

Bus Riders Step Up for Better Service

By Harvey I. Barkin, Photos by Tiburon

Cutting-edge technology and the best-paying jobs may be in San Jose. But San Jose also has a far worse commute time than the national average, and low-income families in Santa Clara County spend more on transportation than their Bay Area neighbors. When they use transit, they are far more likely to use the bus than light rail—and bus riders face daily inconveniences and indignities that can deeply affect their lives.



Consider the experience of Artruro Velarde of San Jose, who takes the #71 bus to his job with a company that stages homes for sale. Sometimes the bus is late, or simply doesn't show up. "To get to work late can mean losing a job. My boss is understanding, but he's not going to pay me when I don't work, and an hour's pay can make the difference in not being able to pay the rent on time, not being able to pay the bills," says Velarde. Or that of Lucy Moran, also of San Jose: "I've been on the bus all day long just trying to get things done, like pay the PG&E, pay the water, go to the doctor," Moran says. "Just to get anything done, it takes forever," she says.

Velarde and Moran each belong to one of the new groups in Silicon Valley that formed to give voice to bus riders and fight for better, more affordable service, and a fair share of transit funding for buses: Transit Riders United (TRU), organized by Working Partnerships USA (WPUSA) and RUTU (*Renovadores Unidos de Transportes Urbanos*), Riders United for Transportation Revitalization, a project of Sacred Heart Community Service. "I'm tired of complaining," Velarde says. "I want to do something."

Transit Riders United

"Transit Riders United is made up of people who ride the bus every single day. The vast majority of them are Latinos and Vietnamese, youth, seniors, students and working folks.

There's beauty in putting all these different cultures, backgrounds and ages into one room joined together in the fight for a better community," says Maria Noel Fernandez, Director of Community and Civic Engagement for WPUSA.

Transit Riders United started based on a need. "We [WPUSA] were working on a whole host of issues around housing, transit, renters, wages and workers," Fernandez says. "The one issue that rose to the surface was the need for reliable transit. Eventually, we started talking about what is it that we really want to do, and how do we build power for transit riders?"

"As part of the conversation, we looked into other communities that were able to build power for transit riders such as Los Angeles and Boston. It was interesting to note the similarity in LA and San Jose where transit riders didn't have power. We realized that the voice of everyday people riding the bus should be part of the decision-making process. And bottom line, that's what we're all about," she says.¹

San Jose's TRU began building its base by going to the most heavily traveled bus lines and talking to riders at the stops and on the buses, surveying riders about their experiences with the bus system and improvements they would like to see.

In the conversations that shaped the TRU, the overlapping nature of transportation and housing issues was never far in the background. Fernandez shares the story of a woman with two kids: The family lives in Tracy because San Jose is too expensive. "She and her husband work here [in San Jose]," Fernandez says. "They get up very early, at 5 a.m., and commute by car. He drops her off at the bus stop. Then she has another two hours to get to her job. She said to me, 'Not only does it cost me time, but I don't see my kids. By the time I get home, they've done with homework and dinner. I only get to kiss them good night. That's it for family time.'"

RUTU

Sacred Heart distributes discount transit passes through Santa Clara County's Transit Assistance Program. TAP itself represents an organizing victory. Community groups mobilized for two years to get the affordable passes—but TAP is temporary, set to close down at the end of 2016.

Sacred Heart's name and fame for "giving lots of free food and TAP (the bus transfer pass) has helped us build a base," says Community Organizer Diana Salazar. Besides helping people meet their immediate needs, though, Sacred Heart works with them to build power to change their conditions. RUTU, its transit riders group, started with people who get TAP passes.

Since it began in February 2015, RUTU has built three committees, one each in San Jose, Sunnyvale, and Gilroy. The San Jose people got together first, named the group, and also came up with the idea of a rider survey. By the end of the summer RUTU members around the county had collected about 400 surveys, talking to people on the bus, at bus stops, and in line to get

TAP passes.

Sacred Heart's work, like WPUSA's, recognizes the intersections among the many issues that affect people's lives. Its organizing model addresses anti-displacement (housing, renters' rights), transportation justice and migrant rights. Transportation often is in the middle.

Salazar explains, "You're an immigrant and you get evicted for no reason. You are now homeless and have no access to transportation." Members of Sacred Heart's senior organizing committee rely on a lunch program funded through VTA, RUTU members want to see TAP continue, and seniors worry that the VTA-run paratransit program may be replaced by cab vouchers.

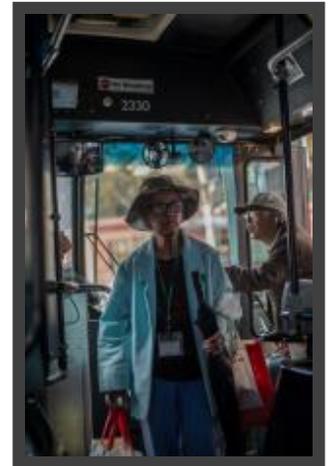
Bus Riders Speak Out

Many of the transit problems TRU and RUTU members seek to solve can be traced to the consistent underfunding of bus service in Santa Clara County. In 2008, for instance, BART took all of the funding from Measure B, which put an eighth-cent sales tax in place. By 2010, rail capitalization had eaten up 88 per cent of the funding from the Measure A sales tax passed in 2000. This left only 10 per cent for VTA operations and 2 per cent for bus capitalization. In the same year, VTA cut four times as much bus service as light rail service to cope with budget deficits.



Now a new proposal for a county transportation sales tax is being developed, upping the ante on the work of TRU and RUTU. (See "Transit Allies Fight for Share of Sales Tax," p. 109.) If funding can be found, it should go where it is most needed.

"There needs to be better investment in transit, such as fast, frequent, and reliable bus service," says WPUSA Director of Health Policy and Community Development Charisse Ma Lebron, speaking on behalf of the Transportation Justice Alliance (TJA), a broad coalition of more than a dozen community, environmental and labor groups.



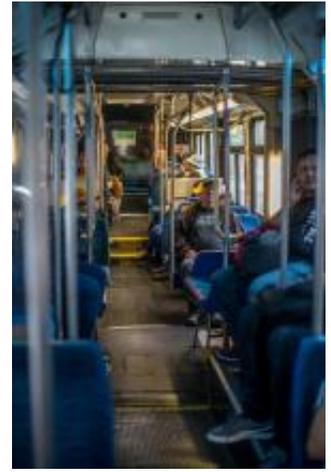
"Transit investments should benefit the needs of low-income, people of color, and working families. These are our same community members who may not be able to afford a car, are transit-dependent, and may work unpredictable hours—so they need better access to buses. Some residents have two or three jobs, yet the current bus service does not meet their transit needs," Lebron says.

Over the summer RUTU and TRU played major roles in mobilizing bus riders to the community meetings co-sponsored by the TJA and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) to gather input for the sales tax proposals. The four meetings identified community leaders and

those with opinions; despite the differences in geography, riders in Gilroy, Mountain View, downtown San Jose, and Alum Rock (East San Jose) voiced some common concerns.

Gilroy, in the rural southern part of the county, “is simply transit-starved,” Lebron says, and bus riders feel the pinch.

Victor Frias has been a bus rider since he lost his eyesight three years ago. At the Gilroy meeting he complained that the #14 bus to Saint Louise Regional Hospital goes to its garage too soon and doesn’t stop at Walmart (where he shops for his basic necessities). He also pointed out that there is no shade under which bus riders could wait in comfort. “You get burned out in the summer,” he said.



Alejandro Ayala of San Martin echoed Frias’ concern about the #14; he has to be out of the hospital at 5:15 p.m. or he will miss the last bus. He has to go to Morgan Hill to pick up his medications, because the County closed medical clinics in Gilroy and even The Sisters of Charity no longer take Medi-Cal or Medicare. He’d walk to Cochrane Road to take the #16, “but it does not run on weekends,” he said. Even when it does run, the walk and the bus ride would take him four hours round trip, said Ayala, shifting his weight from one foot to another as if it hurt to stand.

At the Mountain View community meeting, Angela Mital said, “We use the bus for everything... We take four different buses just to go and walk another hour and a half to the bus station. Sometimes we have to wait for close to one hour on weekends, and the bus trip to San Jose takes two hours. We want more routes for the #26 and for the #304 to run after 7 p.m.,” she said. She gets help from Sunnyvale Community Services with food but because no bus goes there, she has to walk home laden with heavy but basic necessities.

When buses don’t run their routes or are late, students are “sometimes marked absent” in school, Marcel Mendez noted. Patricia Martinez identified the #53, which should come every half hour, but is often late. It is the route that high school and middle school students take.

The Mountain View bus riders also made mention of the need for shade at bus stops and more accommodations for the safety of pedestrians and bicycle riders.

Leticia Martinez told the East San Jose meeting about the difficulties of being a caregiver dependent on the bus. “Twice in the last two years I was unable to drive for health reasons. I live in the eastern foothills in San Jose, and am the caregiver for my 97-year-old mother,” she said. “The nearest bus stop is a mile and a half away. How can you carry groceries that far? How can you do your mother’s laundry? I felt helpless, depressed and very isolated.”

Patricia, a law student at San Jose State and a single mother, said that buses get her home too late after her night classes. “They need to run more frequently, especially the #25 and #65—and they need to run through campus, so we don’t have to walk so far to catch them at night when it isn’t safe,” she said.

Building Power and Voice

The town meetings in Gilroy, Mountain View and San Jose generated a long list of ideas for improving the transit system, Salazar said. Concerns for frequency, connectivity (being able to get around with fewer transfers) and affordability rose to the top.



RUTU and TRU both face the long-term tasks of building their members’ leadership capacity and knowledge of the politics behind transportation decisions—as they think about strategy for the sales tax campaign.

“We’re still almost a year away from the ballot. So we haven’t figured out how many members of RUTU can’t vote,” Salazar says. “It’s still too early to figure out how we’re going to push [for a yes vote] because the ballot language has not been determined.”

Even help from non-voters can be effective. Salazar says, “Those who can’t vote can pass the word out in the streets to vote. They know people who can vote or they have children who can vote. We just need to get the word out.”

Up until now, Fernandez says, “there really wasn’t a lot of time and energy put on organizing riders. We can have a handful of people talking about what isn’t working but unless we can organize, work together and speak in one voice, we’ll definitely be drowned out.” But the picture is changing.

“If we keep building the power of bus riders, we will make sure that the funds that could possibly be collected go to where they’re most needed. And frankly, if I didn’t feel this way, I wouldn’t be doing this job,” she says.

Harvey I. Barkin is a San Jose-based freelance and technical writer. His work has appeared in various outlets, including several Filipino community publications such as FilAm Star and Philippine News.

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Endnote

1. The Los Angeles Bus Riders Union (BRU), founded in 1992, won a civil rights suit against the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority for running a “separate and unequal” transit system: The MTA dramatically underfunded the bus system, used almost exclusively by people of color, compared to light rail, patronized by whites. After winning the suit, BRU kept organizing to turn the victory into concrete improvements, such as added service hours and driver jobs, and a nine-year halt to fare increases.

<http://www.thestrategycenter.org/project/bus-riders-union/about>