

March 17, 2007: Public Transit Forum for Families with Young Children

As part of the Transit Effectiveness Project (TEP), staff from the San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency (SFMTA) and the San Francisco Controller's Office held a Public Transit Forum for Families with Young Children. This forum was co-hosted by Mayor Newsom's Policy Council on Children, Youth and Families, the Department of Children, Youth and their Families, and the San Francisco Youth Commission. The objectives of the forum were to: 1) inform families about the TEP, its objectives and how to participate in the process; 2) allow families to inform the TEP staff about the unique challenges they face when riding transit; and 3) encourage families to help generate potential solutions to these challenges. It is also hoped that the forum informed families with young children about opportunities to provide ongoing feedback to Muni regarding issues beyond the scope of the TEP.

The Public Transit Family Forum was held on March 17, 2007 from 10:30 AM to 12:30 PM at the SF Main Library. Outreach for the event was led by the partner agencies and included several flyers mailed to DCYF grantees (over 170 community-based organizations) and recreational centers and libraries; listings on web groups; tabling at community events; notice in the weekly DCYF newsletter; and email notification to family and parent support agencies. Final attendance included 43 participants plus eight staff from SFMTA, three staff from the Department of Children, Youth and Families and one member from the Mayor's Policy Council on Children, Youth and Families. Included in the 43 participants were nine Spanish speakers.

In order to encourage discussion and elicit concerns and suggestions, the forum was organized into three transit topic areas relevant to families with small children: Affordability, Safety and Security, and Service (including reliability and crowding). In order to encourage small-group discussions, participants worked in small groups – three tables included caretakers of young children and the fourth table included people who came to express more general Muni comments. Both Spanish and Chinese translation services were provided (although there were no Chinese-speaking participants).

A representative from the SFMTA or San Francisco Controller's Office acted as a facilitator at each table. The facilitator was responsible for leading the discussion and bringing forth "concerns" and "solutions" for a particular topic. TEP and DCYF staff filled the role of scribe, and recorded all the concerns and recommended solutions on butcher paper viewed by all. Each group voiced their concerns and solutions. At the end of the discussion, the group agreed on two "Priority Solutions" for each topic, or those concerns they deemed most important and most in need of resolution.

At the end of the forum, all participants came together as a group to report the "Priority Solutions", then through a dot voting process ranked the eight Priority Solutions overall. The Priority Solutions include (from highest number of votes to lowest):

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| 1. Fares based on family income / family pass option | Affordability |
| 2. More buses / More service | Service |
| 3. Priority seating for strollers / boarding with strollers unfolded | Safety |
| 4. Better / More operator training | Safety |

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| 5. More payment options for youth | Affordability |
| 6. Improve security on Muni and around Muni stops | Safety |
| 7. Improve reliability of service | Service |

Families with small children had concerns in all three transit topic areas: Affordability, Safety and Security, and Service. The issue of strollers and operator training appeared in both the Service and Safety discussions. Families tend to have difficulty with Muni’s policy requiring strollers to be folded up when boarding, in part due to the complication of carrying child(ren) onto the bus along with a folded up stroller. In addition, participants reported that operators frequently start moving before families, small children and strollers are safely seated.

Affordability. Participants expressed that Muni is not affordable for families, and in particular, for youth. Families are interested in income-based pass pricing, a reduced or free fare for youth and/or students, discounts for families on cable cars, or alternatives to paying fares (e.g., community service).

Safety and Security. Safety and Security were also a big concern for families. Many perceived Muni’s policy requiring strollers to be folded in conjunction with operators departing Muni stops before families are seated to be dangerous. Families are interested in having designated stroller space and priority seating for families with small children. Many mentioned a desire for permitting families to board with the child in the stroller. Other concerns include: erratic driving and braking, violent or rowdy behavior of riders, and pickpockets. Suggested solutions include regular operator evaluations, better educating children about how to ride transit, and training operators to deal with conflict. An additional concern is the security at stops (especially at night), and participants suggested having more police presence on Muni vehicles.

Service. Finally, families are also interested in improved service reliability on Muni. First and foremost, families see a need for more buses and more service to relieve overcrowding, including additional service to schools. In addition, families would like to see more and better operator training so that operators do not start driving until children and pregnant women are seated safely. Other ideas included better cleaning of buses, better adherence to schedules, expanding Next Muni to more stops, and better notification about service interruptions.

TEP staff has recorded all discussion items as well as concerns and solutions suggested by participants at the Family Forum. The team will use this information when making recommendations for improvement to the Muni system and to address policies for improving the experience for families with small children on Muni in general.

TEP staff held a similar Public Transit Forum for Youth on Monday, March 5th. This forum was also co-hosted by Mayor Newsom’s Policy Council on Children, Youth and Families, DCYF, the San Francisco Youth Commission. Goals, objectives, and format of the forum were similar to the Youth Forum, with the aim of receiving a youth perspective on Muni and the TEP.