

**Planning/Policy/
Programming****October 2025****Project Title:**

Reviving Public Transit Ridership
to Downtowns and Employment
Centers Part 2: Los Angeles and
Long Beach

Task Number: 4489**Start Date:** October 1, 2025**Completion Date:** July 1, 2026**Task Manager:**

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Reviving Public Transit Ridership to Downtowns and Employment Centers Part 2: Los Angeles and Long Beach

Researchers will deliver information about how ridership demand varies across density, use patterns, and other sources of transit demand.

WHAT IS THE NEED?

Hybrid / remote work and online shopping were accelerated by the COVID pandemic, and together with the spatial restructuring of many knowledge industries, downtowns across California have experienced major declines in overall activity and transit use. This situation is particularly acute in the most transit-oriented downtowns statewide. This has major implications for climate commitments, equity, and the economy as the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) works with transportation partners around the state to implement the directives in Executive order N-19-19. Work from home has not yielded ongoing reductions in vehicle miles traveled as higher driving rates have returned although transit ridership remains well below pre-pandemic levels. Among the risks are higher carbon emissions, air pollutants, worse traffic congestion, reduced job accessibility, and declining government revenues that support public services.

Public officials and business leaders are seeking to shore up activity in downtowns by attracting emerging industries, converting outmoded offices and retail to housing, expanding outdoor seating for restaurants, supporting festivals, markets, and other events, providing free shuttles and deep discount transit passes, and generating revenues and moderating car use through parking charges. There has yet to be a systematic analysis, however, of what will generate substantial, lasting demand for transit ridership in metropolitan regions. Will transit ridership be dependent on office recovery? Will other downtown activities and destinations (e.g., entertainment, arts, higher education), attract sufficient users to backfill



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ridership losses from reduced commuting? Will transportation and parking policies make transit a more attractive option for those who do come downtown?

In this environment, some argue that the most resilient strategy for downtowns and key employment centers is to become a mixed-use “central social district,” often with a significant increase in residential population. In order to provide sound guidance in transit planning and distribution of Federal and State transit funds, Caltrans requires additional information on the impacts of various land use shifts on local and regional transit ridership, as well as best practices in meeting the many challenges associated with these shifts.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

Researchers will produce a research report that includes policy recommendations for downtowns of various types that could simultaneously support recovery of transit ridership and central business district development, with statewide applicability. The study will also look at the downtowns in the context of various activity centers across the metropolitan region to see how linking downtowns as primary activity centers to other smaller transit-oriented nodes could help regrow transit ridership through connecting people to key regional destinations for various activities such as education, entertainment, shopping, health care, and work.

Specifically, the study will review the literature on downtown revitalization and the factors that affect transit use for various trip purposes, as well as available information Caltrans’ transit-focused functions. Researchers will examine proposed revitalization efforts across Los Angeles (LA) and Long Beach downtown and assess their likely impact on transit ridership over the short to medium run. Transit agency ridership and survey data as well as data from data provider Replica will be used to analyze how ridership patterns have changed pre- and post- COVID and to identify which types

of destinations and trip purposes within each downtown are most transit focused. Interviews and discussion groups with city officials, developers, property owners, transit operators, and other key stakeholders will be used to identify and assess strategies for downtown revitalization and transit services.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

Several scenarios for downtown and transit recovery will be developed and focus groups and a stated preference survey will be used to elicit likely consumer responses to proposed interventions. Follow-up interviews will be carried out to further assess the options. The report will contain information about the current state of revitalization efforts in LA and Long Beach, insights from stakeholder interviews, and an assessment of the efficacy of policy interventions. Recommendations will include 1) how LA region can increase their transit-friendly destination activities and 2) how transit agencies can respond to downtown changes and 3) how Caltrans can promote transit and downtown-supportive policies through planning and grant pass-through activities. Caltrans will use this information to address the gap in knowledge about which transit-supportive policies may be most effective.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

This project will analyze interventions proposed for recovery and revitalization in a cross section of downtown across the LA and Long Beach in California. Researchers will deliver information about how ridership demand varies across density, use patterns, and other sources of transit demand. This will assist Caltrans’ transit-related functions in anticipating trends in transit recovery and promoting best practices through plans, guidance, and investment programs.

The project will support the realization of critical state and regional goals around climate, equity, and economic opportunity, all of which depend on healthy downtowns and high levels of transit

use. Project outcomes will also advance planning practice in California by better identifying practical strategies to capture more transit-friendly destination uses in downtown, with a focus on opportunities for Caltrans to affect positive changes on a statewide basis. This will be of importance to leaders at Caltrans, transit agencies, cities, metropolitan planning organizations, and other state agencies, as well as community and civic leaders seeking strategies to intervene to support downtown revitalization.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

Project kick off meeting will be scheduled shortly after start date of 10/1/2025.