

**Testimony of Darren M. Kettle
Chief Executive Officer, Metrolink**

**Senate Transportation Subcommittee on LOSSAN Resiliency
Oversight Hearing
State Capitol, Room 1200
August 13, 2024 – 2 PM**

Thank you, Chair Blakespear and members of the Subcommittee for the invitation to speak to you today. My name is Darren Kettle, Chief Executive Officer of the Southern California Regional Rail Authority. SCRRA, which operates Metrolink, is a joint powers authority consisting of the transportation commissions of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties.

When Metrolink launched our first train in 1992 we operated on three lines. Metrolink provides Southern California with safe, efficient, dependable commuter rail service. We offer an outstanding customer

experience, reduce emissions, and foster economic vitality by connecting jobs and housing in a traditionally car-centric region. Today, we operate a 545-route mile, 8-line system serving six counties, making Metrolink the third largest regional passenger railroad in the United States.

As you are aware, reducing vehicle miles traveled is a major goal for California. Metrolink is uniquely positioned to provide viable alternative transportation to those traveling longer distances. We removed 4.1 million car trips in Fiscal Year 24 with an average length of nearly 37 miles. This equates to a whopping 152 *million* fewer vehicle miles travelled.

Our Antelope Valley and Orange County Lines run parallel to I-5, our Riverside Line

to SR-60, and the 91/Perris Valley and Inland Empire/Orange County lines parallel the 91 freeway. Our San Bernardino Line operates alongside the I-10 and 210 freeways and our Ventura County Line parallels the 101 and 118 freeways from LA to Ventura. Not only do these passenger rail lines offer alternatives to driving, but they transport residents in more affordable housing markets to jobs and economic opportunities in the rest of the region.

RIDERSHIP

Nationwide, commuter rail riders have been slow to return, and Metrolink is no exception. With pandemic-related hybrid and remote work schedules appearing permanent, we have a plan to rebuild our ridership. Instead of catering mainly to 9 to 5 commuters traveling to job centers in downtown Los Angeles and Orange County,

we are taking a major step to transition our service model from a commuter orientation to a regional rail model.

TRANSITION TO REGIONAL RAIL

Under our Metrolink Reimagined service plan, we will increase off-peak train availability in the middle part of the day and into the evenings.

Our regional rail transition is similar to other efforts around the country and is based on projected unmet ridership demand. When we surveyed our customers in 2022, respondents were quick to call out the limitations of a commuter-centric schedule. Respondents noted that Metrolink's existing hours of operation preclude them from taking the train to many leisure activities, including sporting events, concerts, and day trips. Three in

four riders said they would be more likely to ride Metrolink if we increased midday service, and a whopping 87% asked for more weekend trains.

Beginning in October, we intend to expand service to meet this demand. Specifically, we intend to add 32 trains, going from 142 to 174 trains daily. We will spread service across the day and into the evening. The schedule will promote transfer opportunities through “pulse” scheduling across lines, providing a true alternative to driving. Our member agencies have approved \$7.2 million to fund this additional service.

RIDERSHIP EXPANSION INITIATIVES

Metrolink is also building ridership via fare initiatives. One of the most exciting of these is the Student Adventure Pass we launched in October 2023. Thanks to an

initial Caltrans grant from the Low Carbon Transit Operations Program, students can ride our system for free. Over 1 million student tickets have been activated to date. Student ticket sales in May and June of this year more than doubled when compared to a year ago. And these students are often new riders – a recent poll showed that 34% of students had not taken Metrolink prior to the implementation of the Student Adventure Pass.

I can personally report that as a frequent Ventura County Line rider, I have spoken to students on board who express true gratitude in this program that opens both education opportunities and life experience to the next generation of public transit users.

We are also making service more convenient and frequent through expanded partnerships. Codeshare is a program Metrolink created, in coordination with LOSSAN, that allows Metrolink ticketholders to ride all Pacific Surfliner trains between Union Station and Ventura. This program is designed to increase service levels for our customers on the Ventura County Line where we run fewer Metrolink trains.

The launch of the codeshare program has proven highly successful. Ridership between Union Station and Ventura was up 96% the last 12 months, increasing from about 30,000 to 60,000 riders. Compare that to south of Union Station, where our Rail 2 Rail program allows for travel on both systems but only for monthly

passholders. Ridership also increased, but by a smaller margin of 45%.

At the request of Santa Barbara and Ventura County transportation agencies, we have provided a proposal to operate a new commuter rail service as far north as Goleta in Santa Barbara County. The Ventura County Transportation Commission approved \$3.8 million from SB 125 funding and the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments intends to use local transportation sales tax dollars to support train service expansion to Santa Barbara.

Concurrent with these efforts we are also evaluating changes to simplify and reduce our complicated fare offerings. Recommendations will be published later this year with the goal of reducing

customer confusion and supporting long-term growth across our system. Additionally, it is worth noting that Metrolink has held the line on ticket pricing, having not raised ticket prices since prior to the pandemic. While many other daily expenses have inflated since the pandemic, our fares have not.

And I am pleased to report that these initiatives are garnering results. Metrolink ridership reached 6.3 million boardings in Fiscal Year 24, an increase of 22% over Fiscal Year 23. We are now at 58% of rider recovery compared to 2019 and our growth maintains a steady trajectory upward.

LOSSAN PERFORMANCE

Within the context of this encouraging growth story, I would like to address performance in the LOSSAN corridor, which is home to some of the busiest

station pairs across our system. Out of the top 20 station pairs, five of them are in the LOSSAN corridor. Last year, the Union Station and Fullerton stations hosted nearly 148,000 ticketed riders, our busiest station pair systemwide.

To keep these positive numbers growing, we place major emphasis on on-time performance. We know that customers rely on us for high-quality, dependable, and on-time service.

One of the causes of delay is freight train interference. However, our coordination with BNSF and UP railroads has improved over the last two years as we have increased our dialogue. We meet regularly to identify hot spots and work with operators to implement changes as needed to minimize disruption and delay. I am committed to our ongoing diligent efforts

to work together to reduce delays and arrive on time for our passengers.

More recently another leading cause of delays to trains, both passenger and freight, is vandalism of our signal systems. And, by vandalism, I mean the disturbing trend of copper wire theft. When our signal houses are broken into, or cables that connect signals or grade crossings are cut, it creates a serious safety issue that requires us to operate at slow speeds until repairs can be made. This impacts our on-time performance.

Another growing source of delay comes from pedestrian strikes. Between July and December 2023, passenger and freight trains operating on Metrolink service lines were involved in 53 vehicle and pedestrian strikes, a 39% increase compared to the same period in 2022. Nearly half of all

strikes in 2023 were ruled as suicides. To address this challenge, Metrolink secured an earmark from Congressman Brad Sherman and an additional federal grant to develop a pioneering track intrusion detection system. It is our intent to use AI to connect with our existing positive train control technology. Cameras will identify trespassers and utilizing the PTC system inform train engineers to slow or stop trains.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

I will end my remarks by emphasizing that while this is an exciting time in Metrolink history, we have some challenges ahead.

Most importantly, Metrolink needs the state's help in identifying alternative dedicated revenue sources that commuter railroads can leverage for capital or

operating expenses. SB 125 was a lifeline for transit operations. We appreciate that the Legislature and Governor continued to support transit through the very challenging FY 24/25 state budget process. Long term, a lack of dedicated funding is a major obstacle to our plans for service growth, new railroad track capacity, and critically important state of good repair needs.

Additionally, our agency is seeking grant funding to replace older, polluting locomotives with Tier 4 technology. In March 2021 the Metrolink Board approved our Climate Action Plan in order to do our part to reduce regional air pollution. We have replaced 40 older locomotives with Tier 4s out of our core fleet of 55 – by far the state’s largest Tier 4 locomotive fleet.

We need help to replace the remaining 15 older locomotives. If we can't expand our Tier 4 fleet by 2030 or earlier, we risk being out of compliance with CARB's recently adopted in-use locomotive regulation and may have to repurpose operations funding and cut service.

Though we have repeatedly tried to secure federal grants to replace our remaining fleet, our applications have not been successful thus far. We need help from lawmakers such as yourself expressing support for our federal applications. Regional and state consensus goes a long way in Washington.

And finally, we are now less than four years away from the 2028 Olympics. The regional public transit system must be ready to accommodate the estimated 3 million expected attendees. Metrolink will serve

as the regional backbone of public transit service, connecting people to venues throughout Southern California.

We saw firsthand, just a little over two weeks ago, the importance of readying public transit for the Games. Unfortunately, France's rail lines were hit by coordinated attacks and vandalism, disrupting the Opening Ceremony and other competitions. We can improve transit's resilience against security threats, but we need federal and state support to ensure our system operates in an efficient, safe, and reliable manner during the Games and beyond.

I thank the Subcommittee for having me today to discuss Metrolink service in the LOSSAN corridor and beyond and I look forward to taking your questions.