

January 20, 2021

Honorable Judge Michael Jurkovich
Madera County Supervising Judge
300 South G Street
Madera, CA 93537

SUBJECT: Responses to Madera County Grand Jury Final Report 1920-02 (December 21, 2020) "Unmet Transit Needs in Madera County: Riders without Routes"

Dear Honorable Judge Michael Jurkovich:

The Madera County Public Works Department would like to acknowledge and express appreciation for extensive efforts undertaken by the Grand Jury to review the County's transit services. This review certainly will benefit the County's efforts to provide efficient and effective levels of mobility for residents throughout Madera County.

In accordance with California Penal Code §933 and §933.05, this letter addresses all the Grand Jury Findings and Recommendations that address subjects under the jurisdiction and control of the Public Works Department--F2/R2; F3/R3; F5/R5; F6/R6; F7/R7; F9/R9; and F10/R10. The Madera County Transportation Commission (MCTC) will address those Findings and Recommendations under their jurisdiction and control--F1/R1; F4/R4; and F8/R8. We hope our responses are helpful to future pursuits of the Grand Jury and to the community at large.

A. RESPONSE TO GRAND JURY FINDINGS

F1 The MCGJ finds that the definition of unmet transit needs is vague and fails to consider the geography, the demographics, and the economic inequity of Madera County.

The County respectfully responds that this finding does not pertain to a matter under its control. Instead, matters pertaining to F1 are believed to be within the jurisdiction and control of the MCTC.



F2 The MCGJ finds that bus schedule information is not readily available.

The County disagrees with this finding as information for all Madera County transit services—MCC, Madera Dial-A-Ride, Chowchilla Dial-A-Ride, Senior Bus and Medical Escort, is readily available through a variety of ways.

- A dedicated, comprehensive County transit website is available at www.mcctransit.com and provides information on all County services with real-time MCC bus location updates by stop, and links with other key transit operators, including YARTS, Madera Metro, CATX, and FAX.
- Google Maps Transit at www.google.com/transit provides on-line access to MCC routing and real-time MCC bus location updates by stop.
- Brochures/schedules are accessible on the Madera County website at www.maderacounty.com/government/public-works/transit and at the Madera County Transportation Commission website at www.maderactc.org.
- Brochures/schedules are available at the following key locations throughout the County:
 - County Transit Administration Building, 201 W. Almond Avenue, Madera
 - Madera County Transportation Commission, 2001 Howard Road, Suite 201, Madera
 - Downtown Intermodal Center, 123 E. Street, Madera
 - Camarena Health Services, Madera and Chowchilla
 - Madera Community Hospital
 - Madera Senior Centers
 - City of Chowchilla City Hall
- Brochures/schedules are available on all MCC buses and Medical Escort van.
- Madera County Transportation Commission periodically publishes a County-Wide Transit Guide.

The County will review other potential opportunities for wider distribution and increased accessibility of information on its transit services at key locations throughout the County.

F3 The MCGJ finds that bus schedules are difficult to read and understand.

The County partially agrees with this finding with the understanding that it appears to refer to MCC fixed-route schedules. The County has five different transit services each with its own brochure/schedule. The MCC fixed-route brochure provides detailed information on its services including bus schedules for three MCC routes—Eastern Madera County; Chowchilla-Fairmead; and Eastin Arcola-Ripperdan-La Vina. The County therefore assumes that this finding refers to MCC bus schedules. The Madera Dial-A-Ride, Chowchilla Dial-A-Ride, Senior Bus and Escort brochures provide detailed information on these services and how to make a demand-response trip reservation.

Although the County has received mostly positive feedback on the format of the MCC schedule, the County is receptive to evaluating alternative approaches to make it easier to

read and understand the brochure/schedule and will review other transit service information for ease of use.

F4 The MCGJ finds that there is inadequate public outreach to secure community input for transit needs from low income, senior citizens and from rural mountain communities.

The County respectfully responds that this finding does not pertain to a matter under its control. Instead, matters pertaining to F1 are believed to be within the jurisdiction and control of the MCTC.

F5 The MCGJ finds that there continues to be unmet transit needs throughout the county which will only increase in outlying areas as the population increases and ages.

The County partially agrees with this finding given that no specific needs by location are identified; the phrase "unmet transit needs" is very broad and undefined; and there are reasonable limits to meeting needs. For clarification purposes, the phrase "unmet transit needs" frequently is used in transit planning by the MCTC and County with a strict definition developed by the MCTC and in compliance with the Transportation Development Act (TDA). The County's response to this finding will address how the County meets both the formal MCTC definition and informal meaning that encompasses operating and capital needs.

As stated above, the MCGJ finding refers to unmet transit needs throughout the County without identifying specific unmet transit needs by location. Given the County's large geographic area, the County's mission has been to provide, at a minimum, lifeline services to those areas and residents that have been identified as being in greatest need of transit services, including seniors, disabled, persons of limited means, students and other general public.

Like many rural transit operators, the County faces many challenges in providing successful transit services and infrastructure to rural communities with low population densities and diverse needs such as those found in Madera County. The County spans over 2,100 square miles and has a population of 157,000 residents served by five different transit services, one fixed-route and four demand-response services—MCC fixed-route; MCC Madera Dial-A-Ride; MCC Chowchilla Dial-A-Ride; Senior Bus; Medical Escort. These services collectively serve an area stretching from Oakhurst-Bass Lake to the north, Valley Children's Hospital to the east, Eastin Arcola-Ripperdan-La Vina to the south, and Chowchilla-Fairmead to the west. Inter-county medical trips also are provided from Madera County to Fresno County.

One of the key purposes of the MCTC Unmet Transit Needs process is to determine whether any unmet transit needs may exist and may be reasonable to meet before street funds can be distributed. MCTC has a well-established annual public outreach process and utilizes its Social Services Transportation Advisory Council (SSTAC) to review all testimony received from the MCTC Board Public Hearing and advises the MCTC Board. The County actively participates in MCTC's annual Unmet Transit Needs process and is a member of the SSTAC

which provides the County with informed insight into transit needs throughout the region from a broad spectrum of the public.

It is important to note that through the County's proactive participation in MCTC's public participation process, the County has expeditiously addressed many transit needs throughout the County. For example, a dedicated MCC route was added to Eastin Arcola-Ripperdan-La Vina, and additional service was expanded to the communities of Raymond and Yosemite Lakes Park. Levels of service also were enhanced to and from Fairmead, Chowchilla, Valley Children's Hospital, and Madera Community College with additional round trip service.

Beyond the MCTC Unmet Transit Needs process, the County initiated and continues to undertake many transit service and capital improvements. Most recently, on-time performance, dispatching and fleet maintenance have improved and a new dedicated Transit Administration Office completed. Bus shelters and benches have been installed at key MCC bus stops throughout the County. All vehicles are wheelchair accessible. Service reliability is high given the procurement of seven new buses and a van over the past two years and the County's goal of adhering to its Fleet Replacement Plan. Consolidation of transit operations from four contracts to one was undertaken beginning in FY2019/20. This effort has led to streamlined operations, management, and administrative oversight, seamless services and dispatching, and more cost-efficient services.

The County's transit services are funded by a variety of federal, State, and local funds. Integral to each funding source are stringent requirements. Implementation of services must be carefully evaluated for effectiveness in meeting service and cost-efficient performance measures. The County, at a minimum, must strive to achieve a ten percent (10%) farebox recovery, where fares cover 10% of transit operating costs, and to maintain transit costs that do not exceed specific Consumer Price Index metrics consistent with State TDA requirements. These requirements do not exclusively guide County transit improvements but must be considered.

While the County recognizes the need for effective transit services throughout the County, including outlying rural communities, warranted operating and capital improvements have been and will continue to be undertaken. The ability to operate transit services while meeting key performance metrics remains key to successful long-term sustainability.

F6 The MCGJ finds that MCC La Vina, Fairmead, Berenda, Madera Dial a Ride, Chowchilla Dial a Ride Senior Bus and Medical Escort are underused.

The County partially agrees with this finding but does not currently provide direct service to Berenda. The MCGJ provides a general statement about underuse collectively of all County transit services. The County agrees that ridership on its services could increase both by incentivizing current riders and attracting non-riders. New residential and commercial

developments, an aging population, and an increasing transit-dependent population also will help generate increased ridership.

The County understands the importance of developing increased public outreach and trust in its transit services, particularly with the dramatic changes in transit rider behavior during the Covid-19 pandemic and declining transit ridership. Marketing efforts will be undertaken as described in greater detail in R10.

F7 The MCGJ finds that when referencing the hours and the bus schedules, transit services do not provide adequate hours or diverse route schedules.

The County disagrees with this finding and would like to clarify that while the finding is general in nature, it appears to reference MCC fixed-route schedules and routes. Assuming this interpretation is correct, the County agrees that MCC has the potential to increase its hours of operation. The service is designed to provide a high level of service justified by demand and that is cost-effective for long-term sustainability.

As described in F5, the County offers diverse services with operating challenges faced by many rural transit operators. Improvements to County transit services, whether through an MCTC Unmet Transit Needs process or informal request, are considered based on a specific defined need and on many operational performance measures, including potential ridership, days and hours of operation, vehicle requirements and cost. Each request is carefully considered and responded to on a timely basis, and as warranted, improvements are initiated.

For clarification purposes, the MCGJ report states that “there have been no new service routes or expanded services in Madera County since the YARTS expansion in 2000 and the addition of MCC routes in 2002/03 to Eastin Arcola, Ripperdan and La Vina.” The County would like to note that MCC services were expanded to the Chukchansi Gold Casino in 2005; Yosemite Lakes Park in 2010; and mid-morning and mid-afternoon trips to Chowchilla-Fairmead, and an early-morning run to the College-Hospital route and additional Eastern Madera stops were added in 2016. Further, two trips were added to Eastin Arcola-Ripperdan-La Vina in July 2020 but discontinued in December 2020 due to low ridership. MCC schedules are continuously monitored for on-time performance and undergo changes as needed due to route changes, transfers, addition or deletion of bus stops, traffic changes, etc.

Six new MCC bus shelters also were installed in 2015 in Fairmead, Chowchilla, Oakhurst, Coarsegold, and La Vina. There are plans for additional shelters at other locations, including in Fairmead through close coordination with community leaders and the organization Fairmead Community and Friends.

F8 The MCGJ finds that there are several volunteer unfilled positions on the SSTAC committee. This limits the input from the underserved populations in the community.

The County respectfully responds that this finding does not pertain to a matter under its control. Instead, matters pertaining to F1 are believed to be within the jurisdiction and control of the MCTC.

- F9 The MCGJ commends the County on the consolidated contract agreement and, cost savings of \$500,000 per year over five years with the selection of FCEOC as the bus service provider under a single operator contract.**

The County agrees with this finding and notes that cost savings through consolidation of contracted services have proven beneficial from both an operational as well as financial perspective. For clarification, however, the cost savings are estimated at \$340,000 annually from FY2019/20 to FY2023/24.

- F10 The MCGJ finds that little is being done to market public transportation within the County.**

The County partially agrees with this finding, and will undertake proactive marketing as described in greater detail in R10.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1 The MCGJ recommends that, by the beginning fiscal year 21-22, the MCTC redefine the definition of "unmet transit needs" to be clearly outlined in layman terms.**

The County respectfully responds that this recommendation does not pertain to a matter under its control. Instead, matters pertaining to F1 are believed to be within the jurisdiction and control of the MCTC.

- R2 The MCGJ recommends that, by the beginning of fiscal year 21-22, bus schedules be posted at bus stops, inside buses, and be made available at local businesses.**

The County partially agrees with this recommendation and already provides bus schedules and brochures on all vehicles. The County will post bus schedules at key bus stops and broaden its distribution of schedules and brochures to more businesses/sites.

- R3 The MCGJ recommends that, by the beginning of fiscal year 21-22, bus schedules should be easier to read to promote ridership and ensure the clarity of transit availability.**

The County agrees with this recommendation and will review the MCC bus schedules and other service brochures and identify alternative approaches to make them easier to read and understand.

- R4 The MCGJ recommends that, by the beginning of fiscal year 21-22, SSTAC increase Unmet Transit Needs Workshops and Unmet Transit Needs Public Hearings to four times per year to promote community involvement from other County locations outside of the City of Madera.**

The County respectfully responds that this recommendation does not pertain to a matter under its control. Instead, matters pertaining to F1 are believed to be within the jurisdiction and control of the MCTC.

- R5 The MCGJ recommends that, by the beginning of fiscal year 21-22, an incentive programs, including FREE ridership days once a month for Seniors Disabled and Persons with Limited Means be introduced.**

The County partially agrees with this recommendation but proposes to undertake a more comprehensive approach for marketing system-wide. The County will evaluate the feasibility of an incentive program targeting free-ride days for seniors, disabled, and persons with limited means as part of a more comprehensive marketing and outreach campaign to increase overall ridership as described in greater detail in R10.

- R6 The MCGJ recommends that by the beginning of fiscal year 21-22, the Senior Bus, Dial-A-Ride, and Medical Transport County service be reviewed and expanded within Eastern Madera County, La Vina, Fairmead, and Berenda.**

The County partially agrees with this recommendation and will review the feasibility of expanding the Senior Bus, Madera Dial-A-Ride, and Medical Escort services within Eastern Madera County, La Vina, Fairmead, and Berenda before final determination is made to expand services. The County does not initiate additional services or bus routes outright without comprehensive evaluation of key performance metrics, including potential ridership, days and hours of operation, vehicle requirements, projected costs, and transit budget and farebox recovery impacts of each service improvement component. Services may be expanded as warranted by County performance findings and carefully monitored for long-term sustainability.

- R7 The MCGJ recommends that, by the beginning of fiscal year 21-22, additional bus routes be added for Fairmead, La Vina, Berenda, Raymond, North Fork, and Eastern Madera County.**

The County partially agrees with this recommendation and will review the feasibility of adding routes to the identified communities before final determination is made to add bus routes. This effort will be undertaken as described in R6. Routes may be added and maintained as warranted by County performance findings and carefully monitored for long-term sustainability.

- R8 The MCGJ recommends that, by the beginning of fiscal year 21-22, a concerted effort be made by SSTAC to recruit volunteers to serve on the SSTAC committee.**

The County respectfully responds that this recommendation does not pertain to a matter under its control. Instead, matters pertaining to F1 are believed to be within the jurisdiction and control of the MCTC.

- R9 The MCGJ recommends that, by the beginning of fiscal year 21-22, the annual \$500,000 v savings be utilized to increase transit service routes in outlying areas; Eastern Madera County, La Vina, Fairmead, Berenda, Raymond, and North Fork.**

The County partially agrees with this recommendation but wishes to clarify that consolidation of transit contracts resulted in approximately \$340,000 in annual cost savings. As noted in R6, additional bus routes are not increased outright without comprehensive evaluation of key performance metrics, including potential ridership, days and hours of operation, vehicle requirements, projected costs, and transit budget and farebox recovery impacts of each service improvement component. Routes may be added and maintained as warranted by County performance findings and carefully monitored for long-term sustainability.

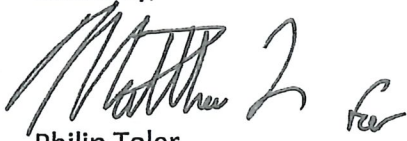
- R10 The MCGJ recommends that, by the beginning of fiscal year 21-22, the County Public Works Department proactively seek additional funding, either through grants or minimal fare increases, to brand themselves and actively market their services to improve community outreach and increase ridership.**

The County agrees with this recommendation and will proactively seek and/or utilize grant funding or minimal fare increases, as recommended, and will undertake marketing and branding strategies in an effort to increase ridership.

The County believes that this effort will help establish a more structured marketing approach to reach out to the general public and targeted groups. Effective marketing and outreach also provide an opportunity to capture greater market share to assure residents that the County is undertaking protective health safety measures in response to unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic impacts on transit ridership in Madera County and throughout the country.

County residents will be informed of the many options available to access transit service information and of specific safety health measures implemented in transit operations. As noted in R5, the County will evaluate the feasibility of an incentive program with free-ride days targeting seniors, disabled, and persons with limited means as part of a more comprehensive marketing campaign to increase overall ridership. The County will coordinate marketing efforts with MCTC, as appropriate.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Philip Toler". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "P" and a distinct "2" at the end.

Philip Toler
Deputy Public Works Direct