

Planning/Policy/ Programming

May 2026

Project Title: Reviving Public Transit Ridership to Downtowns and Employment Centers Part 3: San Diego, Sacramento, and Fresno

Task Number: 4610

Start Date: June 1, 2026

Completion Date: March 31, 2027

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Reviving Public Transit Ridership to Downtowns and Employment Centers Part 3: San Diego, Sacramento, and Fresno

Many California downtowns are still struggling to bounce back after COVID-19, and transit ridership remains far below pre-pandemic levels. This project will examine how transit use has changed in Sacramento, San Diego, and Fresno, how those changes relate to downtown activity, and what strategies could help bring riders back. The research team will review past studies, analyze ridership trends before and after COVID-19, study each city's plans for downtown revitalization, and interview transit agencies, local officials, employers, and riders to understand what improvements would make transit more appealing. By identifying practical, data-driven strategies that strengthen both transit service and downtown vitality, this work will help Caltrans guide transit agencies statewide and support California's goals for climate action, equity, and economic growth.

WHAT IS THE NEED?

Many downtowns in California are still quieter than they were before COVID-19, and transit ridership in these areas remains low. This project will look for practical ways to strengthen public transit and support the recovery of healthy, active downtowns. Doing so will help the state meet its climate, equity, and transportation goals. The research team will study how transit use has changed between 2018–2019 and 2024–2025 in San Diego, Sacramento, and Fresno, and how those changes relate to downtown activity. They will review each city's plans for downtown growth, interview transit agencies and city officials about their ideas for revitalization and transit recovery, and gather feedback from current and former riders on what would encourage them to use transit more. The results will help identify strategies that make transit more sustainable and downtowns more vibrant.



DRISI provides solutions and knowledge that improves California's transportation system.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

This project will study how transit ridership has changed in recent years and how downtowns influence those trends. Focusing on Sacramento, San Diego, and Fresno, the team will review existing research on downtown revitalization and the role transit plays in supporting active urban centers. They will document how transit has been used in each city over time, including how ridership and service levels shifted before and after COVID-19. The researchers will examine local plans, interview city officials, business district staff, developers, and employers to understand current ideas for strengthening downtowns and improving transit service. They will also survey and interview people who ride or used to ride transit to these downtowns to learn what changes might bring them back. The goal is to identify practical strategies that support both transit recovery and downtown revitalization.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

The goal of this project is to develop practical policy ideas that help downtowns become busier, more vibrant places where more people choose to ride transit. It will identify ways that transit can better support downtown growth, and ways that strong, active downtowns can in turn boost transit ridership.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

This research will help Caltrans better understand how transit systems are recovering and what strategies are working, so the department can offer stronger guidance, plans, and funding programs to support transit agencies across the state. By identifying effective approaches for rebuilding ridership and strengthening downtowns, the findings will help Caltrans advance statewide goals for climate action, equity, and economic growth, and support the implementation of Executive Order N-19-19. As outlined in the Directors Policy on Transit (DP-40), it is California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) organizational priority to encourage and maximize transit as a strategy to

not only meet state climate, health, equity, and environmental outcomes but also to foster socially and economically vibrant, thriving, and resilient communities.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

Scheduled to begin 06/01/2026.

IMAGES



Image 1: San Diego's Trolley departs the America Plaza stop in San Diego Downtown. Photo: Dünzl\ullstein bild via Getty Images