

INTRODUCTION

As a next step in developing the SSTAC Strategic Plan, this paper provides some policy options for consideration by the SSTAC with regards to key issues. These issues are more value-based in nature, rather than technical. For each policy option, specific questions on which the Consultant would like input are provided in ***bold italics***.

Policy Option: Should Service Outside Humboldt County Be Considered a Potential Unmet Need?

Identifying “trip purposes outside of Humboldt County” as a specific exclusion from the definition of “unmet transit needs” is a reasonable choice. While some jurisdictions feel funding trips beyond their borders is not the best use of public dollars, others have determined that such service does satisfy residents’ needs and warrants investment. Due to long travel distances, out-of-county trips would be relatively costly in terms of subsidy required per passenger-trip. As many of the jurisdictions (notably Humboldt County) already expend all of their available TDA funds on transit services, funding out-of-county services could well reduce funding available for other unmet needs within Humboldt County.

Some pros and cons of the current definition are discussed below.

Pros of Excluding “Out-of-County Trips” from “unmet needs”

- Reserving funds for in-County service helps prioritize limited funding.
- Can be politically popular to limit public funds intended for the County to be spent 100 percent within the County.
- Providing funds for in-County services only ensures that passengers are funded for accessing goods and services in the County, perhaps keeping more dollars in-county.
- Simplifies controlling costs

Cons of Excluding “Out-of-County Trips” from “unmet needs”

- Can ignore residents’ real needs for access to services outside of the County, particularly medical services.
- Not meeting inter-County needs can impede overall mobility of residents
- Existing options for public transportation out of the County (via Greyhound and Amtrak) are limited in schedule and expensive for the passenger. Amtrak also requires purchase of a train ticket in addition to the bus fare.

Options for SSTAC Consideration

- Keep language as is.
- Remove exclusion and determine “reasonable to meet” out-of-county need on an equal footing with other identified, in-county requests.

- Remove exclusion but determine “reasonable to meet” as a lower priority than in-County trips.
- Remove exclusion but determine “reasonable to meet” only if there is a funding partner to cost-share for the out-of-county portion of the trip (such as another jurisdiction, a medical provider, a business, etc.).

Which of these options is appropriate for Humboldt County?

Policy Option: Establish Goals and Policies for SSTAC That Reflect the Committee’s Values

At present, the SSTAC does not have any established goals or policies. Doing so may help guide future discussions, particularly with regard to prioritizing between unmet transit needs that are reasonable to meet.

As a starting point, the current Regional Transportation Plan (*VROOM ... Variety in Rural Options in Mobility*) contains the following policy statements regarding the scope of public transit services:

“GOAL: Achieve an integrated and sustainable multimodal transportation system that provides public transportation options for all users traveling in Humboldt County. Transit and paratransit users have options for affordable, reliable and efficient transit service that effectively meets their local and regional mobility needs.

Specific Public Transportation Objective: Expand and improve local and interregional transit services to improve mobility for people in Humboldt County.

Policy PT-1: To grow and meet transit demand, fund programs to increase trip frequency. Prioritize programs with the highest potential to increase ridership and reduce the number of single occupancy vehicle trips made in Humboldt County.

Policy PT-7: HCAOG shall evaluate and consider requests for extending service hours, expanding service area, and adding service frequency, based on the potential of the new service(s) to achieve minimum productivity standards.”

Does the SSTAC agree with these policy statements? In particular, does the SSTAC agree with the second sentence in Policy PT-1? Does the SSTAC believe that there should be more emphasis on serving a broader area or more dispersed travel needs? Should these policy statements be changed to reflect SSTAC’s vision for public transit services in Humboldt County? If so, how?

Policy Option: Prioritizing New Service Requests

If there are more than one unmet need deemed reasonable to meet, SSTAC then has the responsibility of making prioritization recommendations. This is where the values of the SSTAC comes to bear. To the degree possible, prioritizing service requests should be a quantitative process, including the evaluation of ridership and performance measures. In particular, the required subsidy per passenger-trip is an important measure to consider, in that it relates the key desired output of a transit program (serving new trips) with the key public input (subsidy funding). A good starting point for a discussion of priorities is therefore to first prioritize those with a lower subsidy per vehicle-hour of service¹. It would be the role of HCAOG staff, with input as appropriate from the transit service providers, to prepare this quantitative analysis.

There are other factors, however, that could be considered and which are more qualitative in nature, such as the relative level of importance that service has in the quality of life for specific groups. For instance, it may be considered more important to provide at least some limited service to an outlying community (to provide access to shopping, medical and other basic needs) rather than providing an incremental improvement to a community that is already well-served (such as providing 10-minute service frequency rather than 15-minute service frequency). It also might be considered to be more important to serve a passenger traveling a longer distance (perhaps from a community lacking essential services) than to serve someone making a short trip in a more urban area.

The crux of the problem is that serving less-concentrated areas (and lower demand periods of the day or week) results in a less efficient use of available TDA funds. For example, reviewing the existing services (Table 21 of the *Technical Memorandum One*), the Southern Humboldt Intercity service requires \$14.43 in subsidy funding to serve one passenger-trip, while the Eureka Transit System requires only \$2.51. In other words, five to six passengers can be served on the Eureka Transit System for every one passenger that can be served on Southern Humboldt Intercity service. This is made even more challenging by the fact that many of the individual jurisdictions use all available TDA funding for transit ... so any decision to fund one service requires reducing funding for another.

Weighing the various quantitative and qualitative factors is exactly the role of the SSTAC, and why the TDA identified the need for a SSTAC in each county. While the numbers can help guide the decision process, in the end the prioritization of transit improvements needs to reflect a community's values. There will never be a formula that can "automatically" perfectly prioritize transit options

What factors should SSTAC consider in prioritizing transit funding options? How much weight should be given to efficiency (serving the greatest amount of trips for the dollars available) versus equity (ensuring that the greatest number of people have at least some basic level of transit service)?

¹ Other measures, such as farebox return ratio, could alternatively be used, in which case the option with the higher value would be prioritized. However, it is possible for a transit option with a relatively high (good) farebox return ratio to also have a relatively high (poor) subsidy per passenger-trip, if fares are relatively high (such as for a long-distance service).