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Caltrain Poll: Voters Continue to Support Dedicated Funding for Caltrain

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Nearly two-thirds of voters in the three counties Caltrain serves would support a one-eighth cent sales tax measure to preserve Caltrain service during the pandemic and to expand service in the longer term, according to a public opinion poll commissioned by the agency. The poll was conducted as Caltrain considers moving forward with a ballot measure that would provide a dedicated revenue source that would address ongoing financial impacts of the pandemic and help prevent regional traffic congestion by increasing Caltrain capacity, service levels and ridership. Caltrain is the only Bay Area transit system without a dedicated source of revenue.

Approximately 1,255 likely voters were polled by email-to-web and by telephone surveys, from June 11 through June 18, to gauge support of a potential measure for the November ballot. Of those polled, 63.3% indicated support for a one-eighth cent sales tax measure for Caltrain. Support increases to 65.6% when including respondents that lean toward supporting. After learning more about the benefits that would be achieved with the increased investment in the system, 70.9% of respondents said they would support the tax. To pass, the measure would need support from a combined two-thirds of voters in San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara Counties. Support for the measure is up slightly from a similar poll conducted in spring 2019.

The poll identifies voters' top reasons for supporting a potential measure, with easing highway traffic congestion, reducing air pollution, and improving Caltrain frequency and capacity topping the list. The poll was conducted by EMC Research and will be presented to the Caltrain Board of Directors at their July meeting.

Currently, the rail agency receives 70% of its funding from fare box revenue, which has been severely affected in recent months due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Despite not having a dedicated funding source, the system has become the 7th largest commuter railroad in the country and is also the nation's most efficient railroad. The pandemic has made it clear that Caltrain will require a more diverse set of revenues to survive the impacts of the pandemic and to grow to meet the region's demands. Caltrain's dependence on fare revenue is not a reliable means of supporting a system of Caltrain's size and importance. . Prior to the pandemic, Caltrain's average weekday ridership was 65,000 passengers. Since the shelter-in-place orders were issued, Caltrain ridership has dipped by 95%.

Based on this recent poll, seven in 10 Caltrain riders who were riding Caltrain prior to the pandemic anticipate eventually returning to their old ridership habits in the future. Approximately 55% of frequent riders said they would ride as often as they did pre-pandemic.

Approving dedicated investment in Caltrain from local sales tax is being considered thanks to legislation (SB 797) passed by State Senator Jerry Hill. The legislation allows the Caltrain Board of Directors to place a measure on the ballot in all three counties, provided that the transportation agency and board of supervisors in each county concurs. The measure would then require approval from two-thirds of residents that vote in the three counties. The San Mateo County Board of Supervisors and the San Mateo County Transit District Board of Directors have already voted to authorize placing the measure on

the ballot. The remaining agencies are scheduled to vote on the issue prior to the August 7 deadline for placing a measure on the November ballot.

If approved, the measure would provide stable, dedicated funding to operate and maintain the service, and to invest in future infrastructure that will be needed to expand service in all three counties. The ability to operate expanded service is made possible by the [Caltrain Electrification](#) project, which is currently under construction. The [Caltrain Business Plan](#) is considering how the system will grow over time and what longer term service levels will be needed to meet ridership demand that is expected to increase by as much as 300% over the next 20 years.

Because the results are so close to the threshold, more information and feedback is needed before staff can recommend whether to continue efforts to place the measure on the November ballot.

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About Caltrain: Owned and operated by the Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board, Caltrain provides commuter rail service from San Francisco to San Jose, with commute service to Gilroy. While the Joint Powers Board assumed operating responsibilities for the service in 1992, the railroad has provided the community with more than 150 years of continuous passenger service. Planning for the next 150 years of Peninsula rail service, Caltrain is on pace to electrify the corridor, reduce diesel emissions by 97 percent by 2040 and add more service to more stations.

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