

The Need for Intercommunity Transit in Santa Barbara County

The Coalition for Sustainable Transportation

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COAST alone bears responsibility for any factual errors. The views and recommendations are those of the organization and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders.

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COAST is a nonprofit organization that educates and advocates for alternatives to the automobile.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Santa Barbara County transit-dependent individuals and commuters need better intercity bus service. One third of County residents, over 100,000 people, do not drive a car. 17,000 drive every day from the North County to the South Coast for employment. While public transportation generally exists in the urbanized areas of the County, there are gaps in service:

- Communities within Santa Ynez Valley are served by intercommunity transit, but there is no public transportation connecting the North County communities of Santa Maria, Lompoc, and the Santa Ynez Valley.
- Public transportation between the North County and the South Coast is limited to commuter subscription service which does not meet the needs of transit-dependent riders and lower income commuters.
- Virtually all North County service stops at 6 or 7pm. Other lines start too late in the morning for an individual to get to an 8am appointment.

Money specifically provided by the State of California to meet these needs is diverted to the backlog of road maintenance in the County. There is a growing need for more transit options. It is time to address these deficiencies.

This report will show that new intercity transit service is not only necessary, but possible. By meeting unmet intercity transit needs, the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG) will address other transportation issues in the County, particularly growing rush hour congestion as a result of increased intercity commuting.

For intercommunity transit to work, it will require a cooperative partnership between the government and the public. COAST is committed to making that happen, both in the design, implementation, and marketing of the system.

2. A COUNTYWIDE VISION FOR PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

The failure to provide adequate public transportation for North County residents is not for lack of vision. A review of existing policies reveals that all jurisdictions agree on the goal to provide a balanced transportation system and promote public transportation.

SBCAG Regional Transportation Plan (2000-2020)

Goal 1. *Provide a comprehensive multimodal transportation system of facilities and services that is balanced, coordinated, safe, cost effective, and environmentally sound and that meets the public's need for the movement of people, information, goods, and services that is consistent with the social, economic, and environmental goals and policies of the region.*

Goal 3. *Promote alternative forms of transportation to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution.*

Policy 1. *The RTP shall provide for a coordinated multimodal system designed to serve the travel requirements of the region and should, where feasible, provide the citizens of individual communities with a realistic choice of travel modes.*

Policy 14. *The RTP shall provide the expansion of public transit services within the county to meet the mobility needs of the residents for access to essential services, education, recreational and employment opportunities as a means to reduce air pollution, traffic congestion, and parking problems.*

Objective 14.7 *Support federal and state transportation legislation that continues funding support for transit, particularly for operating expenses commensurate with transit's expanded role in addressing congestion and improving air quality.*

City of Santa Maria Circulation Element (January 1994)

Policy C.6.b. Transit: *Continue to work with the Santa Maria Organization of Transportation Helpers (SMOOTH) to improve and expand Santa Maria Area Transit (SMAT) service to meet those transit needs that can be reasonably met, with particular emphasis on the needs of the elderly, disabled, low income, and community college students.*

Los Alamos Community Plan (March 1994)

Policy CITC-LA-2.2: *The county should seek methods to link commercial, recreational, and educational facilities with transit lines, bikeways, and pedestrian trails.*

Orcutt Community Plan (July 1997)

Policy O-6: *The County shall encourage development of all feasible forms of alternative transportation in the Orcutt / Santa Maria area.*

City of Lompoc General Plan (1996)

Goal 3: *Maximize the viability and convenience of transportation modes that reduce automobile use.*

Policy 3.4: *The City shall provide safe and convenient transit service which meets the needs of the transportation-disadvantaged including young, elderly, disabled, and low-income individuals.*

Santa Ynez Valley Blueprint

Social Fabric Goal 4:

- *Transit is improved to and from local and County social and human service organizations*

- *Expand our local transit to provide regularly scheduled service to all areas of the Valley, Lompoc, Los Alamos, Santa Maria, and Santa Barbara. Provide a dial-up service where centralized transit stops are not possible.*

Infrastructure & Transportation

Introduction: . . . *increase the use of alternative transportation modes in order to free up the flow of traffic from one area to another. . .*

Goal 1: *Improve current transportation and circulation in the Valley and plan and prepare for future demands, utilizing existing roadways. To help achieve this goal, we want to encourage and enhance alternative transportation modes.*

- *There is frequent, reliable, regularly scheduled transit.*

- *Coordinate efforts between County and state agencies to deal with transportation issues on a regional level. Utilize SBCAG and other funding sources to improve the transportation system.*

- *Create regularly scheduled transit within the Valley and serving surrounding communities in the entire County.*

3. THE NEED FOR PUBLIC TRANSIT

Santa Barbara County is a county united in the need for adequate transit services. Though South Coast residents receive the benefit of all available transit funds, North County residents and commuters do not.

Spending on the automobile dominates transportation funding

Because they are too young or too old or unable to afford or physically operate a vehicle, one-third of county residents cannot drive. Without the ability to drive and without critical transit services, many of these transit-dependent individuals are deprived of opportunities to work, study, shop, or access medical care. Over 90% of local transportation dollars are spent on infrastructure improvements primarily directed to automobiles.

North County residents do not receive adequate service

The South Coast receives a full share of TDA money, approximately \$6 million a year. Service exists from Win-

chester Canyon to Carpinteria, with express connections to Ventura and communities further south. Buses regularly run into the evening and in some cases as late as midnight. Because of this comprehensive service, the South Coast provided over 7 million rides in 2001, over 90% of total county service.

In the North County, regular service exists to some degree within the communities of Santa Maria, Lompoc, and the Santa Ynez Valley. All North County service stops in the early evening. The last bus leaves between 6 and 7 pm. This prevents many working families from using transit to go shopping. Additionally, many buses do not leave early enough for an individual to get to work. For instance, an individual who lives in the Tanglewood area of Santa Maria could not get to Righetti High School until 8:35am (or the Oak Knoll Shopping Center until 8:50am). The existing systems are not well connected. An individual who lives in Lompoc is not able to get to Santa Maria by public transit for work, school, or other needs.

Demographically, the North is not all that different from the South. Analysis suggests that there is a greater need for public transportation services in the North County:

- The North County has a population virtually equal to the South Coast.
- 80% of County social service recipients reside in the North County.
- Demographic analysis shows that the North County has a majority of working class Latino families. This segment is becoming an increasingly large part of the population of the County.
- Thousands of North County residents commute every day, primarily in single-occupancy vehicles, to jobs on the South Coast.

**Table 1. A COMPARISON OF 2000 DEMOGRAPHICS
AND FIXED ROUTE SERVICE LEVELS**

Locality (Transit Provider)	Population	Age 18 & younger*	Age 65+*	No car*	Low income*	Transit-dependent Factor*	Fixed Route Transit rides*	Transit rides per person
Guadalupe (G. Flyer)	7,561	30.8%	12.2%	5.8%	19.1%	0.68	34,192	4.5
Santa Maria (SMAT)	110,154	30.8%	12.2%	5.8%	19.1%	0.68	539,370	4.9
Lompoc (COLT)	67,435	30.8%	7.9%	4.9%	17.7%	0.61	105,059	1.6
SYV (SYVT)	21,407	25.5%	14.6%	3.3%	14.6%	0.58	23,659	1.1
North County total	206,557	30.3%	11.0%	5.2%	18.2%	0.65	702,280	3.4
South Coast (MTD)	208,303	20.0%	13.3%	7.9%	18.0%	0.59	7,070,701	33.9

*Data from SBCAG RTP 2000-2020.

More than 208,000 South Coast residents enjoy transit service that provides over 7 million fixed route trips per year, an average of 33.9 trips per person.

There is nearly the same population in the North County, over 206,000. A larger percentage are likely to be transit-dependent, but there are far fewer transit opportunities, an average of 3.4 trips per person.

4. THE TRANSPORTATION DEVELOPMENT ACT: MEETING CALIFORNIA'S TRANSIT NEEDS

In passing the Transportation Development Act (TDA), the state legislature declared its intention to provide an "integrated and coordinated system to meet the public transportation needs of an entire county."

Part of the act guaranteed that funds raised by a ¼ cent sales tax are distributed to local communities based on population. These funds would first be spent on any and all "unmet transit needs" that were "reasonable to meet." Local communities were allowed to devise their own definitions of unmet transit needs as well as what was reasonable to meet. If it were determined that there are no unmet transit needs feasible to meet, localities would be allowed to use the TDA monies for street and road repair.

These TDA monies are intended to provide operating funds for transit services. Generally, the state requires that a service provide a certain percentage of its operating funds through the farebox for it to be eligible for TDA funds - usually 10% for rural areas and 20% for urban areas. However, a transit line is given a grace period of two years to build to this level of success. If fare revenues are insufficient to meet the state's applicable minimum ratio of fares to operating cost, an operator may satisfy the requirement by supplementing its fare revenues with local funds.

As the regional intergovernmental transportation agency, SBCAG is responsible for holding an annual hearing to solicit testimony to unmet transit needs. The SBCAG board is made up of the County Board of Supervisors and one representative from every city council within the County.

In Santa Barbara County, hearings are held in both North County and on the South Coast. An unmet transit needs determination is not made for the South Coast region because the local transit providers, MTD and Easy Lift, claim all the TDA funds for transit purposes. The North County TDA claimants however, apply for funding for both transit and road and street maintenance.

Under the TDA law, before SBCAG can allocate monies for street and road purposes, a hearing must be held to obtain public input. SBCAG must make a finding whether transit needs exist, and further, whether it is reasonable to meet the identified needs.

Each year, SBCAG finds the North County requests for intercommunity transit service and some specific requests for expanded service within the communities are "unreasonable to meet." As a consequence, a significant portion of TDA transit money is released for use on North County streets and roads. In 2001, this was nearly \$4 million.

2002 SBCAG REPRESENTATIVES

1 st District	Naomi Schwartz
2 nd District	Susan Rose
3 rd District	Gail Marshall
4 th District	Joni Gray
5 th District	Tom Urbanske
Carpinteria	Dick Weinberg
Santa Barbara	Gregg Hart
Goleta	Jack Hawxhurst
Solvang	Ed Andrisek
Lompoc	Dick DeWees
Santa Maria	Larry Lavagnino
Buellton	Russ Hicks
Guadalupe	Sam Arca

5. TDA MONEY AND THE ROAD MAINTENANCE BACKLOG

The use of TDA transit money for street and road maintenance is problematic for two reasons:

- TDA is one of the only funding sources available for the continued operation of transit;
- The amount available annually cannot begin to address the continual need for road maintenance but it would make a significant difference to transit-dependent residents and commuters.

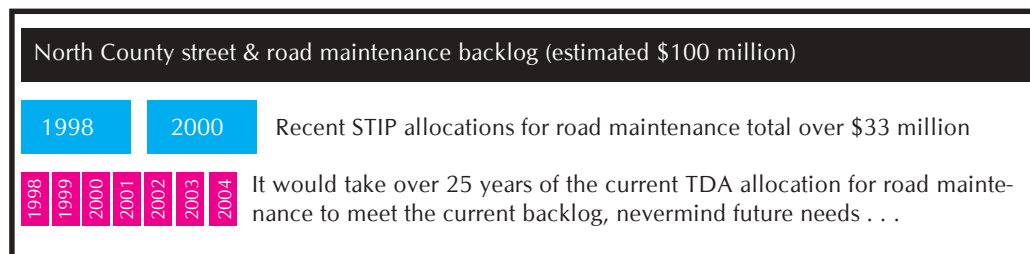
Other sources of transportation funding available to SBCAG and the North County for street and road maintenance include Measure D, Federal transportation funds, and State fuel and sales taxes. In 1997 California passed SB45 allowing the use of gas and highway taxes not just for new congestion relief projects (new roads, traffic signals, bridges, trains, buses, sidewalks and bikeways), but also for the maintenance of these facilities.

In the last two biennial funding cycles, SBCAG allocated approximately 20% of total funds (\$33 million) to road repairs. This new source of funding can shrink the road repairs' backlog without dipping into needed transit funds.

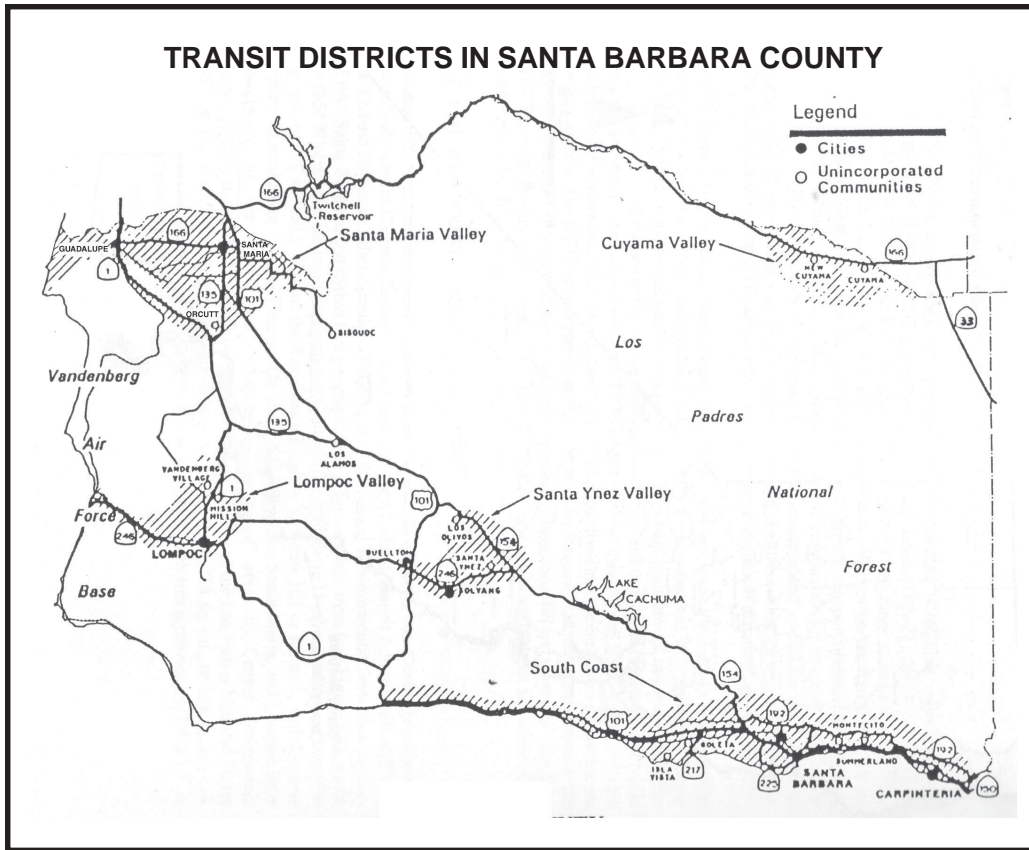
TDA money, in contrast to other funding sources, is much more limited and specifically earmarked for transit operation purposes. The money, if programmed properly, would go a long way to addressing the County's greatest transit needs. By providing a transit system accessible to a large number of county residents, meeting transit needs may also reduce the need to expand our roadway system in some areas.

A critical difference between South Coast transit and its counterparts in the North County is structural. MTD is independent of South Coast municipalities, even though it provides service to Santa Barbara, Carpinteria, Goleta, and unincorporated areas of the South Coast.

MTD receives funding directly from SBCAG for the services it provides. North County providers, in contrast, are under the purview of the Public Works Departments of the cities they serve. As a result of public works departments' focus on infrastructure maintenance, funding for transit services is lower in priority than other public needs such as road maintenance.



6. EXISTING NORTH COUNTY INTERCOMMUNITY TRANSIT



A map of the County transit service districts illustrates the biggest weakness of our current system: each transit district exists independently of the others with little or no connection or coordination between them. Commuters and the transit-dependent cannot rely on our transit providers for service between most communities.

To deal with the growing need for intercommunity transit, specialty services have been devised to deal with particular needs. For instance, the Clean Air Express is a popular and growing subscription commuter service providing express coach buses Monday through Friday from Lompoc and Santa Maria to the South Coast.

As successful as this service is, it is limited in its hours and buses do not make a return trip earlier in the day. The service is limited to subscribers. A transit-dependent individual could not use the bus for an occasional trip to the South Coast.

There are a variety of transportation services available for specific transit-dependent individuals. Most of these require that the individual be a recipient of a particular social service agency. Others are not cost effective: over \$100 for a cab from the Santa Ynez Valley to the South Coast, or \$14.25 each way for a Greyhound bus from Santa Barbara to Santa Maria.

There are some local North County successes in intercommunity transit.

- The Guadalupe Flyer was instituted after public testimony at an unmet transit needs hearing to the need for travel between Guadalupe and Santa Maria. The Guadalupe Flyer has proven to be a great success, recovering over 40% of its costs at the farebox.
- The City of Santa Maria enjoys a connection to San Luis Obispo through buses operated by the San Luis Obispo Regional Transit Authority (SLORTA).
- The Chumash began operating buses from Lompoc and Santa Maria to its casino in the Santa Ynez Valley. Ridership on these frequently scheduled buses shows that there is a great demand for transportation services if it can be crafted around an existing need.
- On the South Coast, MTD service extends from Winchester Canyon to Carpinteria. The VISTA service,

run by the Ventura County Transportation Commission and funded jointly with SBCAG, provides a regular bus connection from Santa Barbara to Ventura.

- Starting in September 2003, MTD will be providing buses that connect the Santa Ynez Valley with Santa Barbara. MTD is not asking for any TDA money to subsidize this new route; they will pay for the service through the farebox and their own operating budget. Four or five buses will leave the valley at staggered times in the morning. They will only return at the end of the working day. While these buses are targeted to commuters, they are open to anyone who can pay the daily fare, which is only a few dollars. The daily fare includes a free transfer to MTD's network of South Coast routes. MTD has also stated publicly that it is open to providing more buses as interest in the service expands.

7. A LOOK AT OTHER COUNTIES

Other counties, many with demographics and geography similar to Santa Barbara County, have found intercity transit needs “reasonable to meet.” Once lines and service are established, even in rural jurisdictions

between urban centers, ridership increases and stabilizes over time. San Luis Obispo County's intercity service, for example, averaged a 25% farebox ratio in fiscal year 2000-01.

COUNTIES WITH INTERCITY SERVICE (shaded)



8. CASE STUDY: YOLO COUNTY

An example of a successful intercommunity route exists in Yolo County. The Yolo County Transportation District began providing bus service between Woodland and Cache Creek Casino July 1, 2000. The service provides 5 round trips per day, 365 days/year, and connects the communities of Madison, Esparto, Capay and Woodland.

The service was jointly funded by the Rumsey Indian Rancheria (owner/operator of Cache Creek Indian Bingo & Casino), Yolo County Transportation District, the County of Yolo, and a jobs access grant from the Federal Transit Administration.

The service was designed to provide economic and convenient transportation to and from work, to assist the West Yolo communities of Madison, Esparto and Capay, and to help alleviate traffic safety concerns along Highway 16. The bus schedules were closely matched to the work schedules of the major employers in the area in order to make the service convenient for workers.

According to Randy Takemoto, General Manager of Cache Creek Indian Bingo and Casino, "The service improved our ability to recruit and retain employees, which in the long run means better service for our customers." The service began with a

monthly ridership of 2,283 in its first month and by the end of the year had achieved a rural ridership increase of 2000% in Capay Valley. According to Terry Bassett, Executive Director of YCTD, "Such dramatic increases demonstrate the need for reliable public transportation to and from Capay Valley."

Providing transit service to Capay Valley increased the transportation options for students, seniors and disabled riders who previously relied on two day a week transit service, and created the option of commuting by bus to work for approximately one-third of the Cache Creek Indian Bingo & Casino's 900 employees who live in communities between the Casino and Woodland. The benefits extended beyond the riders however, as the service reduced commuter traffic congestion on Highway 16, improving safety conditions. And with the Cache Creek Route, the communities within the entire county are connected by convenient transit.

Due to its success, the Cache Creek service has been continued beyond its trial period. The University of Berkeley is completing a case study of the innovative approach the government agencies, the transit district and the Rumsey Indian Rancheria took in instituting this service.

9. PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESSFUL INTERCOMMUNITY SERVICE

Provide express service that works for commuters as well as the transit-dependent.

The growing success of the Clean Air Express, as well as the anticipated arrival of the MTD commuter coaches between the Santa Ynez Valley and the South Coast, shows that there is demand for intercommunity transit. Workers realize that a long commute can be improved if they can use the time to work, socialize, or sleep on the bus.

Unfortunately, subscription services address only a part of the potential ridership. Transit-dependent individuals are left out by the hours of operation, limited schedule, and monthly subscription fees. Other counties have made intercommunity transit a reality for all of their residents by providing services that work for transit-dependent individuals as well as commuters.

Improvements to the existing subscription service routes could include the option for daily fares (as opposed to monthly subscriptions), greater coordination with park-and-ride lots and the provision of local services at these locations, and more frequent runs at peak hours.

To make the service available to transit dependent individuals, such a service would have to be well-connected and synchronized with local transit

service. Fares must be reasonable, no more than a few dollars. Off-peak service, even one bus in the midday, is necessary to maximize flexibility.

Create connections through transportation hubs.

Since it is impossible to provide direct service from every departure point to every destination, it becomes necessary to provide convenient transit hubs where people can transfer between lines.

Such a system occurs naturally within cities and within transit districts. The same principle would make intercommunity transit more effective. Buellton is an ideal place for a transit hub: situated at the intersection of Highways 101 and 246 roughly in the middle of the County with easy access to other communities in the Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Maria (30 miles away), and Goleta (33 miles away).

Use road money for roads, transit money for transit

TDA funds can only make a small dent in the backlog of North County road maintenance. Such work is best budgeted through other, more substantial, funding sources. However, the additional \$4 million dollars a year will help address unmet transportation needs.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are intended to demonstrate ways that TDA funds could provide valuable services where there are unmet transit needs. These needs and others like them throughout the North County are reasonable to meet. Further study will refine the specific routes and schedules.

Connect the communities of Lompoc and Santa Maria.

The communities of Lompoc and Santa Maria are close to each other, about 20 miles apart, just a little further than Guadalupe and Santa Maria. Lompoc and the surrounding area have 67,000 residents, many more than the 7,500 in Guadalupe who make the Guadalupe Flyer such a success. Lompoc residents need to go to Santa Maria for work, education, and social services. Over 2,000 people commute each day from Lompoc to Santa Maria. Vandenberg Air Force Base, lying between the two communities, is the region's largest employer. Allan Hancock operates a satellite college in Lompoc, but most classes are offered in Santa Maria. Many social service agencies only have offices in Santa Maria.

STOP	MIN	MILES
COLT Center		
Allen Hancock College, Lompoc	13	6.0
Vandenberg AFB	14	4.9
Orcutt	18	11.4
Town Center, Santa Maria	13	6.5
Allen Hancock College, Santa Maria	10	2.3
Orcutt	13	6.5
Vandenberg AFB	18	11.4
Allen Hancock College, Lompoc	14	4.9
COLT Center	13	6.0
Total loop	126	59.9

Two buses could run this schedule regularly, with departures every 75 minutes, similar to the operation of the Guadalupe Flyer. Other options are to limit service to three buses in each direction (at approximately 8:00am, 12:00pm, and 5:00pm) or to provide off-peak buses to coincide with classes and student demand.

STOP	MIN	MILES
Town Center Mall, Santa Maria		
Los Alamos, Bell & 101	32	19.3
Buellton, Avenue of the Flags	22	14.7
Santa Ynez, Chumash Casino	18	7.0
Total One Way	72	40.9

Connect the communities of Santa Maria, Los Alamos, and the Santa Ynez Valley.

An opportunity is modeled by the existing, non-public service that the Chumash Casino currently operates between Santa Maria and the casino. The buses have many regular riders. By coordinating with the Chumash, it may be possible to operate a public service that meets the needs of casino riders as well as the general public.

The service would have two stops.

1. A bus stop in Los Alamos would give residents access to public transportation as called for in the Los Alamos Community Plan. This service will allow transit-dependent individuals to connect to local service in the Santa Maria and Santa Ynez Valleys. Currently, Los Alamos residents have no public transportation.

2. A station in Buellton not only allows connection to the Santa Ynez Valley Transit system, but also builds the potential for transfers to other regional locations. Buellton would become a North County transit hub. With the advent of expanded MTD

service from the Santa Ynez Valley to the South Coast, riders will be able to make public transit connections from the North County to the South Coast.

Improve transit connections between the North County and the South Coast

To accomplish this, it is possible to build on existing service. On April 1, 2002, SBCAG and Traffic Solutions will be assuming management of the Clean Air Express. With this change of operator, it may be possible to expand the Clean Air Express beyond its original commuter subscription service. Daily fares, in addition to monthly subscriptions would make it possible for other transit-dependent riders and commuters to benefit from the routes. Such a change might mean that more buses need to be put on the road to ensure that there are vacant seats regularly available.

With small additions of operating funds, the Clean Air Express routes could be made more flexible. One or two buses which lie idle during the day could be used to make a return trip during the day from the South Coast to the North County and back.

MTD's service from the Santa Ynez Valley to the South Coast will begin in 2003. Though MTD is proposing to run the line without any operational subsidy, it might be possible to increase service for transit-dependent individuals with such a subsidy. One bus that runs from the South Coast to

the Santa Ynez Valley and back during mid-day would greatly increase the usefulness of this bus line to transit-dependent individuals.

Improve coordination between transit districts

For the long-term success of intercommunity transit, there must be better coordination between transit providers. Ideally, transit improvements like those suggested above would be coordinated in their implementation. A strategy to improve intercommunity transit throughout the County would provide underserved transit-dependent residents and commuters with viable access to jobs, education, recreation, and social services.

Convenient connections must be made between express intercommunity service and local transit routes. SBCAG may consider creating a unified transit district that encompasses all of Santa Barbara County. Another option would be for SBCAG to create a council of all transit providers where the agencies might be able to coordinate intercommunity service. Such a council could operate in the spirit of free enterprise and friendly competition where individual agencies propose services and contracts would be awarded to the most cost-effective service.

Such coordination benefits riders as well as the overall system. Riders get better service, and the system gets more riders.

11. CONCLUSION

1. There are unmet transit needs.

Based on the evidence supplied in this document and the testimony of members of the public and transit agencies, it is reasonable to conclude that there are unmet transit needs in the North County and between the North County and the South Coast.

2. These unmet transit needs are reasonable to meet.

Evidence exists to support the assertion that these unmet transit needs are reasonable to meet and, as shown in existing examples of successful transit service in both areas, have potential to expand in use by the residents of the County whose transportation needs have not yet been served by transit.

3. The community is willing to work with SBCAG to make intercommunity transit successful.

For these needs to be met in the most cost-effective and efficient manner, service must be designed, implemented and marketed as a partnership between government agencies and the public. COAST is committed to making that happen.