

PUBLIC TRANSIT IN TULARE COUNTY

BACKGROUND:

Tulare County with its eight cities, as a collective metropolitan agency, are required by federal highway and transit legislation to provide comprehensive surface transportation planning. The name of the County's metropolitan planning organization is the Tulare County Association of Governments, commonly referred to as TCAG. This legislation provides guidelines for the cooperation of TCAG with other area metropolitan planning organizations, Caltrans, and public transit operators. The goal of TCAG in this process is to reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality within the County. This includes planning, operating, and maintaining a public transit system.

Within Tulare County there are seven public transit agencies, excluding private transportation, Amtrak, or school bus services: Tulare County Area Transit (TCAT), Visalia Transit, City of Tulare Transit (TIME), City of Porterville Transit (COLT), City of Dinuba Transit (DART), Exeter Dial-A-Ride, and Woodlake Dial-A-Ride. Most of the city-based agencies serve their respective communities and the surrounding area, with TCAT serving most of western Tulare County. For local trips in or out of the County, there are specific bus stops to facilitate riders onto Fresno, Kings and Kern County Transit services.

Tulare County Area Transit (TCAT) provides reliable and convenient public transit service between cities and in-city transit services for many small communities throughout Tulare County. Fixed routes service is offered Monday through Sunday. Riders may request a route deviation by calling at least one hour in advance of service. Demand-response Dial-A-Ride service is offered Monday through Friday. You may schedule a curb-to-curb trip by calling at least a day in advance to assure service. LOOP service is offered to bring after school youths to activity centers and return. This service is available during the school year.

The Visalia City Coach was established in 1981, undergoing a name change to Visalia Transit in 2009 due to expansion of services well beyond the City of Visalia. It has grown to be the largest public bus transportation provider within Tulare County, reaching the two million ridership milestone in fiscal year 2011-2012. Visalia Transit public transit system provides fixed-route and demand-response transit services within the Visalia Urbanized Area. It also connects with other transit operations in and around the county, including Amtrak. In an effort to reduce vehicle trips to the National Parks, Visalia Transit also operates the Sequoia Shuttle, which provides transportation services between Visalia and Sequoia National Park.

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION:

The 2014-2015 Tulare County Grand Jury chose to investigate the Area Transit in response to suggested topics by the 2013–2014 Grand Jury.

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION:

The Grand Jury chose to concentrate their investigations on TCAT and Visalia Transit due to the size and extent of their operations.

A Power Point presentation provided by TCAT was viewed by the Grand Jury. Public website data, along with other applicable materials, were reviewed.

Visalia Transit and TCAT Transit Guides were reviewed, including the Bus Systems of Tulare County handout and interconnect information between the various transit agencies serving Tulare County. The Grand Jury also reviewed ridership and revenue reports on rural routes and Dial-a-ride for fiscal years 2008-2009 thru 2013-2014; Transit Operators Financial Transactions and Compensation Reports, and Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for fiscal year ending June 2011 and 2012.

Grand Jury members rode various TCAT and Visalia Transit rural and urban routes and rated the services. During the Grand Jury-member trips, transit commuters were also asked to participate in a short survey. Tulare County, City of Visalia, and contracted employees were interviewed.

FACTS:

1. TCAT connects with Dinuba Area Regional Transit, Kings Area Rural Transit, Porterville Transit, Tulare InterModal Express, and Visalia Transit.
2. TCAT operates nine fixed bus routes in rural areas. They are inter-city North, South, Northeast, and Southeast County, along with local circulator Delft Colony-London-Traver, Lindsay-Plainview-Woodville, Springville-Porterville, Terra Bella-Porterville, and Woodville-Poplar-Porterville.
3. Visalia Transit operates 12 fixed bus routes and a downtown trolley service, plus the Sequoia Shuttle and the Dial-A-Ride service. It connects with Tulare InterModal Express, TCAT, Greyhound, Orange Belt, Kings Area Rural Transit, and Amtrak.
4. Visalia Transit has established bus stops along each of their fixed routes. Each of their bus stops are signed. There are over 500 bus stops throughout Visalia, Goshen, Farmersville, and Exeter.
5. The Sequoia Shuttle, based on the ridership, has been an effective service for local residents and tourists as an alternative to driving a motor vehicle into Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks.
6. Visalia Transit will initiate a shuttle to Fresno sometime in Fall 2015. Stops will include downtown Fresno in the Courthouse area, Fresno-Yosemite International Airport, and California State University, Fresno campus.
7. With TCAT, their drivers will stop in other locations when requested as long as time, distance, and safety permit. Visalia Transit, however, is far more rigid with respect to the issue of non-scheduled stops.
8. For both TCAT and Visalia Transit, basic transit operations are contracted out to a private transportation management firm (contractor). Bus maintenance, field supervision and other related management issues are included in these contracts. Additionally, bus

drivers, mechanics, dispatchers, operations staff and supervisory personnel are employees of the contractor.

9. Dial-A-Ride demand-response service: A supplemental specific curb-to-curb pick up and drop off service. Reservations are generally required the day before service is provided. TCAT Dial-A-Ride service is currently listed as Monday through Friday with hours varying by service area. Visalia Transit Dial-A-Ride service is listed as Monday through Friday, 6:00 A.M. to 9:30 P.M., and Saturday and Sunday, 8:00 A.M. to 6:30 P.M.
10. Late buses is the most frequent complaint.
11. Complaints about the system are handled collaboratively by Tulare County or City of Visalia and their respective contractors. At this time, both TCAT and Visalia Transit have awarded transit operations contracts to the same firm.
12. Fare revenues are insufficient to finance the operation of both TCAT and Visalia Transit; therefore, their budgets must be augmented with additional funding sources. This is typical of all the transit operations not only within the County but statewide as well. Included in the many different funding sources are exterior bus wraps and other advertising and various local, state and federal subsidies and grants. Tulare County's Measure R also assists with the financing of transit operations in the County. The Measure R Transportation initiative, passed by voters in 2006, allocates 14% of its funds for transit, bike, and other environmentally friendly projects.
13. TCAT and Visalia Transit switched over to Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) to fuel their buses. The advantage of CNG is reduced fuel costs and produce cleaner emissions; however, maintenance and engine longevity issues are greater than when the fleet ran diesel fuel.
14. Grand Jury ridership survey results:
 - a) **Riders** - most riders polled use public transit frequently. They felt safe while on bus, breakdowns are rare, drivers have a professional appearance and are courteous, and the buses were clean. With the bus stops, riders reported that they were clean, with adequate numbers and locations. Scheduled time intervals were reported as adequate; however, buses arrived late on occasion.
 - b) **Bus Drivers** – The bus drivers indicated they drive from 6-1/2 to 9 hours per day. One specific route is assigned to each bus driver. They stated that the contractor keeps the buses on an adequate maintenance schedule. Bus Drivers noted there were few rider behavior problems, and company protocols pertaining to behavior, illness, violation of handicap and senior seating issues are established and in place.
 - c) **Grand Jury member observations** – bus conditions were clean, there were missing arm rests in one bus; parking areas were adequate, driving habits were good, ridership depends on time of day and route, all buses had handicap access, and some riders occupied senior and handicap seats.

FINDINGS:

- F1. With the given limitations of a rural setting, riders can still transfer between various transit systems and services with a reasonable amount of effort.
- F2. As a whole, the transit system within Tulare County is providing fundamental transportation service for its citizens. The majority of transit users are able to move about within the county with a reasonable level of service. For citizens who do not own or drive a vehicle, public transit within Tulare County is a necessity for their commuting needs.
- F3. Because of the rural nature and lower levels of ridership in many locations, the public transit system does not provide comprehensive fixed-route service for the entire county. Dial-A-Ride provides a reasonable stop-gap for those not served with a fixed-route within close proximity. Reasonable expansion of the system as demand increases is expected.
- F4. Due to variables in traffic and rider demand, it is not always possible to arrive as scheduled. As per transit staff, due to riders setting their schedules based on bus arrivals, riders may miss their bus if it arrives and leaves earlier than published schedule.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- R1. TCAT may consider revisions in rural schedules so as not to exclude certain south county unincorporated communities.

REQUIRED RESPONSES:

- 1. Tulare County Association /of Governments
- 2. Tulare County Area Transit
- 3. Visalia Transit ✓

Disclaimer

Grand Jury reports are based on documentary evidence and the testimony of sworn or admonished witnesses, not on conjecture or opinion. However, the Grand Jury is precluded by law from disclosing such evidence except upon specific approval of the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court, or another judge appointed by the Presiding Judge (Penal Code Section 911, 924.1 (a) and 929). Similarly, the Grand Jury is precluded by law from disclosing the identity of witnesses except upon an order of the court for narrowly defined purposes (Penal Code Section 924.2 and 929).



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June 15, 2015

The Honorable Judge Bret Hillman
County Civic Center, Room 303
221 S. Mooney Boulevard
Visalia, CA 93291

Dear Judge Hillman:

On behalf of the Tulare County Association of Governments, the following is the Association's response to the 2014/15 Grand Jury findings and recommendations regarding "Public Transit in Tulare County."

Reason for Investigation

The 2014-2015 Tulare County Grand Jury chose to investigate the Area Transit in response to suggested topics by the 2013-2014 Grand Jury.

Finding F1

With the given limitations of a rural setting, riders can still transfer between various transit systems and services with a reasonable amount of effort.

Response: TCAG agrees with the finding.

Finding F2

As a whole, the transit system within Tulare County is providing fundamental transportation service for its citizens. The majority of transit users are able to move about within the county with a reasonable level of service. For citizens who do not own or drive a vehicle, public transit within Tulare County is a necessity for their commuting needs.

Response: TCAG agrees with the finding.

Finding F3

Because of the rural nature and lower levels of ridership in many locations, the public transit system does not provide comprehensive fixed-route service for the entire county. Dial-A-Ride provides a reasonable stop-gap for those not served with a fixed-route within close proximity. Reasonable expansion of the system as demand increases is expected.

Response: TCAG agrees with the finding.

Finding F4

Due to variables in traffic and rider demand, it is not always possible to arrive as scheduled. As per transit staff, due to riders setting their schedules based on bus arrivals, riders may miss their bus if it arrives and leaves earlier than published schedule.

Response: TCAG agrees with the finding.

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Recommendations R1

TCAT may consider revisions in rural schedules so as not to exclude certain south county unincorporated communities.

Response: This recommendation is being implemented. TCAG is currently coordinating with TCaT to evaluate and expand service as is needed and reasonable in all areas of the county, including the south county unincorporated communities.

Sincerely,



Phil Cox, Chair
Tulare County Association of Governments

Cc: Tulare County Grand Jury
Tulare County Board of Supervisors



400 E. Oak Avenue Ste. 201, Visalia, CA 93291

(559) 713-4100 Fax (559) 713-4815

June 26, 2015

Tulare County Grand Jury
5963 S. Mooney Blvd.
Visalia, CA 93277

Subject: City of Visalia Response to "Public Transit in Tulare County" 2014/2015 Tulare County Grand Jury report.

Dear Panel:

Thank you for your dedicated work on behalf of the residents of Tulare County.

The City of Visalia Transit Division respectfully submits the following in response to the 2014/2015 Final Report issued on May 7, 2015 titled "Public Transit in Tulare County".

1. In the report there were 14 items listed as FACTS, 4 items listed as FINDINGS and 1 item listed as RECOMMENDATIONS (the recommendation pertained to Tulare County Area Transit only).
2. The Transit Division of the City of Visalia believes the items listed as FACTS and FINDINGS are thorough and accurate, as far as they pertain to services provided by Visalia.
3. Visalia Transit will continue to add bus stops, new bus routes and bus stop amenities to better service the growing Visalia Urbanized Area as budgets allow.
4. Visalia Transit will continue striving to have our buses operate on schedule, so that our customers can expect to arrive to their destinations on time.
5. Visalia Transit will continue to look for other ways to improve our rider's experience.

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to this report. If you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (559) 713-4100.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Monty A. Cox".

Monty A. Cox
Transit Manager

cc: Michael Olmos, City Manager

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7/2/2015





August 3, 2015

Mr. Chuck White, Foreman
Tulare County Grand Jury
5963 S. Mooney Blvd.
Visalia, CA 93277

Subject: City of Visalia Additional Response to "Public Transit in Tulare County"
2014/2015 Tulare County Grand Jury report.

Dear Mr. White:

This is in response to your letter dated July 30, 2015, requesting additional information regarding our initial response to the referenced Grand Jury report. We apologize for not using the correct format previously. Following is the information you requested:

FINDINGS

- We agree with the findings; numbered: F1, F2, F3, F4

The City of Visalia will continue to do the following in regards to these findings:

Finding 1: Visalia will continue to work with Tulare County Association of Governments (TCAG) and the other affected transit systems to ensure effective transfers will continue.

Finding 2: Visalia will continue to provide fundamental transportation services allowing riders to move within the County with a reasonable level of service.

Finding 3: Visalia will continue to provide Dial-A-Ride service as a reasonable stop-gap option for those unable to access the fixed-route service.

Finding 4: Visalia will continue to use tools available, such as the automatic vehicle location system to monitor on-time performance and minimize early or late departures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recommendation 1 pertained to TCAT only; however, it is our understanding that it has been implemented by TCAT.

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TCAT is operated by the County of Tulare. The City of Visalia is aware that TCAT has implemented this recommendation in the following ways:

First, on January 2, 2015, TCAT extended the hours of operation of the South County demand response (Dial-A-Ride) service, thereby serving all of the South County's unincorporated communities from four hours per day, Monday thru Friday, to ten hours per day, Monday thru Friday.

Second, TCAT continuously monitors ridership demand throughout Tulare County, including the unincorporated communities, to determine if and when it would be reasonable and viable to modify or expand the existing fixed-route service or add an additional fixed route. Further, TCAT will continue to conduct outreach throughout the County regarding existing transit options and community needs, such as, for example, when TCAT staff addressed the Allensworth Community Board on April 21, 2015.

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to this letter. If you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (559) 713-4100.

Sincerely,



Monty A. Cox
Transit Manager



RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AGENCY

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MICHAEL C. SPATA, DIRECTOR

June 17, 2015

The Honorable Judge Bret Hillman
County Civic Center, Room 303
221 South Mooney Boulevard
Visalia, CA 93291

Tulare County Grand Jury
5963 South Mooney Boulevard
Visalia, CA 93277

Subject: The Resource Management Agency's Response to "Public Transit in Tulare County" (2014/2015 Tulare County Grand Jury Final Report)

To the Honorable Judge Bret Hillman and the Tulare County Grand Jury:

The Tulare County Resource Management Agency (RMA) respectfully submits its responses to the Findings and Recommendation contained within the report entitled "Public Transit in Tulare County" (dated May 15, 2015 and received on May 11, 2015) as part of the 2014/2015 Tulare County Grand Jury Final Report.

Each finding and recommendation will be addressed, in turn, as follows:

Finding 1: With the given limitations of a rural setting, riders can still transfer between various transit systems and services with a reasonable amount of effort.

RMA agrees with Finding No. 1

More specifically, RMA agrees that with reasonable effort riders may transfer between various transit systems and services; and, in doing so, RMA is committed to work diligently with the Tulare County Association of Governments (TCAG) and the other affected transit agencies area to ensure that this outcome continues to occur.

Finding 2: As a whole, the transit system within Tulare County is providing a fundamental transportation services for its citizens. The majority of transit users are able to move about within the county with a reasonable level of service. For citizens who do not own or drive a vehicle, public transit within Tulare County is a necessity for their commuting needs.

RMA agrees with Finding 2.

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More specifically, RMA agrees with this finding in that the transit system within Tulare County is providing a fundamental transportation service for the citizens.

RMA also agrees that the majority of transit users are able to move about within the County with a reasonable level of service; and to assist further, the County will continue to expand the transit options, routes, services, and hours of operation as is reasonable.

RMA agrees further that public transit within Tulare County is a necessity for the commuting needs of those citizens who do not own or drive a vehicle.

Finding 3: Because of the rural nature and lower levels of ridership in many locations, the public transit system does not provide comprehensive fixed-route service for the entire county. Dial-A-Ride provides a reasonable stop-gap for those not served with a fixed-route within close proximity. Reasonable expansion of the system as demand increases is expected.

RMA agrees with Finding 3.

More specifically, RMA agrees that the public transit system currently does not provide comprehensive fixed-route service for the entire County; however, to do so would be cost-prohibitive because of the rural nature of the service area and the lower level of ridership in many locations.

RMA also agrees that Dial-A-Ride provides a reasonable stop-gap for those not served with a fixed-route within close proximity. In this connection, RMA would like to highlight that it allows riders with special needs to request a deviation from a fixed-route service, thereby further increasing the availability of fixed-route service.

Accordingly, RMA intends to expand service -- to the extent reasonably feasible -- for the purpose of addressing any increases or changes in demand. As part of this proactive effort, RMA continuously monitors ridership on the Dial-A-Ride to help determine if, when, and where a new fixed-route service should be added.

In this regard, RMA has extended the hours that Dial-A-Ride service is available to certain parts of the County and will monitor the use and demand to determine if the hours should be further extended.

Finding 4: Due to variables in traffic and rider demand, it is not always possible to arrive as scheduled. As per transit staff, due to riders setting their schedules based on bus arrivals, riders may miss their bus if it arrives and leaves earlier than published schedule.

RMA agrees with Finding 4.

More specifically, RMA agrees that these factors are pertinent to this finding; and, as a practical matter, it is not always possible to arrive as schedule. However, Tulare County and its contractor will continue to make every effort to ensure timely service.

To assist in this regard, Tulare County expects to add an automatic vehicle location (AVL) system using GPS to its fleet within the next year. Such a system would allow the ridership to track the location of buses in real-time. Options are being considered that would allow this information to reach as much of the ridership as possible.

Finally, RMA agrees that riders may miss their bus if it arrives and leaves earlier than the published schedule. As a preventive measure, Tulare County's agreement with its contractor provides for penalties for buses that leave specified stops too early; and, to be sure, the County will continue to work with the contractor to minimize or eliminate such occurrences. As suggested above, the inclusion of an AVL/GPS system would allow the County and the ridership to track the location of the buses in real time to further minimize such occurrences.

Recommendation 1: TCaT may consider revisions in rural schedules so as not to exclude certain south county unincorporated communities.

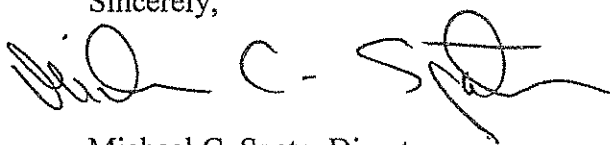
RMA agrees with Recommendation 1. More specifically, Tulare County has implemented this recommendation in the following two ways:

First, on January 2, 2015, TCaT extended the hours of operation of the South County demand response (Dial-A-Ride) service, thereby serving all of the South County's unincorporated communities from four hours per day, Monday through Friday, to ten hours per day, Monday through Friday.

Second, TCaT continuously monitors ridership demand throughout Tulare County, including the unincorporated communities, to determine if and when it would be reasonable and viable to modify or expand the existing fixed-route services or add an additional fixed route. Further, TCaT will continue to conduct outreach throughout the County regarding existing transit options and community needs, such as, for example, when TCaT staff addressed the Allensworth Community Board on April 21, 2015.

In conclusion, RMA commends the Grand Jury for its dedication, hard work and insight with respect to this important public issue; and consequently, RMA is pleased to be able to respond and assist, where necessary, to help improve this much needed transit service to the public.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael C. Spata", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michael C. Spata, Director
Tulare County Resource Management Agency

cc: Tulare County Board of Supervisors
Jean Rousseau, Tulare County Administrative Officer
Ted Smalley, Executive Director, Tulare County Association of Governments