Public Transit Agencies Face Many Challenges with Coronavirus Outbreak

The coronavirus is causing public transit agencies across the U.S. to make major changes to accommodate health and safety concerns.

Cleaning Goes Above and Beyond
The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) has implemented enhanced cleaning efforts of buses and light rail trains and paratransit vehicles, explained General Manager and CEO and APTA Chair Nuria I. Fernandez. Currently, there are no plans to restrict service. Fernandez noted that VTA’s partially activated Emergency Response Center continues to monitor public health recommendations and warnings.

On March 11 the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) announced an update to its agency-wide sanitizing protocols as it redoubles safety precautions in response to the virus. New York City Transit, MTA Bus Company, Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North are significantly increasing the frequency and intensity of sanitizing procedures at each of its stations, moving to disinfecting efforts twice a day, and continuing its daily cleanings on its fleet of rolling stock with the full fleet of train cars and buses completed every 72 hours or less.

Metro-North’s New Rochelle station has the largest cluster of coronavirus cases in New York. As a result, a dedicated cleaning crew is now stationed there daily, and crews will be performing a weekly deep cleaning. Extended hours are also being offered for employees to receive free flu shots at any MTA Medical Assessment Center.

“Our top priority is to ensure we are doing all we can to make the system as safe as possible for customers and employees,” said Patrick J. Foye, MTA Chairman and CEO. “We are investigating new advanced disinfectant methods to build on the round-the-clock efforts our hard-working employees are undertaking to sanitize the system.”

The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) has also increased its sanitation schedule to disinfect all MBTA fleet vehicles and customer business site locations daily—and all high-contact surfaces at subway stations (handrails, fare gates, fare vending machines) are being cleaned every four hours.

Vehicle disinfection occurs during the overnight hours when vehicles are not in service. MBTA held a special disinfecting and cleaning demonstration event for local media on March 11 at midnight. The event was well-attended and was a great way to provide the public photos and videos of the agency’s cleaning efforts.

AVTA has also contracted with an outside firm to add five more people to evening utility crew for bus cleaning. Macy Neshati said, “It’s an expense we need to incur right now to make sure
we’re covering our bases in terms of proactivity and keeping our buses clean for the riding public.”

Neshati noted that because AVTA operates 51 electric buses and 30 commuter buses to LA, “We’re looking to potentially hire through a temp agency four to six people who would ride the busses all day long, so every bus gets wiped down en-route at least once. I think that if we strategically position those staff, I’m confident we can do a mid-day disinfecting of each bus each day. It’s necessary to protect our riders and employees.”

Changes to Ridership, Revenue and Staffing
Many systems have experienced a drop in ridership. Among them, The New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) reported an 18.65 percent drop in ridership on NYCT subways and a 15 percent drop on buses on March 11 versus a comparable Wednesday one year ago. On March 12, LIRR and MNR ridership figures were also down by 31 and 48 percent, respectively.

“Not surprisingly, we are seeing daily declines in ridership and we expect those declines to continue as mass gatherings are barred and major companies and universities move to telecommuting,” said MTA Chief Communications Officer Abbey Collins. “This has led to a decline in revenue and we continue to monitor the situation closely. We continue to run regular service.”

In regard to any possible resulting MTA shutdowns, the office of the Governor of New York released a statement March 12 saying: “To be clear, the state has the legal authority to overrule any locality’s decision to issue an order of mass quarantine or shut down. No locality will be closing down. The mass transit system is not shutting down. These rumors, caused by undue anxiety, are just that—rumors.”

The Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) in San Francisco reported that its ridership number for March 11 was 268,192, which represents a 35 percent drop compared to an average Wednesday in February 2020. BART General Manager Robert Powers said his system has an emergency plan in place should there be a call for significantly reduced service or a shut down; however, as of March 12 this was not anticipated. He also noted that BART has layers of staffing trained to distribute information and updates.

As noted by the agency, fewer riders mean less revenue for BART. Sixty percent of BART’s budget is sustained by fare dollars, which currently equates to approximately $450,000 to more than $600,000 fare revenue lost each weekday with current ridership levels. BART noted that it will be actively pursuing emergency aid from local, state and federal sources in the coming days and weeks.

New Jersey (NJ) Transit has observed an approximate 20 percent reduction on both bus and rail ridership. The agency is currently operating regular service, but says it has the ability to adjust as conditions warrant. While cleaning and disinfecting is undertaken every 24 hours, NJ Transit encouraged customers to purchase tickets through the NJ TRANSIT App to limit use of touchpoints within the system. The app allows passengers to buy and display passes and tickets and get real-time bus and train statuses.
Antelope Valley Transit Authority (AVTA) Executive Director and CEO Macy Neshati said on March 12 there were no changes in ridership through February, but AVTA is anticipating a drop in March. Luckily, Neshati does not expect a drop in ridership to effect AVTA’s financials. “The fare passengers pay is a very small amount of what it costs to operate our system,” she said. “It’s something we’ll need to endure and measure on a weekly basis. A lot of our funding is not dependent on farebox coverage.”

As of March 12, The Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority (The COMET) Executive Director and CEO John Andoh hadn’t noticed a drop in ridership on his system yet either, but he anticipates that as major events close down, the system will be more effected. “Our top priority is keeping people safe and educated and keeping our fleet clean. It’s good to be preventative instead of reactive. We are monitoring what FTA is doing to learn best practices to incorporate into our operation,” he said.

When it comes to financing, Andoh said, “Public safety is more important than worrying about the finances right now. Hopefully, FTA will provide reimbursement to help with costs we’re incurring. We’ve also always had a teleworking and a flexible alternative work schedule here, so we haven’t had to make any changes yet. But we are monitoring to determine if we need a mandated policy or not.”

Other systems are considering changes to their staffing policies. On March 12 the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (RTA) implemented paid sick leave guarantees for its employees related to coronavirus. “Any employee who is quarantined as a result of COVID-19 will be eligible for up to a two-week leave with full straight-time pay,” said RTA CEO and General Manager India Birdsong. “We want our employees to have the assurance that in the event their doctor diagnoses them with COVID-19 and orders a quarantine, they will be paid for the 14-day mandated time off, whether or not they have enough sick leave available in their accruals.”

To help public transit agencies address these concerns, Optibus is offering no-cost assistance in preparing coronavirus contingency plans to any cities/agencies that request it through June. “Contingency plans are needed so that cities can prepare for scenarios in which hard decisions need to be made about reducing service in ways that cause the least harm in the present, with an eye toward rebuilding a relationship with riders in the future,” said Optibus Co-Founder and CEO Amos Haggiag.

APTA is closely monitoring members’ responses to coronavirus and will provide more information in upcoming issues of Passenger Transport.