

## TAKE THE BUS: RIDERSHIP AND THE MST FLEET



### SUMMARY

In 2022, the Monterey County Civil Grand Jury (CGJ) reviewed a complaint concerning Monterey Salinas Transit (MST). The complainant observed large vehicles with few, if any, riders and believed the buses to be fuel-inefficient and a waste of public money. The complaint indicated that MST, the Transportation Agency for Monterey County (TAMC), and public officials in Pacific Grove and Monterey failed to respond to inquiries.

The CGJ found that MST has a mandate to provide for the transportation needs of Monterey County residents based on the terms dictated by its major funding sources. MST's staff fulfills this mandate in the most cost-effective, safe, innovative, and environmentally safe manner possible. Its routes, fleet, schedules, bus stops, and fares are decided based on ample and accurate data. Its 2022 finances were audited by the independent firm of Eide Bailey ([Opinion Letter, page 52](#)).

Systems are already in place on the MST website to respond to comments, complaints and issues. Public perception, however, presents a challenge. MST could better acknowledge and address observations such as empty buses. Approved procedures direct staff to respond to every comment and complaint received. Detailed logs are maintained which record public contact. However, any complaints submitted via telephone, email, or USPS rather than the website, may have been overlooked. The CGJ did not pursue the complainant's noted lack of response from TAMC or officials of Pacific Grove or Monterey, as the complaint was largely directed at MST. Based on the logistical information provided, the CGJ did not find misuse of public funding related to the issue of empty buses.

## **BACKGROUND**

During the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, buses were the primary means of local transportation for many Monterey County residents. With the increased availability and affordability of automobiles, most residents stopped taking public transportation. Privately-owned bus companies could no longer operate at a profit and folded.

Monterey-Salinas Transit District was created by State Law AB644 and formed July 1, 2010. The District succeeds Monterey-Salinas Transit Joint Powers Agency, formed in 1981 when the City of Salinas joined the Monterey Peninsula Transit Joint Owners Agency, which was formed in 1972. MST is currently celebrating its 50 years of service to Monterey County.

The routes, schedules, and bus sizes are determined by ridership data collected electronically on every bus in operation. Individuals who regularly take the bus may be unable to drive or are college students, commuters, tourists, and individuals who see the environmental benefits of taking public transportation. Safety concerns also contribute to where routes and bus stops exist.

MST secures several government grants through the Transportation Agency for Monterey County (TAMC). TAMC serves as Monterey County's regional transportation planning agency and is a state designated agency responsible for planning and financial

programming of transportation projects. TAMC funding is also available for air, rail, road, and bridge improvement projects.

The mission of TAMC also includes investigation of new sources of transportation revenue. TAMC informs Monterey County agencies, including public works departments, of these funds and then works with potential recipients to develop their proposals. All recipients are required by law to report on how the funds were spent.

Both MST and TAMC have governing boards composed of county and city officials and appointees. Several individuals serve on both boards, furthering cooperation and communication. Regular public meetings are held and provide oversight into agency priorities and the expenditure of funds. Agendas, minutes, and support documents are posted on the websites of MST and TAMC.

In December 2022, MST introduced the Better Bus Network, which instituted multiple changes in its routes, stops, fares, and schedules. It also recently introduced its first all-electric buses and now operates four electric buses and one electric trolley. MST's 2022 Annual Report was issued in March 2023 and is available at [2022 Annual Report | Monterey-Salinas Transit \(mst.org\)](https://www.mst.org/2022-Annual-Report)

## **METHODOLOGY**

The CGJ conducted multiple interviews with individuals familiar with the operations of MST, TAMC, and the City of Salinas to gain a wider perspective on their distinct roles in providing public transportation in Monterey County. The CGJ also explored the areas of authority each entity maintains, as well as the limits of funding each must pursue, and the cooperation that exists between MST, TAMC, and municipalities.

The websites of each agency were reviewed as a source of current information and historical content. Supplemental information regarding the bus fleet owned by MST and complaint logs which are nonpublic documents were secured and reviewed.

Several leaders were interviewed as to the cooperation between entities, the use of technology to secure accurate information, and their vision for improving services.

Research was conducted regarding other bus services investigated by Civil Grand Juries throughout California, including an investigation of public transportation in Tulare County (2019-2020).

In addition, members of the CGJ purchased fares, and rode buses in Salinas and on the Monterey Peninsula.

## **DISCUSSION**

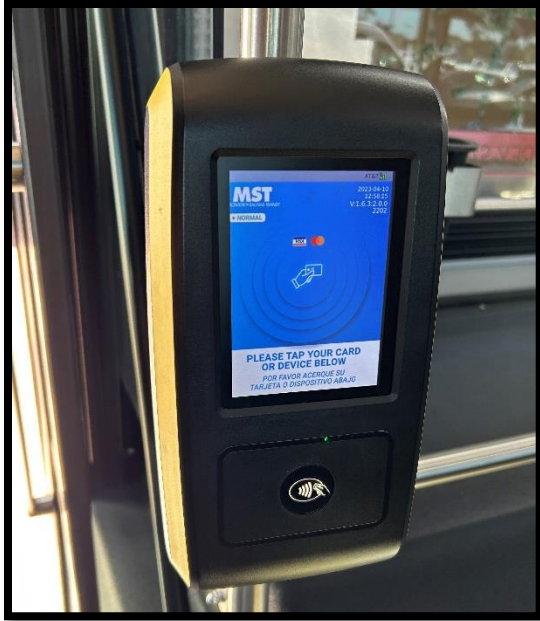
MST has a mandate to provide transportation to the people of Monterey County. This responsibility is accomplished through a variety of services and programs which balance distinct public transportation needs, government mandates, budgetary and personnel limits, and the impact to the environment.

MST's top leadership makes decisions based on data it compiles daily and on information shared through networks such as the [American Public Transportation Association](#). This data provides information used to evaluate current schedules, fleet assignments, and fares. It is also used to project the transportation needs of the future.

The relationship between MST and its funders is effective. For instance, TAMC works to ensure that available funds are known and applied for by all agencies it serves, including MST. Assistance is often given while the applications are being written. Awards of varying amounts are granted and spent as intended. The final reports detail the expenditure and are produced in a timely manner. Inappropriate use of funds was not evident.

### Ridership

Ridership data is collected as passengers enter and depart the vehicles.



Fixed route service connects riders with regularly scheduled buses at designated bus stops on routes proven popular by ridership data. The primary users of MST include individuals who do not drive or own a car (disabled, seniors, unlicensed, military, one-car families where the primary wage earner uses the car), others who cannot afford paid parking in congested areas (service workers, seniors, military, college students), and lastly, environmentally conscious individuals who understand the benefits of mass transportation. Most buses are equipped to carry bicycles. MST provides training and education programs on how these groups can best take advantage of MST's programs and transportation services.

MST offers a variety of fare options available through the website, cell phone app, or the bus itself. Its most recent fare option is "Two Dollars for Two Hours," valid anywhere MST goes.

Ridership on mass transportation across the United States saw a dramatic decline due to the COVID pandemic. Monterey County was no exception. During that time, MST followed strict protocols to assure public safety. Many of those COVID protocols are still in place. The closure of many businesses that employed service workers who regularly rode the bus contributed to the decline.

Ridership has been slow to rebound. which caused MST to re-evaluate all its routes, fares, and services. In December 2020, MST announced its Better Bus Network, which restructured many of the routes and eliminated less popular ones.

	2022	2021	2020
Fixed-Route Passengers	1,759,050	1,280,619	3,082,463
% increase/(decrease)	37.36%	-58.45%	-27.86%
RIDES Paratransit Passengers	151,352	124,134	195,762
% increase/(decrease)	21.93%	-36.59%	-4.57%

Ridership is measured electronically when a passenger enters and leaves a bus. A record of each fare is also kept. The location of every bus is tracked by satellite, which then translates that information to when the bus is expected to arrive at a designated stop. Should buses get ahead of schedule, they wait at stops until the correct departure time is reached for that stop. Each bus contains video cameras which document any incident occurring on the bus. The drivers can be in constant communication with the dispatch office should the need arise.

Communication with riders is a high priority, as evidenced by the following paragraph which appears in most MST public memorandums:

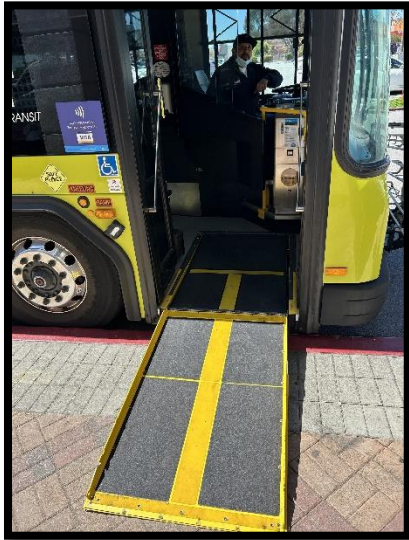
“For more information, visit [www.mst.org](http://www.mst.org) or call Monterey-Salinas Transit toll-free at 1-888-MST-BUS1 (1-888-678-2871). For RealTime bus arrival information, text “Next” and your four-digit bus stop ID (example, “Next 9103”) to 25370, call 1-888-MST-BUS1 with your four-digit bus stop ID, download the free Transit app, or use Google Maps. Follow MST on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/mst\\_bus](https://www.twitter.com/mst_bus) for the latest service alerts.”

Several schedule changes were made again on March 18, 2023, and posted on the [MST website](#).

### Mobility Services

MST operates a Mobility Services Center located at 15 Lincoln Avenue in Salinas, where it trains seniors, disabled individuals, and volunteers (Navigators) on how to take

advantage of the multiple services MST provides, including Monterey RIDES, fare options, and taxi services.



MST Navigators work side-by-side with MST staff in promoting mobility for individuals with travel challenges, because increased mobility means greater independence and a better quality of life. Navigators can be assigned to community centers or outreach events to help in promoting MST services and mobility programs. Also, Navigators can assist staff in travel training activities, where they may be assigned as a Travel Companion, also known as a "Bus Buddy," to travel with individuals who completed the travel training

program.

### Bus Stops

MST owns and manages the bus stops. Safety concerns are of the highest importance when a bus stop is selected. Certain congested locations do not have sufficient space on the sidewalk for a shelter or bench to be installed.

Municipalities paint the bus stop curbs red and ban all other vehicles from using those spaces. It is illegal for vehicles to stand or park in a designated bus stop lane (California Vehicle Code Section 21458).

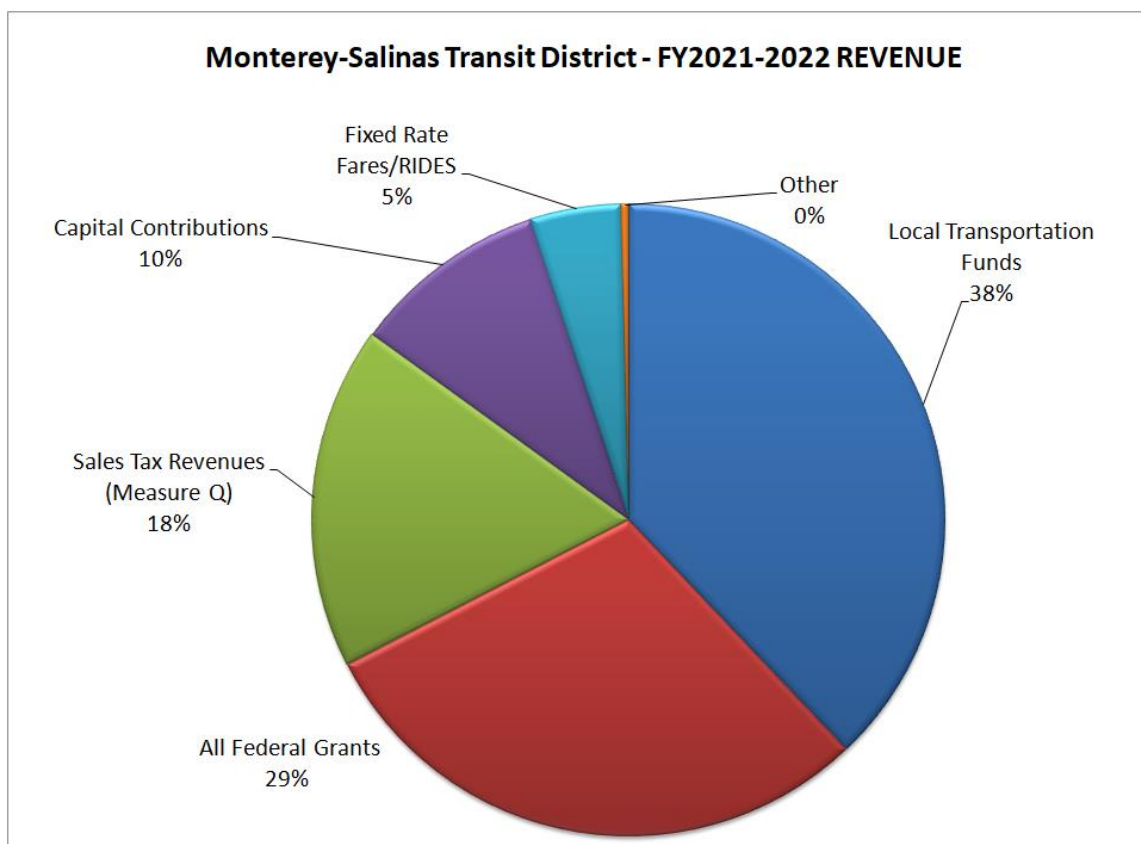
MST drivers and administrators patrol all bus stops. Should individuals decide to reside in an MST shelter, they will be asked to move. If they return later and continue to trespass, MST will remove the shelter and bench, wait a sufficient time for them to move on, and then reinstall the shelter and bench.

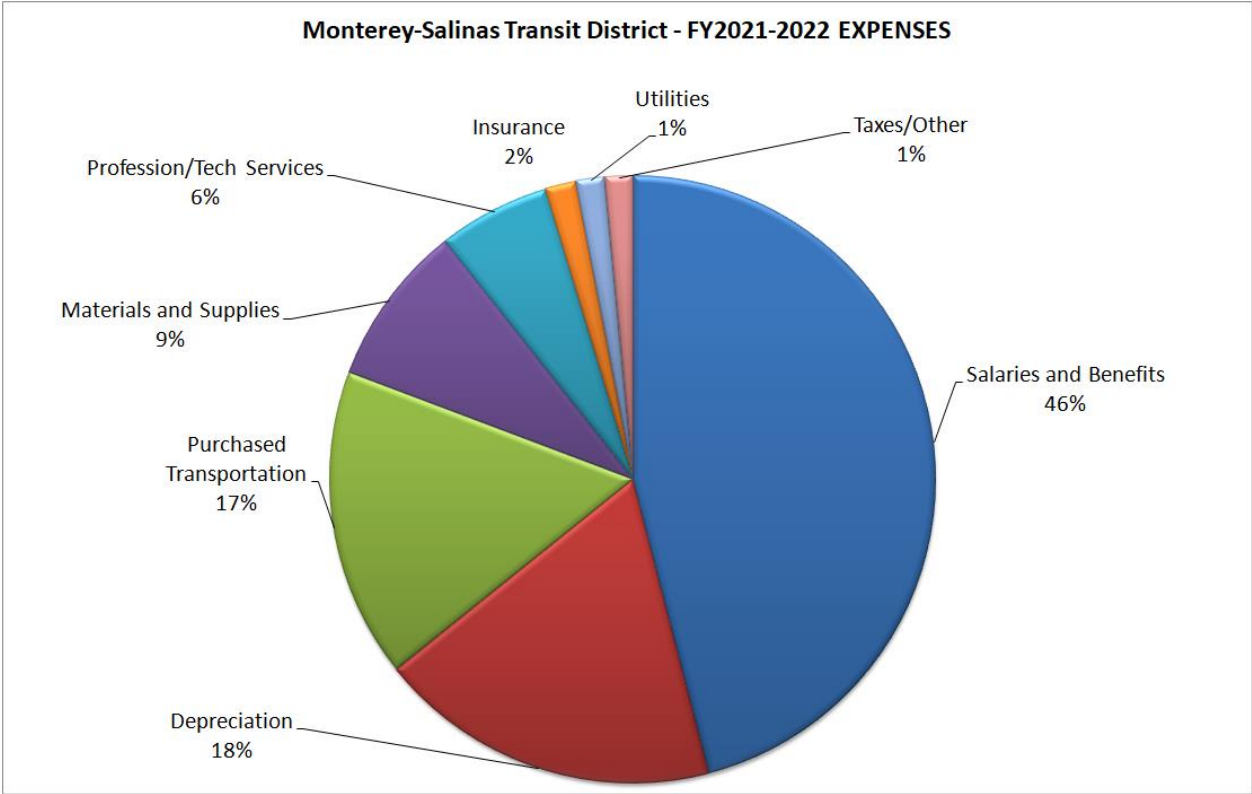
Environmental Impact Reports obligate all new housing and commercial developments to address public transportation amenities. Developers must underwrite the cost of a stop which includes a dedicated pullover lane, ADA compliant curbs and sidewalks, shelters, benches, and posts which contain the MST route information.

## Financial Information

Public transportation is highly dependent on subsidies from various government and public sources and could not exist in Monterey County solely on ridership fares.

MST is financed through a combination of local, state and federal grants, Monterey County's Measure Q (sales tax), rider fares, and other monies, including investment interest and ad revenue. Some grants are automatic, while others are competitive. Rider fare revenue accounts for only 5% of total revenue.





The Fleet

According to the MST Board Report of February 2023, MST operates a diverse fleet of 101 diesel and electric buses. The fuel used for the diesel engines is from renewable sources. These buses are assigned to fixed routes and schedules. Under Federal Transit Administration regulations, heavy-duty (big) buses are eligible for replacement at 12 years or 500,000 miles and light duty (small) buses are eligible for replacement at 5 years or 150,000 miles. The State of California Air Resources Board Innovative Clean Transit Rule mandates a 100% Zero Emission bus fleet by 2040. Federal grant programs encourage and incentivize transition to zero emission buses as well.



Electric vehicles have several challenges in Monterey County. The distances of MST's rural routes are beyond the capacity of current batteries, which last for about 135 miles or 5 hours, significantly less than a bio fueled heavy duty bus. Even city routes require the electric vehicles to be rotated before a regular eight-hour shift. More charging stations and larger-capacity batteries are likely in the future.

### MST RIDES

MST subcontracts its fleet of smaller buses to MST RIDES for individuals physically unable to use a fixed-route bus line. MST RIDES provides reduced fare, pre-arranged door-to-door paratransit (wheelchair equipped) services. MST RIDES also provides for vans and taxis which comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. This service is particularly useful for individuals who need transportation to medical appointments.



### MST On Call, Dial-A-Ride

MST On Call offers convenient mini-bus service throughout the cities of Gonzales, Greenfield, and Soledad, outside its fixed route service area. MST On Call is custom fit to riders' schedules and neighborhoods. It takes riders anywhere in the MST On Call zone or to a timed transfer with Bus Line 23 which runs to the Transportation Hub in Salinas. Riders call 1-866-663-3278 to set up the service.

### Commute with Enterprise Car Rentals

MST connects four or more individuals who have a shared entry and destination point and provides them with a recent-model van or SUV. Riders commute together and save resources. MST provides a \$450 monthly subsidy and riders divide up the remaining cost of the vehicle they chose.

### Response to Community Disasters

Whenever and wherever community evacuations are necessary, Monterey County's disaster management team informs MST. Drivers and buses are then made ready for immediate travel. When the evacuation order is given, buses transport residents to safe locations until the threat to their lives and safety subsides, reducing the number of private vehicles on public roads.

The CGJ applauds MST's efforts in providing safe and rapid transportation for residents most recently displaced by wildfires and floods.

### Website

MST has an extensive website and phone app. The website has two content sections: information related to bus schedules and fares, and information dealing with the transparency of its operations. The phone app provides real time information on bus schedules and payment options.

Information exists on the website about fare packages, real-time updates on bus schedules and routes, MST RIDES and its training facility, and many other services. In addition, public meeting schedules and information packets are accessible.

A Customer Service Report contact form and telephone number for comments or complaints are both available on the MST website. These are the most effective ways to communicate with MST. A record is created for each contact and reviewed by staff. Comments and complaints remain open until resolved.

### Comment Logs

The comment log provides for the following information: a unique number for each complaint, date received, employee name (if relevant), date occurred, bus number, line number, service provider (MST, MST Rides, other), nature of report (improper driving, fare dispute, employee other, full bus/left behind, late, no show), customer statement, employee/agency response, action taken, and invalid concern (Yes/No).

MST's bus drivers are the topic of the majority of the positive comments it receives. Conversely, they are also the topic of most complaints. MST investigates driver issues rigorously. Each bus is equipped with video cameras that drivers do not control.

The CGJ reviewed the comment log from January to November 2022.

### Dispelling Perceptions

MST is funded and mandated by law, including the Transportation Development Act of 1971, to provide transportation throughout Monterey County.

Individuals who depend on public transportation and use it regularly understand the routes, schedules, stops, and fares. They also are more aware of how to lodge a complaint or make a positive comment. Others who may never ride an MST bus, however, might not know anything about these procedures. Drivers or pedestrians may see a large bus on a busy street with few or no passengers and conclude that this is a waste of money and harmful to the environment. That impression sticks, unfortunately.



Ridership vacillates throughout the day. However, it is more costly, logistically impractical, and environmentally worse to switch bus sizes when ridership is lower. Smaller buses may not be able to accommodate increased ridership during peak hours.

The CGJ applauds the innovative, data-driven decisions of Monterey Salinas Transit's experienced administrative leadership.

## **FINDINGS**

- F1. MST is managed by staff who administer a wide range of transportation services in Monterey County committed to serving the community's transportation needs in efficient and effective ways.
- F2. The community at large is unaware of the range of services provided by MST, including their training centers to assist vulnerable populations.
- F3. A variety of funding sources contributes to the effective operations of MST.

- F4. MST collects data and disseminates real-time information and services for riders.
- F5. Some complaints not submitted through formal channels may be overlooked, leading to potential frustration for the public.
- F6. There is a lack of electric charging stations throughout the MST service area, limiting the range of electric buses.
- F7. The public perception that buses are underutilized is not consistent with the reality of logistics and the mandates of a functioning fleet.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- R1. MST develop strategies to work with local and state entities to expand the infrastructure needed to keep electric vehicles adequately viable by December 31, 2023.
- R2. MST increase public service awareness regarding ridership levels and available services by September 30, 2023.
- R3. MST enhance opportunities for MST board members, employees, and subcontractors to acknowledge and respond to all comments and complaints by September 30, 2023.

## **REQUEST FOR RESPONSES**

### **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

The following responses are required pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05:

From the following governing body within 90 days:

- Monterey Salinas Transit District Board of Directors  
Findings F1-F7  
Recommendations R1-R3

### **INVITED RESPONSES**

- Transportations Agency for Monterey County (TAMC) Board of Directors  
Findings F1-7  
Recommendations R1-3
- Monterey-Salinas Transit General Manager / CEO  
Findings F1-7  
Recommendations R1-3

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

## **GLOSSARY**

ADA Americans with Disabilities Act

Measure Q Local Transit Funding for Senior Citizens, Veterans and People with Disabilities via Monterey County Sales Tax

MST Monterey Salinas Transit District

TAMC Transportation Agency for Monterey County

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Monterey Salinas Transit website: <https://mst.org/>

Transportation Agency for Monterey County website: <https://www.tamcmonterey.org/>

MST [FY 2022 Annual Financial Report](#) (3/17/2023)

[Tulare County Civil Grand Jury Final Report 2019-2020, pp. 23-25.](#)

[California Vehicle Codes](#)

[Guidebook for Deploying Zero Emissions Transit Buses](#) (TCRP J-11/Task 33)

*All photos taken by Grand Jury members*

