



ITEM ID: 2024-171-0

TRANSMITTAL DATE: April 19, 2024

MEETING DATE: April 26, 2024

TO: Board of Directors

FROM: Lisa Bahr, Chief Customer Experience Officer

SUBJECT: Preliminary Evaluation of the October 2023 Antelope Valley Line Service Expansion

Issue

On October 23, 2023, the Authority implemented a major increase in service on the Antelope Valley Line with additional trains added during the off-peak and weekend. This item provides a preliminary evaluation of the ridership response to the service increase and a summary of the feedback received from a customer survey.

Recommendation

Receive and file.

Strategic Commitment

This report aligns with the Strategic Business Plan commitment of:

- **Customers Are Our Business:** We respect and value our customers, putting them at the heart of all we do, and work hard to attract and retain new customers by understanding their needs and finding new and innovative ways to delight them. The Antelope Valley Line service expansion responds to the service enhancement most requested by customers.

Background

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Authority reduced service levels in response to the lower ridership demand. On the Antelope Valley Line, the number of weekday trains was

reduced from 30 to 22 trains. Weekend service levels remained unchanged.

By September 2023, Metrolink ridership had rebounded to 50% of pre-pandemic levels. Service levels were still below pre-pandemic levels, and Metrolink riders asked for more service on their line. Results from a customer survey identified more trains as the top priority of current Metrolink riders, as was reported to the Board at its meeting on July 22, 2022. A similar finding was echoed in a subsequent survey of potential riders who identified more convenient station locations and more convenient schedules as most likely to influence them to ride Metrolink, as was shared with the Board at its July 28, 2023 meeting.

In early 2022, the Authority began work on the development of new optimized service plans that increase off-peak service levels and support Metrolink's transition from commuter rail to regional rail. On September 28, 2023, the Metro Board authorized funding to restore Antelope Valley Line weekday service back to the pre-pandemic 30 daily trains and double the number of weekend trains from 12 to 24 trains.

The October 2023 Antelope Valley line service expansion represents the first phase of a planned systemwide service optimization.

Discussion

On October 23, 2023, the Antelope Valley Line became the first line to receive new optimized schedules developed for the Authority's proposed Service Growth Development Plan. This schedule change added most new service during non-commute hours:

- Two new trains LA to Via Princessa (10:39, 12:39 departures)
- Two new trains Via Princessa to LA (12:13, 14:13 departures)
- Three trains added Lancaster to LA (16:11, 20:11, 22:11 departures)
- Two trains added LA to Lancaster (13:39, 23:39 departures)
- Train 200, the first train of the day from Lancaster to LA (5:48 arrival), was discontinued to allow for the addition of a late-night train to Lancaster
- Weekend service was doubled from 12 – 24 trains

In addition to the increased train service, the Vista Canyon station was opened as a new station stop.

This report provides a preliminary evaluation of the ridership response since the schedule change. The analysis attempts to account for several other ridership factors:

1. Ridership typically falls during the winter months due to seasonal factors, which may mask the effect of the schedule change.
2. Ridership response to service changes builds over time with the full effect often not evident until after a year.
3. Concurrent with the schedule change on October 3rd, the Authority launched the free-fare Student Adventure Pass on October 9th, which resulted in large increases in student ridership.
4. Finally, a systemwide suspension of train service between December 26-29 resulted in lower ridership levels in December.

Ridership Analysis

During the four months following the AVL service expansion (November 2023 to February 2024), total ridership on the Antelope Valley Line increased by 27% compared to the same period of the prior year. Students accounted for half of the new ridership. Given the large impact of the free student fares it was necessary to exclude student ridership from the analysis to isolate the effect of the optimized service.

Prior to October 2023, non-student ridership on the Antelope Valley Line during the first quarter of FY24 grew at an average rate of 11% as compared to the same quarter of the prior year. Student ridership even declined slightly during this period.

Since October, average monthly non-student ridership in November 2023, January, and February 2024 (not including December 2023 because of the system closure) grew at an average annual rate of 19% compared to the same period of the prior year. This suggests the service expansion resulted in an 8% lift in the near-term average monthly ridership growth rate, from 11% to 19%, with further increases expected in the long-term.

Customer Survey

An online customer survey was offered between October 9 and December 1, 2023, to allow Antelope Valley Line riders to provide feedback on the new schedule. A total of 631 responses were received. Positive comments were prevalent, with many riders voicing appreciation for the added service and welcoming the flexibility it offers.

Some respondents criticized that the schedule changes cater to non-commuters vs. regular riders, and that the changes were made without adequate input. Most of the negative feedback was in response to the suspension of train 200, which provided early morning service for many essential workers with an early work start time. Survey respondents complained that the removal of train 200 forced them to be late for work. Yet, conductor counts do not indicate a loss of ridership from the suspension of train 200. The train averaged 100 daily boardings during the two weeks prior to the schedule change. Most of these riders appear to have shifted to train 202, which was rescheduled to an earlier time to run 30 minutes after the original departure time of train 200.

The survey also received requests for other service improvements. Better security on the train and at the station were the most frequent requests. Others requested lower fares, better cleanliness inside the train, and better enforcement of fares.

Next Steps

Staff is currently conducting a Title VI equity analysis and public outreach for the Antelope Valley Line service expansion and will present the findings at the May 2024 Board meeting.

Optimized schedules are included in the FY25 Budget request for an anticipated implementation on other lines in October 2024.

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Approved by: Lisa Bahr, Chief Customer Experience Officer

Attachment(s)

Presentation - Preliminary Evaluation of AVL Service Expansion