

GENERIC RESPONSE TO CUSTOMERS REGARDING “SPARE THE AIR”

Thank you for taking the time to advise the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District (District) about your experiences with using our bus and ferry service on the “Spare the Air” days. The District has received numerous comments from our regular customers about the effect specifically on our ferry service and suggestions on ways to improve the system if this program is considered for next year.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD) declares Spare the Air Days when the overall Bay Area air quality reaches certain levels. On these days, all Bay Area residents are asked to fight air pollution by driving less, taking public transportation, trip-linking, walking, biking, choosing not to use gasoline-powered lawn and garden equipment, and avoiding polluting household products. People who are especially sensitive to pollution are advised to limit their time outdoors, particularly in the afternoon hours.

Last year, free rides were offered for all transit service during the morning commute period and this year, the program was extended to include the entire day rather than just the morning commute. The goals were to increase overall public awareness about what Spare the Air days are and how public transit can help improve air quality, increase ridership and introduce non-transit riders to riding transit. Now that the six free Spare the Days have passed, we will be participating in de-briefing sessions, sharing our own operational experience and our customers' experiences. Those comments will be shared with the Spare the Air program sponsors at both BAAQMD and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC). It has not yet been determined if the program will continue next year and, if it does, in what manner and your comments will be very helpful in the evaluation process.

SAMPLE ARTICLES - SPARE THE AIR

JULY 26, 2006, SF CHRONICLE

EXCERPTS FROM: TWO WORTH COLUMN: Was there a downside to the Spare the Air days?

Jerry Royer, San Francisco: My observation is that many people rode public transit only because it was free and not as an alternate to the automobile. I think it was a colossal failure myself. The free riders made out at the expense of the commuters.

Michael Ponce, Oakland: Overcrowded buses, BART, and ferries was the downside. I commute every day and during the free-transit days, it was difficult finding seats. I took the ferry last Friday but it took me an hour and a half before I got on because of delays.

Carol Fairweather, Alameda: My husband and I rode the ferry to the city on one of the Spare the Air days. We didn't need to go. We just wanted to cool off. I think it's crazy that it was free. What a waste of transportation funds! Isn't the idea to get future riders? Maybe free-riders should have had to buy and show a ticket for future use.

Bill Reque, San Francisco: Absolutely ridiculous! Those who paid for monthly passes got cheated by a bunch of people who just like to ride for fun. The whole concept should be dumped for a transit system that pays for itself. They'd accomplish much more by taking away the transit employees' free parking perks.

Lisa Cooper, Alameda: I suspect a number of people took advantage of free ferry rides as an afternoon activity, which begs the question: Did they drive to the ferry terminal when they normally wouldn't have? The real question is did Spare the Air days help the air? If those days cost \$14 million but pollution was only cut by 3 percent, then I don't think it was worth it.

Kevin Wiggins, Oakland: One could definitely see and feel a difference in ridership on mass transit. It's like an area-wide carnival! However, the greater purpose is worth better planning by all agencies involved. Any uniformed presence usually discourages unfriendly behavior.

Jean Walsh, Berkeley: The downside is that many people experience public transit for the very first time on a day when service is unusually bad. I always hope Spare the Air days don't end up backfiring and turning people off public transit for good!

Rose Chiu, South San Francisco: I love not having to pay and that people took BART instead of driving to lessen pollution. I saw families with different generations -- grandparents to infants -- who looked like they came back from sightseeing or shopping in San Francisco. The downside was that all the trains were extremely crowded. Due to the number of people entering and exiting the trains, I noticed some delays as well. Other

than having more trains and more frequent trains -- since the schedule is thrown off anyway -- more service personnel would help.

Juliana Bunim, San Francisco: I didn't see any downside. Spare the Air serves as a great motivation for people who usually use other methods of transportation to familiarize themselves with public transit. If overcrowding and crime deter from the program, there are ways for the city to counter those problems in order to promote the environment, which in turn generates more usage and revenue on regular fare days.

JULY 19, 2006, SF CHRONICLE

LETTER TO THE EDITOR Spare the Air Day? Spare me! My understanding of the purpose of a "Spare the Air Day" designation is to encourage car commuters to try public transportation. It's not working, unless the new commuters wear shorts, flip-flops, and carry cameras and shopping bags from well-known San Francisco retailers. For us regular commuters, it's a nightmare.

The 2:35 p.m. ferry for Sausalito was "sold out" at 2:15 (750 people). At 2:25, some of the regular commuters showed up only to be told "no room." They were told "you can take the next ferry at 4 p.m." Thanks for that. Don't get me started on what happened with the 3 p.m. Larkspur ferry. When I got back to Larkspur (after a 10-minute delay due to boarding problems), I found a big sign: "Overflow parking available at the Marin Airporter." They already figured out that tons more people would be driving to the ferry and there wouldn't be any parking spaces for them. So, instead of getting people out of cars, it gets more people into cars because ... it's FREE!

How do we make Spare the Air Days work? Only allow a one-way "free" pass to early-morning commuters until 9 a.m. and no free ride home? How do you differentiate the regular commuters from the new ones, who actually want to try alternative transportation options? I don't know the answer, but I know what I am going to do when I get the next Spare the Air Day e-mail alert. I am driving to and from the city in the comfort of my car and avoiding the mess on public transportation. Carol Brandt, San Rafael

JULY 16, 2006, SF CHRONICLE

LETTER TO THE EDITOR I see once again faceless, utopian-addled bureaucrats are about to unleash misguided transit policy with its unintended consequences ("Panels OK more funds for free transit days," July 13). As a 30-year Sausalito ferry commuter, I have never seen such chaos as ferries were jammed to capacity with freeloading day trippers during the last transit experiment. Because of overcrowding, passengers trying to board in Sausalito were actually turned away. Furthermore, this boondoggle provided a taxpayer-paid windfall to the Golden Gate Bridge District, I am told, because the district was compensated full fare for those (children, elderly and commuters) who would normally travel free or at a discount. However, I know it is all for a noble cause. On the next "Spare the Air Day," I will blissfully drive my polluting gas guzzler to the city knowing that in my ferry seat sits an individual about to experience a damascene conversion to public transit. W. R. Wallace, Sausalito

JULY 26, 2006, SF CHRONICLE

Calls raised for free transit all of the time, Ridership surges on Spare the Air days

Rachel Gordon

Ridership on the Bay Area's public transit systems spiked during the six Spare the Air days when passengers were offered free rides in exchange for parking their polluting cars, prompting some local officials to call for making mass transit free all the time.

The higher numbers generated complaints from some regular commuters who were unhappy with the crowded trains, buses and boats, and the associated delays in service. Reported crime also was up on BART, possibly because paying customers are less likely to vandalize vehicles or torment passengers, said several transit officials.

Despite the scattered gripes, some Bay Area officials want to use the popularity of the Spare the Air no-fare days to push for making free passage the norm. Alameda County Supervisor Scott Haggerty is one of the most vocal proponents. "We're not going to be able to pave our way out of the congestion we have today," said Haggerty, who also serves on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the regional transportation planning agency. "We have to look at expanding ridership on public transit." Offering free rides is one way to do that, he said.

But free is relative. Public transit agencies in the nine Bay Area counties collect nearly \$517 million a year at the fare box to help fund operations, many of which are subsidized by grants, taxes and tolls. Revenue to replace fares would have to be found elsewhere. There are costs associated with collecting fares, but they are nowhere near the half-billion dollar mark, said Randy Rentschler, legislative and public affairs director for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

Some cities, such as Portland and Seattle, provide free bus service in their downtown districts. Others, including San Francisco, give free rides on New Year's Eve with the intent of keeping drunken drivers off the roads. Several cities across the country mirror the Bay Area municipalities in offering free service or reduced fares when air pollution is particularly bad. But no major transit agency in the United States has free service year-round.

There are various ways to subsidize a free-fare program in the Bay Area but all would face tremendous political hurdles. With about 5 million trucks and cars in the Bay Area, officials could tack a \$100 surcharge onto annual registration fees. Or they could raise the sales tax or bridge tolls to fund a free-transit program.

Another option is to cut public transit service to reduce operational costs. San Francisco Supervisor Tom Ammiano, who also serves on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, said the notion of year-round free transit "is something that should be pursued. The question, of course, is where we would get the money for this?" One idea Ammiano has unsuccessfully pushed was to impose a special assessment on downtown businesses to help fund the Municipal Railway.

Haggerty says the federal government should assist in setting up a 1-year pilot project to provide free transit with the goal of reducing air pollution. The government can withhold federal transportation funds when regions exceed federal air pollution standards.

The Bay Area already has blown through this year's budget for free-transit on Spare the Air days, spending nearly \$14 million in subsidies to transit agencies that lost fare revenue. The designation for the free-fare days -- three in June and three earlier this month -- came when the Bay Area Air Quality Management District projected that smog might exceed federal health-based limits. Originally, there was enough money for three days, but the unusually hot, wind-free conditions prompted the expenditure of additional money for three more days.

The program -- formed with the dual goal of lessening air pollution and generating interest in public transit -- proved to be a success, with an increase of ridership throughout the more than two dozen public transit systems that participated. It also helped to keep air pollution levels in check, officials reported. BART, for instance, saw an increase of between 16,000 and 33,000 additional boardings on the days when there was no charge. That's on top of the 315,000 or so typical weekday boardings. The number of people using ferries operated by the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District ballooned, as well. On July 21, for example, ridership on the Sausalito ferry jumped 510 percent, with nearly 12,000 boardings.

A push to fund more free-fare days may come as early as today when the governing board of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission meets. "Can we scare up a few million dollars more? Sure," said Rentschler of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which allocates about \$1.5 billion a year for various transit and roadway projects. But, he noted, the extra allocation likely would mean less money for something else.

JULY 21, 2006, SF CHRONICLE

EDITORIAL Spare the air, spur economy

MANY BAY AREA residents have spent the last few days jostling for free rides on BART and the ferries, which led us to wonder where everyone was going on Spare the Air Day. The answer became clear during an early-afternoon stroll in downtown San Francisco Thursday: They're going everywhere but work.

Seriously. We saw them. Way too many of them -- lounging on every inch of green in Union Square, thinning the racks at H&M, cramming into every shop that sells soft-serve ice cream. Many of them were carrying large bottles of water and tangles of electronic equipment, but many of them weren't. Nearly all of them, however, seemed to be clutching shopping bags. Hmm.

They have earned some humorless weekday commuters' ire for the enthusiasm with which they've been packing trains, buses and ferries for the past few days. BART estimates that midday "leisure" travel shoots up 75 percent on free-ride days. This leads us to two conclusions as we approach the summer's Spare the Air finale today:

-- The Bay Area Air Quality Management District ought to partner with local chambers of commerce to declare "Spare the Air, Save the Economy" days, and;

-- It's time for local governments to consider the idea that subsidizing public transit, especially in off-peak hours, pays off in other ways.

Few local business organizations have studied economic fluctuations during Spare the Air days, but we've heard a great deal of anecdotal evidence about the impact of free rides on business traffic.

Karen Bell of the Fisherman's Wharf community told us that her neighborhood's businesses have definitely seen an uptick this week -- and a lot of the foot traffic is local. Market Street was unusually thick with shoppers Thursday.

All of this bodes well for employers, job seekers and local government tax receipts. Spare the Air days are proving that offering good public transportation -- quick, cheap, easy to navigate -- creates benefits that we can't afford to spare.