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Editorial

Muni not meeting riders' needs

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SAN FRANCISCO -

All across the [United States](#), record-breaking gasoline prices, along with worsening gridlock on an aging road infrastructure plus the spread of global warming consciousness, are pushing more and more riders out of their automobiles and onto public transit — some 10.3 billion trips in 2007, a 50-year ridership high.

The [American Public Transportation Association's](#) new study tallied public transit ridership as rising 2.1 percent nationwide last year, which marks a one-third increase since 1995. Public transit usage more than doubled the 15 percent U.S. population growth during that period and was substantially more than the one-fourth increase in national highway vehicle miles traveled. The biggest transit rises during 2007 were in light-rail trolley systems with 6.1 percent and commuter rail with 5.5 percent.

Here in the Bay Area, our totals mostly followed the national trend. The biggest percentage rise was experienced by [Caltrain](#), whose popular Baby Bullet one-hour Peninsula express between [San Francisco](#) and [San Jose](#) garnered a hefty 8.25 percent increase. Runner-up was the regionwide BART rail system, which served 5.91 percent more riders and broke a number of its records. Even SamTrans was up 1.75 percent, while attracting consistent complaints for insufficient feeder shuttles to El Camino Real and a lack of fast express buses into San Francisco.

Yet Muni — by far the Bay Area's largest transit service — has suffered its third consecutive usage decrease in three years. The only other local bus line to lose passengers in 2007 was [Marin County's](#) Golden Gate Transit, with a 2.14 percent fall.

However, Muni management is challenging the APTA numbers, saying the reported 5.16 percent totals are inaccurate second-quarter projections. Muni claims that by the end of December 2007 its annual drop-off was just 1.68 percent and ridership actually rose 1.81 percent during the fourth quarter.

In addition, the primary recommendation of The City's new 18-month, \$2 million Transit Effectiveness Project study is to concentrate a major service improvement push on the busiest routes. Muni is counting on faster, more dependable scheduling along the most heavily used lines to attract new customers and increase total ridership.

Muni is also in the process of tripling the number of automatic passenger-counting units installed on its buses and light-rail cars. The goal is to automatically tally true ridership totals on 30 percent of Muni vehicles.

But the bottom line is that if Muni ridership is not rising substantially at a time when public transit sets national records and other Bay Area systems are growing, it clearly indicates that Muni is not sufficiently meeting the needs of San Franciscans and high-priority efforts must continue seeking ways to turn this around.

Examiner