**Testimony of Rebecca Long, Director of Legislation & Public Affairs, Metropolitan Transportation Commission & Association of Bay Area Governments**

**February 27, 2023 Joint Assembly/Senate Transportation Committee Hearing**

Good afternoon, Chair Gonzalez and Chair Friedman. My name is Rebecca Long and I’m the Director of Legislation & Public Affairs at MTC.

Thank you for having me today.

I was asked to share what the Bay Area is doing to bring back riders and what barriers we face in that effort.

To begin, let me orient you to our transit landscape in the Bay Area and MTC’s role in it.

1. **MTC & Bay Area Transit Agency Background**

MTC is the regional transportation planning agency or RTPA for the 9-county Bay Area, a region of 8 million people served by 27 distinct transit operators. Despite this fragmented governance, riders can navigate the system with a single fare payment card, known as Clipper, which was developed by and is administered by MTC.

As the RTPA, MTC is also responsible for long-term planning, our sustainable communities strategy and project prioritization and distributes both state and federal transit funds.

In December 2022 over 20 million trips were taken on public transit in our region – a large number, but only 53% of 2019 levels.

This significant reduction in ridership along with steep increases in the cost of operations these last three years, results in a forecasted shortfall of between $2.5-$2.9 billion dollars over the next five years.

Transit has always been a lifeline for the Bay Area’s low-income residents as well as many persons with disabilities and seniors, who count on transit to get to work, school, medical appointments and other essential trips, but today these riders represent an even greater share of Bay Area transit customers. Transit riders are also disproportionately more likely to be people of color. As such, having a healthy transit system is foundational to advancing equity in our region and our state.

1. **Efforts to Bring Back Riders**

So what are we doing to bring back riders and preserve our transit system?

When the pandemic hit, MTC recognized the crisis was also an opportunity to address longstanding barriers to a more seamless transit system and formed a multi-stakeholder Blue Ribbon Task Force to identify strategies to win back riders.

Our first major initiative is fare integration.

I mentioned the Clipper card which makes fare *payment* simple. Fare integration goes one step further, creating synergy and access where today there is friction.

The second, is improving the experience transit riders have using multiple operators so that it feels like one connected, harmonious system instead of a confusing maze of logos and symbols.

And last but not least, it’s about speed. If transit takes much longer than driving, most people who have a choice won’t take it. When you give buses priority and cut down travel time, the riders come.

As helpful as these initiatives will be, they are one-offs. To sustain the momentum generated by the task force and create the customer-focused, seamless system we need, just last week MTC approved a new **Regional Network Management** structure for the Bay Area to drive transformative improvements in the transit rider experience. This voluntary structure elevates the role MTC will play in coordinating public transit in partnership with transit agencies and includes a new transit customer advisory committee to give Bay Area transit riders a single forum to voice their concerns.

1. **Challenges**

In closing, I’d like to highlight some of the key challenges we face in bringing riders back.

By far the largest barrier the Bay Area faces is the shift in how we work. Remote work has taken hold in the Bay Area more than anywhere in North America and there’s very little transit agencies can do about it. So those that were focused on serving commuters trying to avoid weekday traffic need to reinvent themselves to attract different kinds of trips, like weekend entertainment options, shopping, school trips, essential service workers, and more.

Implementing transit priority is also a challenge. Transit agencies typically need permission from their city or the state to get preferential treatment on the roadway and that isn’t easy.

Finally, a major challenge is hiring – many agencies face operator vacancies of 20% or more and say the biggest barrier they face to ridership recovery is not having enough drivers to provide better service levels.

That concludes my prepared remarks and thank you again for holding this hearing and inviting me today.