

To: CapMetro Board of Directors

From: Sharmila Mukherjee, EVP, Chief Strategic Planning and Development Officer

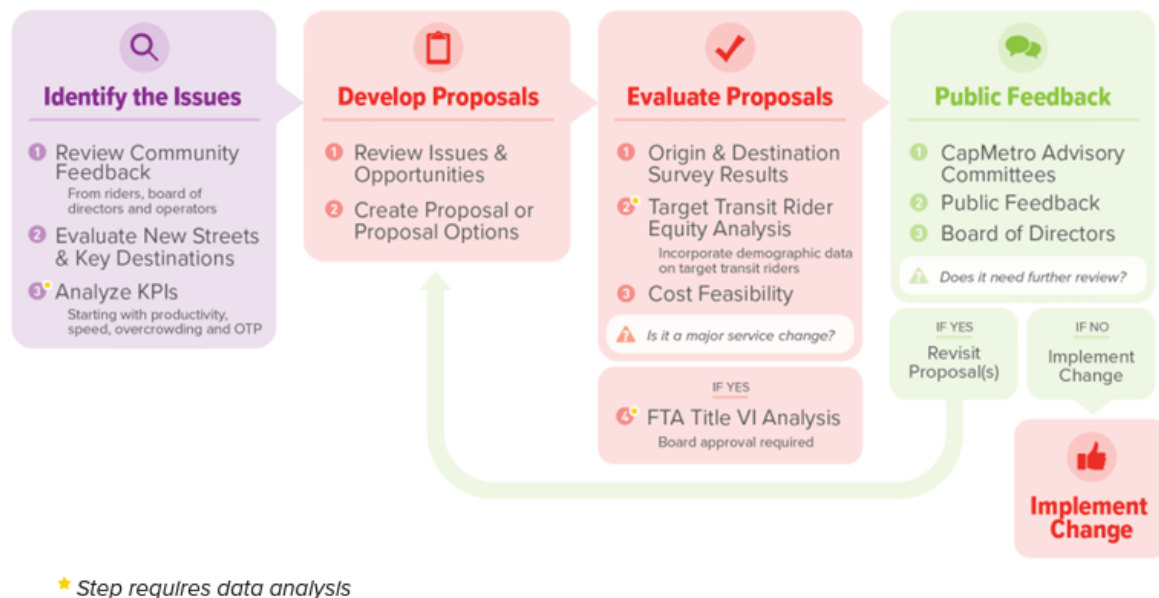
Date: August 23, 2023

Re: Proposed January 2024 Service Changes

Service changes provide CapMetro an opportunity to adjust its services to meet the needs of customers and efficiently use our resources. Service changes occur up to three times a year typically in January, June, and August. These changes coincide with local school and university calendars.

The service change process is guided by the revised Service Standards and Guidelines, which the board approved at its June 2023 board meeting. CapMetro's service change process is illustrated below (Figure 1) and additional information about how service changes are developed, evaluated, approved and ultimately implemented is available on our website at [capmetro.org/servicechange](http://capmetro.org/servicechange).

Figure 1: CapMetro Service Change Process



The proposed January 2024 service change process includes a robust community engagement phase that involves notifying elected officials, key stakeholders, and communities at-large, and soliciting input from potentially impacted interests. CapMetro will share information about its proposed January 2024 service changes, review community feedback, and summarize its community engagement efforts prior to bringing the proposed service change to the board for approval in October 2023. A public involvement plan is included in Appendix C.

These proposed changes are classified as a major service change since routes are recommended for discontinuance or there is a major modification which causes a 25% or greater change in the number of daily service hours provided. Therefore, a public hearing is required, and the community will have

an opportunity to formally comment on the proposed service changes during a scheduled public hearing before the board considers acting on this item.

The following is a high-level summary of the proposed service changes for January 2024.

- **Discontinuation of Service Suspension and Service Change for Reductions** – Service suspensions on Express routes 981 and 987, E-Bus are proposed to become permanent. Daily service frequency reductions on Routes 18, 217, & 335 would now be an official service change. These routes consistently had the lowest average daily ridership and lowest performance when compared to other High-Frequency Routes.
- **Minor Bus Schedule Adjustments** – To improve on-time performance, select routes may receive minor adjustments to their schedules.
- **Minor Rail Schedule Adjustments** – Rail on Weekdays and/or Saturdays may receive minor schedule adjustments to ensure more efficient and reliable service.
- **New Pickup Zone** – Implement a new Dove Springs Pickup zone in southeast Austin that will provide a flexible service in southeast Austin and a connector to the future Pleasant Valley MetroRapid service.

The proposed changes are in accordance with CapMetro's proposed FY 2024 budget. If approved, the changes would be implemented on Sunday, January 14, 2024. Appendix A describes the specifics of the recommendations.

## **Bus**

As part of our ongoing commitment to best serve the community and stewarding limited resources responsibly, CapMetro implemented several data-driven service adjustments and reallocations during the pandemic. We faced challenges maintaining service levels due to a shortage of operators, mechanics, vehicles, replacement parts, and numerous other unexpected changes. In March of 2020, we temporarily suspended Express Routes 981 and 987, and in September of 2021, we temporarily suspended E-Bus service and reduced daily service frequencies on Routes 18, 217 and 335. The decision to temporarily suspend these services and reduce frequencies was not taken lightly but was treated as a necessary step to efficiently distribute limited resources to provide reliable service for our customers overall.

CapMetro's original intention was to restore these routes to their original service levels once various resources were available and transit demand returned. However, determining the timelines and processes for restoring service has proven to be unpredictable given the number of factors that influence this process -- recruitment, successful hiring, availability of vehicles and replacement parts, to name a few. In addition, there have been long-lasting shifts in travel patterns and demand that continue to necessitate reallocating limited CapMetro resources to other services.

Prior to the start of the pandemic, Routes 18, 217, & 335 consistently had the lowest average daily ridership and lowest performance when compared to other High-Frequency Routes. They continued to have low performance compared to other High-Frequency Routes during the pandemic. When CapMetro needed to reduce service in fall of 2021, these routes were selected due to lagging ridership. By providing service on these routes every 30 minutes, we aim to ensure that customers still have access to transit. The reclassification does not apply to temporary weekend frequency reductions for

our High-Frequency routes. CapMetro still plans to reinstate 15-minute weekend frequencies for our High-Frequency routes once resources become available.

Commuter routes continue to have low ridership due to changing work patterns. The proposed discontinued Routes 981 and 987 have viable substitutes that ensure continued transportation options for commuters. More specifically, customers who use Route 981 can utilize Route 982 as an alternative, and those who use Route 987 have the option to switch to the Red Line and Route 985.

E-Bus service (Routes 410, 411, and 412) previously operated on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights from 10:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. during the University of Texas' Fall and Spring semesters. Before the suspension, ridership on the E-Bus had been declining as students chose other options to travel downtown. CapMetro temporarily suspended E-Bus service during Fall 2021 and encouraged customers to utilize our Night Owl service as a viable alternative with 6-days-a-week year-round service.

Staff recommends discontinuing the suspended service status of these service adjustments and confirming an official service change, based on current availability of resources, and needs. The update ensures that we are reliably meeting our established service levels and communicating clearly and transparently to our customers and the public. The board reviewed a Title VI service equity analysis for the suspension of Routes 981 and 987 in January 2022. A service equity analysis for E-Bus and Routes 18, 217 & 335 showed no disparate impact or disproportionate burden on our customers. Both service equity analysis memos are included in Appendix B.

### **Pickup**

Pickup has provided over 650,000 trips since its inception on June 3, 2019, and ridership continues to increase in 2023. The service is currently providing an average of 1,351 weekday trips. Pickup's continued popularity drives CapMetro to expand this service to other parts of our service area.

Staff proposes a new zone, Pickup Dove Springs, that will provide a flexible service in southeast Austin and a connector to the future Pleasant Valley MetroRapid service. Pickup Dove Springs was planned to provide a neighborhood and activity-centered transit solution in an area of Austin that has been historically underinvested in and where typical fixed route transit services were inefficient due to the current geography and street grid connectivity. Pickup Dove Springs is planned to launch in January 2024 before the future Pleasant Valley MetroRapid and will provide first/last mile service to Route 7, Route 311 and Route 333. The zone will be bordered by IH-35 to the west, E. Ben White Blvd to the north, E. Stassney Ln to the east, and E. William Cannon Dr. to the south (see Appendix D for map). Pickup Dove Springs will include destinations such as HEB, Travis County Association for the Blind, Austin Lighthouse for the Blind, the future site of the Dove Springs Medical Center and numerous schools, elementary through high school.

Initial public engagement efforts for Pickup Dove Springs began on May 11, 2023, with the launch of an online survey and concluded on June 25, 2023. CapMetro's Community Engagement team informed stakeholder groups and key leaders of the proposed new service and reached out to select businesses and organizations throughout the proposed zone to seek input on destinations, service levels and other zone details. CapMetro sent 12,000 postcards to Dove Springs businesses and residents encouraging survey participation, held two public meetings, engaged local schools, conducted at-stop outreach, led information sessions at six community-based events in and around the proposed zone, and promoted the survey on social media. Staff provided English and Spanish engagement materials

and created accessible documents for meeting with the Lighthouse for the Blind, including accessible PowerPoint and recorded presentations, large-text posters, and braille materials. More than one hundred surveys were received because of these efforts.

The zone would launch on Monday, January 15, 2024. Two vehicles would operate simultaneously between 7am – 7pm Monday-Friday and 10am – 6pm Saturday<sup>1</sup>. The number of vehicles could increase after the zone launches based on demand and ability to meet our 15-minute response time. The average monthly cost is expected to be \$51,000 to operate, which is in accordance with CapMetro's proposed FY 2024 budget.

### **Regional Coordination**

The CapMetro Government Affairs team, in close coordination with Planning and Development staff continues to facilitate engagement opportunities and ongoing communication with all cities within CapMetro's service area. As part of the update to the Service Standards and Guidelines, staff met with member cities and non-member regional partners, in coordination with the Regional Transportation Coordination team, to explore ways to strengthen our service change process. These discussions helped shape our conversations around incorporating regional feedback in service change processes. A memo updating the board on staff's member city outreach was provided in the July 24<sup>th</sup> board meeting agenda packet.

In addition, CapMetro's Regional Planning team, in close coordination with Government Affairs staff, facilitates partnerships, Transit Development Plans (TDPs) and transit service agreements with jurisdictions within the Central Texas urbanized area, but outside of the CapMetro service area. The team is working with Buda, Pflugerville, and Travis County on their TDPs. There will be several agreements with regional partners to continue transit service into FY24 September Board meeting.

As we develop service change proposals, staff will work with each jurisdiction to solicit input, understand their concerns, evaluate existing and future services, identify any practicable solutions and address issues that may occur. In the future, all service evaluations will follow the process outlined in the updated Service Standards and Guidelines, allowing for several points of engagement with the public. As part of CapMetro's upcoming Service Planning process, staff will also coordinate on communicating proposed service changes to help facilitate an exchange of information and understanding among our regional partners and address any concerns.

### **Service Planning**

While the proposed January 2024 Service Change includes discontinuing suspended service and making permanent service changes to select routes, staff are about to start CapMetro's next 5-10-Year Transit Plan. Our previous 5-10-year plan, Connections 2025, yielded our most recent transit system re-design, Cap Remap, that increased the frequency and reliability of our services and resulted in a month-over-month, year over year increase in ridership from June 2018 until March 2020. The upcoming service planning effort will culminate in a detailed implementation and vision plan to coordinate and implement all current and future CapMetro services in a way that aligns with community needs today. During this process we will identify how people are traveling in the central Texas region and evaluate the entire system to identify where services are meeting our customer's needs and where there are opportunities for improvements. During this process, CapMetro will meaningfully engage with the community and prioritize a public participatory and inclusive process to

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<sup>1</sup> The August 10, 2023 memo stated operating hours as 6am-7pm Monday – Friday.

ensure we capture representative feedback and equip the board with information to make informed decisions.

Should Board Members have any questions regarding the proposed changes, they should contact [Ed.Easton@capmetro.org](mailto:Ed.Easton@capmetro.org).

### **Appendixes**

- Appendix A – Summary of January 2024 Proposed Service Changes
- Appendix B – August 2021 Service Change Equity Analysis (distributed to the Board in November, 2021)
- Appendix C – Proposed Dove Springs Pickup Zone Map