

## CHAPTER 4 PARATRANSIT SERVICE PLAN

### Paratransit Planning Principles

The paratransit service plan is based on four service principles. These principles were developed from the analysis of existing conditions and an understanding of the future demographics in the County.

- MCTD must continue to meet the mandate and spirit of the Americans With Disabilities Act.
- Paratransit service should be available to all residents of the County who meet ADA eligibility guidelines, regardless of where they live with a high likelihood that all requests for rides can be met.
- Demand for traditional paratransit services can only be controlled by broadening the number of choices available to paratransit riders, and by keeping people on fixed route transit as long as possible.
- All services must be sustainable

### Mandated and Non Mandated Paratransit Service

Throughout this document, two types of paratransit service are described – mandated services, which are required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and non mandated services which go beyond the requirements of the ADA. Paratransit services in general include a wide range of service delivery mechanisms that provide door-to-door service for riders who are frail or who have disabilities that keep them from using the fixed route transit system. In Marin County, the majority of paratransit service is provided by Whistlestop Wheels,

although there are a range of social service and other agencies that provide paratransit service to particular user groups.

The Americans with Disabilities Act is Civil Rights legislation that guarantees access to a well-defined level of service for individuals who are unable to use standard fixed route service, due to their disability. The services required by ADA are based on the amount and location of fixed route services offered. In general, paratransit service is required in an area  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile on either side of a fixed route, and must be offered during the days and times when fixed route service is provided. In geographic areas where no fixed routes operate, or during times of day or days of the week when fixed route service is not operating, there is no requirement that paratransit service be offered.

Fares are another criteria covered by the ADA. Under ADA, passengers can be charged up to twice the fixed route cash fare for paratransit service. In Marin County, a paratransit rider could be charged up to \$4.00 per one-way trip for mandated service. Other criteria covered by ADA include a requirement that trips not be prioritized by the type of trip being made (ie. Medical trips can not be prioritized over recreational trips), and the need to provide adequate capacity to meet demand.

Marin County has a history of providing paratransit service that exceeds the requirements of ADA in a number of important ways. Fares are well below the levels allowed by ADA. At least some service is provided throughout the County, even in areas that are outside of the mandated service area. As has been noted,

however, service outside of the mandated area is constrained, with frequent service denials. A key challenge of this plan is maintaining service mandated by the ADA, as demands on this service continue to increase, while still providing at least a safety net of services to those outside of the ADA service area.

Continuing to provide quality service to all paratransit consumers is a major challenge because subsidies for paratransit trips are so high. Each trip on the door-to-door system is subsidized by more than \$30.00, and the demand for service grows each year as the population continues to age.

This plan builds on the existing Whistlestop Wheels paratransit service, adding new service delivery mechanisms to maintain people on fixed route as long as possible and to provide new ways to reach service demand throughout the County.

## **Maintaining Mandated ADA Paratransit Services**

MCTD and Whistlestop Wheels have done an excellent job of meeting and exceeding the mandate for paratransit services under the American's With Disabilities Act. The service has continued to get more productive over time as Whistlestop has improved their scheduling and dispatch capability and begun to reduce no-shows and late cancellations.

Maintaining cost effective ADA service requires that regular transit be as accessible as possible, including allowing for "senior and disabled friendly" services and travel training that will encourage older adults to develop the habits of using fixed route transit as long as possible.

The Marketing Plan, presented in Chapter 5 of this report, presents a number of alternatives for

maintaining senior and disabled riders on fixed route transit. These techniques include travel training for older adults, free midday transit to ADA eligible riders, and the use of small bus and local initiative service to penetrate the community with local shuttles that can reduce walk distances and encourage transit use. These techniques must be aggressively pursued simultaneously to ensure that future ADA eligible riders learn how to use the transit system and gain confidence before they are physically or cognitively unable to use the system.

Even with all of the techniques described throughout this plan, ADA mandated paratransit ridership is expected to grow by 5% per year. Additional techniques are required to meet demand within the anticipated resources. These techniques are described below. No increase in general paratransit hours is recommended until other alternatives have been attempted.

## **Bus Travel Training**

Although the eligibility standards for ADA paratransit require that the consumer be unable to use fixed route transit, in reality, most consumers can ride accessible fixed route transit some of the time and under some conditions. A travel training program that identifies the most likely bus riders and makes it as seamless as possible for them to use fixed route transit for all or some of their trips is both economical for the agency and provides higher levels of mobility for users.

King County (Seattle) Washington has one of the best bus travel training programs in the Country. Training is focused on people who are most likely to take advantage of the bus system, including people aged 17-21 with Individualized Education Programs who can be trained to use the bus to school, work and training;

seniors living in congregate housing; and social programs where people congregate, including senior centers.

Training should be offered to all applicants who make trips in areas that have access to transit service. One of the key questions in travel training is how to know whether someone will be traveling to places that have transit service that will meet their needs. In King County, the application for paratransit service includes a section where the applicant identifies where they live and common places where they travel. This helps to identify individuals who use corridors with good service.

Travel training has a number of different components that all need to be considered:

- **Lift Training** for wheelchair users and users of other mobility devices, especially new lift users. Lift users are often intimidated by learning “on the street”. A group class brought to consumers would allow potential riders to learn the lift and learn the bus tie down systems in advance of taking a ride on the street. Given comments received in outreach meetings about difficulties with the tie-down systems on Golden Gate Transit, this type of training would be especially helpful.
- **System Training** which includes both a “classroom” training on how to use the bus system and an escorted bus trip on the system. These types of trainings are often given at senior housing and senior center facilities.
- **Individual Training** which teaches a consumer how to use an individual line or how to make an individual trip. This type of training is especially effective for persons with disabilities traveling to work or school, or making other repeat trips.

As a reward for training, the rider is generally offered free ride coupons for a period of time, to encourage them to try on their own. Follow-up

surveys are done at 6 months and 1 year after training to see if the rider is still using fixed route service.

Travel training costs are easily offset over time by the number of fixed route transit rides taken by individuals who would otherwise ride paratransit. Training should be offered to applicants for paratransit service, whether they are found to be eligible or not, based on their ability and the availability of transit service to their most common destinations. King County has found that the best market for travel training includes senior centers, independent living centers, and senior housing sites, where there is a ready made community that can provide encouragement and information. In addition, developmentally disabled young adults, identified through the Regional Center and Office of Education are another key market for travel training. Although parents of disabled children are often concerned about having their children ride transit to school, travel training a young adult is an important life skill, and parents are often happy to participate with an older teenager. Visually impaired riders can also be trained to navigate the system using specially trained teachers.

In King County, training is contracted to an experienced provider of travel training services. The contract cost for approximately 300 individual and group trainings was \$315,000 in 2004-05; however the increased number of trips made on fixed route at lower subsidy resulted in a net savings from training of about \$200,000. A similar contract in Marin County could be developed and implemented in time for the 2007-08 fiscal year, assuming staff availability.

Currently, MCTD provides one active travel training program. The Route 149 service provides a weekly bus to students at Indian Valley College and the Office of Education who need to learn bus riding skills as part of their life skills program. The route, which will end service in May, is currently operated as a fixed route service, although it does not carry the general public and would not qualify for fixed route funding. MCTD is working with the office of Education to identify alternative methods for providing travel training services to this target group.

### **Making Better Use of Community Resources**

There are currently a number of resources in Marin County that do not provide standard mandated ADA transportation but that could be utilized for that purpose. A primary example is Novato's EZ Rider service, which provides on-demand paratransit within the City of Novato. To the extent possible, Whistlestop should be using EZ Rider as an "overflow" service for ADA mandated trips – scheduling as many trips as possible on EZ Rider to help meet service requirements there. Services like EZ Rider are especially useful for serving a combination of mandated and non-mandated demand. EZ Rider operates on Sundays, when there is little mandated service provided in Novato.

Currently EZ Rider's productivity is lower than the general Whistlestop service. It is imperative that Whistlestop Wheels work with EZ Rider and the Novato Human Needs Center in Novato to ensure that all three systems are coordinated and work effectively. If EZ Rider productivity cannot be increased in the next 12-months, it should be replaced with a shuttle service that is coordinated out of the senior center in Novato.

Other similar resources exist throughout the County, provided by social service agencies and others. Before denying any trip, Whistlestop should make referral to these additional services. In cases like EZ Rider, where Whistlestop is the contractor providing the service, scheduling should be automatic.

### **Adding a Taxi Component**

Many paratransit operators utilize taxi companies for all or part of their paratransit service. In general, taxis are more flexible, allowing the rider to call on-demand for rides around the clock, and somewhat less expensive than door-to-door van and sedan services, because taxi operators are limited to pre-set metered rates. Taxi operations also offer the option of setting subsidy levels for non-ADA mandated trips at an amount that meets the financial constraints of the agency.

While taxi services may have a role in providing some paratransit trips in Marin County, they are not a reasonable choice for the full range of paratransit services. Whistlestop Wheels, provides a much higher degree of personalized service and door-to-door assistance, not generally provided by taxi companies. Taxi operators in Marin do not have accessible vehicles needed for this service, nor do they have the capacity required to serve the high demand for paratransit at peak times. In addition, issues such as insurance provision, sensitivity training and drug testing for drivers, and other barriers limit the ability to substitute taxi service for traditional paratransit.

Taxi service may be appropriate as a supplement to traditional ADA services, especially in the non-mandated areas where the traditional services are unable to meet demand, and where additional paratransit capacity would be very costly. As part of the Short Range Transit Plan an initial study of taxi options was completed. Additional implementation work will be done by MCTD as part of an MTC funded study, expected to be completed in 2006. Implementation would likely take place in the 2007-08 fiscal year.

### Taxi Operations in Marin County

Currently, there are four primary taxi companies (some operating under more than one flag) that serve Marin County with 69 vehicles. Forty of the 69 vehicles are held by a single company as summarized in Figure 4-1.

As part of a broader analysis of the opportunities to use taxi service as part of the local transit system, MCTD met with taxi companies in August 2005. A number of potential opportunities to integrate subsidized taxi service into the transit and paratransit system were discussed. Additional work with both taxi operators and other stakeholders will be completed as part of the MTC study.

Currently, there is no taxi component in the paratransit program, primarily because there are no accessible vehicles in the system. However, the vast majority of trips provided by Whistle-stop do not require lift access, and could be fulfilled by taxis. Other concerns about taxi service include drivers not being trained to work with this frail population, and the need for drug screening and other contracting requirements.

**Figure 4-1 Marin County Taxi Inventory**

Taxi Company				Options for Payment			Fare Charged	
Company Name	# Vehicles Licensed	# Accessible Vehicles	Parts of County NOT Served	3rd Party Billing	Swipe Card	Voucher	Flag Drop	Per Mile
Tiburon Taxi	1	0	Novato, Northern Marin	No	Credit Card	Yes	\$2.30	\$2.50
Novato Taxi	7	0	South of San Rafael	Yes	Credit Card	Yes	\$3.00	\$3.00
North Bay Taxi Cooperative	19	0	Serves whole county	Yes	Credit Card	Yes	\$1.90	\$3.00
Radio Cabs on the Move	40	0	West Marin	Yes	Credit Card	Yes (Scrip)	\$2.20	\$2.50
Happy Cab	5	0	Serves whole county	Yes	Credit Card	Yes	\$1.90	\$2.00

There are essentially two approaches to using taxis as part of the paratransit system:

- **Contractor Choice** – Under this approach, Whistlestop Wheels would have the option of calling a taxi to serve any paratransit trip. Consumers would continue to call Whistlestop and would have no choice of the type of vehicle that serves their trip. Since there are currently no accessible taxis, Whistlestop would call the taxi companies only when there was an ambulatory rider making a trip, and only when the cost and circumstances of the trip made it advantageous to call a cab. An ideal example of a trip that would be moved to taxi service is a medical return trip for a client that missed a scheduled trip who would otherwise have to wait a long time for another Whistlestop van. The consumer would pay the taxi the same fare that would normally be paid for the Whistlestop trip, and the taxi company would bill Whistlestop for the remainder of the trip. Because Whistlestop is in control of which trips are fulfilled by taxi, the issue of accessible vehicles is not a problem. Whistlestop would simply not refer any wheelchair trips to the taxi companies.

The major advantage to Whistlestop in utilizing taxis would be flexibility in scheduling and dispatching. By allowing Whistlestop to choose which trips will be assigned to taxi, Whistlestop can ensure that only the most cost effective trips are being taken on taxi.

Consumers generally do not prefer this approach because they have no control over who will fill their trip request. Some riders will prefer taxi service; others will prefer Whistlestop.

To implement this type of taxi program, Whistlestop would need to develop a third party billing arrangement with the taxi companies. Whistlestop would retain the right to use any or all of the

taxi companies with whom they have a third party billing arrangement. Any taxi operator that fails to provide the highest quality service will simply not receive calls for rides. Taxi companies that agree to participate in the program will require their drivers to take sensitivity training, provided at no cost to the drivers or the taxi companies, and will bill Whistlestop directly for the full cost of all trips authorized by Whistlestop. The fare paid by the passenger will go directly to the driver as a gratuity and incentive for providing good service. Three of the four taxi companies in Marin County currently have the ability to accept 3rd party billing, and all four can accept a voucher for service.

Under the “contractor’s choice” alternative, a total of 250 taxi trips are expected to be generated each month, for a total of 3,000 trips per year. At an average cost of \$15 per trip, the cost of this program is expected to be \$45,000. Most of these trips will essentially be new trips, because Whistlestop would utilize taxis in order to be able to fulfill trips that would otherwise be denied, so this is a net cost to the paratransit program.

- **Consumer Choice** – Under the consumer choice model, consumers would have the option for calling a taxi or calling Whistlestop for their trips. Because Whistlestop Wheels will continue to be the provider of mandated services under the American’s With Disabilities Act, MCTD would have more flexibility in developing a taxi scrip program and would have more control over the amount spent on taxi service.

Under a consumer choice program, MCTD would set the rate of subsidy for taxi service. Other systems, like King County in Seattle, Washington, have generally chosen a 50% subsidy for taxi scrip. A consumer would purchase a book of \$20 worth of scrip for \$10.

The scrip would be used as the payment mechanism for the taxi ride which would be charged at the regular metered rate. Generally, transit operators limit the number of scrip books that can be purchased by any individual to approximately \$60 per month. Therefore the maximum subsidy per person is \$30 per month. These type of controls are essential in a consumer choice program because providing opportunity for on-demand door-to-door service has increased demand for paratransit services everywhere it has been implemented. Should enrollment in the program exceed expectations, MCTD would have the option of reducing the amount of scrip available or reducing the subsidy to ensure the viability of the program.

Consumers would have the option of using taxi scrip or Whistlestop Wheels service for any trip they are making. A rider traveling to a doctor's appointment, for example, may choose to reserve a Whistlestop ride on the way TO the doctor, when the arrival time is scheduled and predictable, and may choose to take a taxi HOME when the departure time from the doctor is less certain. Paratransit riders may choose the taxi when a direct ride is most important to them, rather than the Whistlestop shared ride concept, which can increase time on the vehicle.

Allowing consumers to choose which service best meets their needs is positive for both consumers and for service providers. Because some riders will choose taxis for some or all of their trips, growth in demand for Whistlestop services should be contained, and Whistlestop should be better able to meet the volume of calls it receives. The intent is that everyone would receive better service by allowing consumers who can afford and choose to use taxi service to do so.

A key component of a consumer choice program is the availability of accessible

vehicles. Because this service would supplement the mandated ADA service, it would not be subject to ADA requirements. However as a matter of "equal access" it is preferable not to offer on-demand service available to some riders and not others. To implement a consumer choice program, MCTD would therefore need to purchase at least two, and up to five, wheelchair accessible taxis, similar to the taxis being used in San Francisco and other major metropolitan areas. MCTD or Marin County would retain title to the accessible vehicles, which would be insured under the County's fleet insurance. This is important, because taxi companies generally do not carry collision insurance, and would not be interested in insuring a new vehicle while operating at the metered rate.

Vehicles would be leased to cab companies for the cost of insurance. The cab companies receiving the vehicles would be required to give priority to calls requiring accessible vehicles on those cabs, but will be allowed to carry any trip on the vehicles during their service day. Ambulatory consumers using scrip could be serviced in any vehicle in the taxi fleet. MCTD would retain the right to inspect the vehicles at least twice each year to monitor maintenance and condition of the vehicles.

In a consumer choice program, it is generally not necessary for the cab companies to have a contract with the County. The current JPA agreement for taxi licensing in Marin could easily be modified to require all taxis in the County to accept scrip as payment for trips.

Based on the response in other Counties, it is estimated that approximately 200 participants would purchase up to \$60 in scrip per month. This total of \$144,000 represents up to \$72,000 in subsidy. However, some of these trips would currently be trips made on Whistlestop Wheels, which is more heavily subsidized.

Therefore the net operating cost for the consumer choice program is expected to be approximately \$50,000 per year, roughly the same amount as the contractor's choice program.

Assuming MCTD chooses to purchase accessible vehicles, no fewer than two vehicles could be purchased initially, at a cost of about \$40,000 per vehicle. Ramp taxi vehicles are recommended rather than lift vans for speed of loading and unloading, gas mileage and flexibility in carrying other passengers. Maintenance would be provided by the taxi companies, subject to semi-annual inspection by the County.

It is difficult to determine a timeframe for implementation of this program, especially if vehicles need to be purchased. However, the program should be implemented as soon as possible, perhaps beginning as a pilot program.

There are a number of issues to be resolved prior to implementation:

1. **Capacity** – The taxi companies indicated that they have capacity available from 10 AM to 2 PM, but that they are generally fully committed with other work during the peak travel periods. This is largely because they provide services to special education students at schools and services to Regional Center clients going to programs. All of the taxi companies indicated a willingness to expand but not in advance of knowing the market.
2. **Random Drug Testing** – If MCTD becomes a federal recipient it will require both pre-employment, accident related and random drug testing of drivers, as required by federal law. The current taxi ordinance does allow for random testing, but it has not yet been implemented. MCTD may be required to establish a random drug testing program at its expense. This can be done, but is an administrative issue and a cost item beyond the meter rate.

3. **Insurance** – All of the taxi operators indicate that they carry only \$350,000 in liability insurance and no collision insurance on their vehicles. Most transit operators require at least \$1,000,000 in liability and if the transit district buys an accessible vehicle, it would certainly want collision coverage. The taxi companies have indicated that they would not be willing to increase their insurance and work at the metered rate.

Insurance issues have been a barrier for many taxi operations. In some places, such as the City of Berkeley, the issue of insurance has been avoided by simply amending the taxi ordinance to require all cab companies to accept scrip issued by the City. Consumers call the taxi company of their choice, and there is no contractual arrangement between the public agency and the taxi company. If MCTD were to purchase accessible vehicles, it would need to ensure that those vehicles were properly insured. By having the District or the County hold title to the vehicles, it may be possible to insure them under the County insurance pool, leasing them back to the taxi companies for the price of insurance.

Additional study of insurance issues will be completed as part of an MTC funded implementation study on taxi options, scheduled to be completed in 2006.

4. **Other Issues Involved in Taxi Operation**  
In outreach to the taxi industry, the taxi companies presented a number of other issues, all of which are probably solvable:
  - a. **Tipping** – Some drivers are dependant on their tips as income. Knowing that low income paratransit riders and transit riders would likely not tip, some drivers may not provide adequate service, or may intimidate riders into tipping. The Transit District would need to provide driver training and would require drivers who participate in the program to agree to accept the full meter rate but not to

expect additional tips for their rides. This is probably not a major barrier, especially if the program provides rides during the 10-2 period when taxis are under utilized.

- b. **Loading and Unloading Time** – State law does not allow taxi companies to turn on the meter until wheelchair customers are loaded and secured in the vehicle. The meter must be turned off when the vehicle arrives at the destination, even though it takes considerable time to unsecure and unload the passenger. Drivers carrying a large number of wheelchair passengers would find this very inconvenient and potentially expensive, since time spent “sitting” is real money to taxi drivers. The relatively low volume of accessible taxi calls should minimize this issue, but if wheelchair calls increased, it could be a problem.
- c. **Driver Training** – Whistlestop and Golden Gate drivers are all required to take extensive training courses, including sensitivity training for working with persons with disabilities. Taxi operators are not required to take such training and are generally not employees on salary who could be compelled to take the training. A program of certifying drivers for this type of service could be developed, where the driver would be required to take a training course provided at no cost to them, and offered during mid-day hours when calls tend to be slow. The need for training is limited somewhat if the program is a “consumer choice” program where the customer has the option of choosing a more highly trained driver if they prefer.

## Serving Non-Mandated Trips

Currently, the public has the same expectation for service regardless of where they live in the

County. Eligible riders living beyond the mandated service area often do not understand why they are not able to get service. Whistlestop has taken steps to ensure that riders in the mandated service area receive paratransit service as required by law; this has resulted in riders outside of the mandated service area experiencing high denial rates. At times, a rider in the non-mandated service area has a 1 in 4 chance of not getting a ride, and most riders making requests for rides outside of the mandated area are put on a “stand by list” and may not be informed whether they will get a ride until the day before their trip. This uncertainty is very difficult to deal with when the primary trip purpose on paratransit is access to medical trips.

The need to travel outside of the mandated service is exacerbated by the location of a number of senior housing facilities outside of the mandated area. Senior housing centers sometimes receive limited or no mandated paratransit service, despite high potential demands. While land use policy is outside of MCTD’s purview, cities should be aware that allowing senior housing and facilities that attract seniors and persons with disabilities to locate away from the main corridors will have a negative impact on the facility’s ability to get service.

Rather than providing less reliable paratransit service to the non-mandated service area, investment should be made in providing different types of services in the non-mandated area. These include:

- Partnering with Community Based Agencies and Housing Complexes
- Utilizing Local Initiative Services to Supplement Paratransit
- Adding a tax component

## **Partnering with Community Based Agencies and Housing Complexes**

King County in Washington State offers a unique program called the Community Partnership Program. This program is designed to complement the basic ADA service, which is not extended beyond the mandated service area, by filling in gaps in service that would otherwise go unfilled. The goal is to create innovative and less expensive alternative transportation tools for seniors and people with disabilities. Under this program, used paratransit vehicles and operating subsidies are offered to community agencies who agree to provide at least a minimum number of trips to ADA certified consumers.

For example, a senior housing complex may receive a vehicle and \$25,000 per year, with the promise that they will carry at least 1000 ADA eligible trips per year, or about 80 per month. The housing complex matches the operating dollars and starts their own resident transportation service. The complex can carry anyone they want and go anywhere they choose to go, as long as about 85 of those monthly trips are made by ADA certified travelers. A senior housing complex where some, but not all, of its residents are ADA eligible, will take advantage of the subsidy to provide some level of service to all of its residents. Using these numbers, each ADA trip would cost \$25.00 in subsidy per trip – substantially less than if the trip were made on Whistlestop Wheels.

The advantages of this type of partnership go beyond saving money. Drivers from the community-based programs are often volunteers or staff who have other functions with the agency. They are very familiar with the consumers from their program and can develop a service

that is geared to their needs. Consumers who participate in these programs often make trips that they would not even attempt to make on the mandated service provider.

In King County, over 30 vehicles have been distributed throughout the County, to agencies as varied as a Wheelchair Ski Group, which carries ADA eligible and non-eligible riders to nearby ski slopes; to assisted living complexes; and adult day centers. Because the recipients of these vehicles carry ADA eligible riders at a fraction of the cost of providing the ride with their regular ADA provider, the community and the riders benefit.

In addition to providing retired vehicles, MCTD could also help non-profits to seek vehicles under the 5310 program available for non-profits providing paratransit services; and could enter into different types of arrangements with organizations that have their own vehicle to offer.

A program like this will develop over time, as vehicles become available. The first step is to gauge interest in the community and identify possible operators.

## **Partnering with Local Initiative Services**

Local initiative services were described in the service plan. They are designed to provide an opportunity for MCTD to partner with local jurisdictions. As local communities develop their plans for local shuttle services, the need for services for seniors and persons with disabilities should be considered. Operating cost subsidies from MCTD may come from either fixed route or special needs funds, depending on the number of special needs riders that would be served by the proposed route.

## “Grandfathering” Areas Losing Coverage

As described in Chapter 3, a small number of residents in Marin County overall will lose local bus coverage in the proposed service plan. The impact of these changes on fixed route riders is expected to be minimal. For the small number of paratransit riders, especially those in Santa Venetia and Pt. San Pedro, the difference between being in the mandated service area and being outside the area could be dramatic.

While the number of paratransit riders affected by these changes is small (estimated at less than 20), a transition period of three years is recommended, allowing current registered riders in these areas to be treated as if they remain in the mandated service area. This is not intended to set a precedent for future service reductions. It is intended to allow time for alternative programs proposed in the SRTP to be implemented and for riders to become aware of the options available to them.

## Paratransit Fares

The performance goals presented in Chapter 2 include a goal for maintaining mandated paratransit fares at the full cash price for fixed route transit, even though the law allows paratransit fares to be twice that amount. The relatively high cost of fixed route fares would currently allow a \$4.00 one-way ADA paratransit fare. However, given that two-thirds of the ADA paratransit riders live in households with annual incomes of less than \$25,000, the negative impact on riders could outweigh the additional revenue from this increase.

Instead of increasing fares for mandated service, a number of fare recommendations are included in the financial plan:

1. **Provide a mid-day pass for ADA eligible riders, allowing them to ride local transit routes at no charge.** While most paratransit riders cannot use fixed route services at any cost, some will be able to use MCTD services for some of their trips. This will be an added incentive to take advantage of travel training. Although MCTD will forgo the fare for these riders, the cost of providing a fixed route trip is far less than the cost of providing a paratransit trip, and the increase in ridership from this program is not expected to have any impact on capacity.
2. **Institute an agency fare policy.** Currently, Senior Access, the Adult Day program in Novato is the only social service agency receiving a significant amount of direct service from the paratransit program. The service provided to Senior Access clients is a higher level than that provided to the general eligible public. Clients of Senior Access do not need to call in for each ride – a coordinator at the program takes care of their transportation. They do not need to call directly if they miss a ride – again, the program takes care of all the logistics. Most important, Senior Access clients are assured a ride, with no denials, with a consistent driver on a consistent route. Senior Access clients are assured to get to their program on time and have a specific pick-up time that they can count on.

Currently, the paratransit program provides 8 bus-days of service each week to the program, and the program contracts directly for an additional 24 bus-days of service. There is no particular reason for the 8 bus-days – it simply evolved over time. For the service provided by paratransit, Senior Access currently pays only the fares for their riders, or about \$11,000 per year.

Senior Access riders receive an unprecedented level of service with no extra fare. The actual marginal cost of providing their service would be approximately \$30,000. While all of their clients would be eligible for ADA service, and could make individual trip reservations, it is unlikely that the level of service available to their clients would be adequate for their needs. Some clients would find another way to get to their program, or there would be increasing pressure on the program to provide their own transportation.

Although Senior Access is the only agency currently receiving these special services, other social service agencies might also like to take advantage of an agency service. Other paratransit programs offer these types of services for an “agency fare” that exceeds the cost of normal paratransit fare and more closely reflects the cost of providing service.

Another example of an agency that may require specialized services is Satellite Dialysis, which is placing a growing burden on paratransit resources. Riders going to dialysis need to be delivered at a specific time, often very early in the morning when little fixed route service is running. Patients are often late for their return trip and may be too weak to tolerate a standard shared ride. While Whistlestop and MCTD have worked very hard to accommodate these riders, the specialized nature of their needs exceeds the service MCTD can reasonably provide at current subsidy levels.

In setting an agency fare, it is important to recognize that agency trips do allow Whistlestop to group rides together and improve overall productivity. Therefore, a “compromise” fare is recommended, set at twice the fare for regular non-mandated trips, or \$5.00 per trip. Revenue from Senior Access would increase from \$11,000 to about \$22,000 under this proposal. Other agencies interested in

this type of service could also make an arrangement with Whistlestop for the agency fare.

The agency fares come with the following benefits over and above the standard service. These benefits are currently essentially being “given away” by MCTD:

- o Automatic subscription trips, essentially providing guaranteed capacity
- o Ability to change schedules until 3 PM the day before
- o Scheduled arrival time at the agency (versus a window for unaffiliated individuals)

In San Mateo County, they have had a program of agency fares with 6 different agencies for some time. On “top of” their standard fare of \$2.00 they charge up to \$3.35 per trip (they have slightly different arrangements with each agency) for agency trips. If MCTD charged Senior Access \$3.35 per trip, the fares related to that service would increase from the current \$6,000 to about \$15,000, or about half of the actual marginal cost of the trip.

## **Public Process and Outreach**

It is very important that MCTD conduct educational outreach to key stakeholders prior to implementing some of the recommendations in this section. A public participation process targeted to paratransit consumers should precede changes to the paratransit program.

## **Contracting for Paratransit Service**

Although this chapter identifies a number of supplemental services that will augment the traditional paratransit historically provided by Whistlestop Wheels, there will be an on-going

and increasing need for exactly the type of services Whistlestop provides.

Marin County Transit and Golden Gate Transit have contracted for van services with the Senior Coordinating Council for more than 20 years. Over the years there have been occasional bids for the service, but there has been no attempt to encourage competition for the contract.

Changing paratransit vendors can be very disruptive to clients who depend on relationships with drivers and dispatchers for their service. However, it is in MCTD's interest to routinely bid out the paratransit contract, testing the marketplace for both cost and service reputation.

When the next opportunity to bid paratransit service occurs, MCTD should consider a separate bid for eligibility analysis – separating the function of eligibility determination from the function of providing service. MCTD has recently adopted the updated regional ADA eligibility process, which calls for many more in person assessments. These types of assessments are generally much more effective if done through a medical services provider or rehabilitation specialist. Other systems that have chosen to use professional evaluators have found that eligibility has dropped slightly and that many more riders become conditionally eligible; allowing the system to concentrate resources where they are truly needed.

