Ride.
57. MTA assists Senior Centers with the process of selecting and purchasing new vehicles and provides vehicle storage, servicing and fueling for those with access to its Ukiah headquarters.
58. MTA also provides storage, maintenance and fueling services for the Mendocino County Bookmobile and Animal Care and Control mobile pet clinic and for vehicles that serve veterans.

Finances

59. The Transportation Development Act requires that at least 14.7% of the cost of public services come from farebox revenue. For Fiscal Year 2006-07, farebox revenue accounted for 17.6% of operating costs. Additional revenue came from contracts, grants and contributions. The farebox ratio dropped to 14.9% for Fiscal Year 2007-08 because fare revenue declined while operating costs increased slightly.
60. During the rapid run up of fuel costs in 2007-08, the MTA board voted to use reserves, if necessary, rather than increasing fares to compensate for the projected deficit. Despite reduction of other expenses, MTA anticipates a 2008-09 budget deficit of approximately \$200,000, largely due to fuel costs.

61. MTA solicits fuel bids from local wholesalers, approximately monthly, for its own vehicles and for resale to the Ukiah Senior Center, Department of Veteran's Affairs vehicles, Mendocino County Bookmobile and Animal Care and Control mobile pet clinic.
62. Capital programming, budgeting and grant-writing have allowed replacement of vehicles before excessive operating costs or unreliability become problems.
63. MTA managers expressed concern that cutbacks in transportation funding may make it difficult to maintain the current high replacement standards and achieve the planned transition to alternatively fueled vehicles. Reduction in sales tax during the current recession may also impact the operating budget.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that Mendocino Transit Authority:

1. begin, in the current fiscal year, to locate funds to commence a new planning cycle by no later than 2012 to incorporate and prioritize objectives and strategies consistent with anticipated transportation needs and economic circumstances. (Findings 9, 17, 18, 20-22, 42, 49)
2. establish procedures for drivers regularly to check the information posted at bus stops and provide feedback so that missing or incorrect information can be promptly corrected. (Finding 48)
3. enhance the MTA website by adding Dial-A-Ride fare and zone information and details on how the disabled can secure an MTA authorized discount card. (Findings 39-40)
4. consider a "Return Ride Guarantee" for cyclists in Willits, Ukiah and Fort Bragg that would employ Dial-A-Ride as a backup to ensure that a cyclist will not be stranded on a return trip due to a full bike rack or the needs of a disabled passenger for space on a regularly scheduled bus. (Findings 26, 54-55)

Discussion

In preparing for this inquiry, Jurors reviewed prior Grand Jury reports that described a number of concerns about MTA's operations and management of its facilities. The 2008-09 Jurors were impressed by the transformation that has been achieved in recent years and by the evidence they saw of the strategic planning and on-going assessment that are essential to MTA's continued sustainability.

Economic and environmental pressures are making public transportation increasingly important to Mendocino County residents. It is heartening to be able to encourage increased use of the services offered and to commend those who are striving to further improve MTA's performance and the many contributions it makes throughout the county.

Required Response

Mendocino Transit Authority General Manager
(All Findings; All Recommendations)