



TOWN OF TIBURON
1505 Tiburon Boulevard
Tiburon, CA 94920

Town Council Meeting
July 16, 2014
Agenda
Item:

STAFF REPORT

To: Mayor and Members of the Town Council

From: Office of the Town Manager
Tiburon Police Department

Subject: Recommendation to Authorize a Council Committee and Staff to Work with the Reed Union School District and the City of Belvedere to Implement an Experimental Bus Subsidy Program to Reduce Traffic on Tiburon Boulevard and Appropriate \$225,000 to Fund the Program in Partnership with Belvedere

Reviewed By: _____

INTRODUCTION

This report seeks authorization to participate in a program to reduce traffic on Tiburon Boulevard by increasing ridership on yellow school buses to Reed Union School District (RUSD) campuses. The notion is that lowering the cost of school bus passes by one-half will significantly increase bus ridership which, in turn, will eliminate many private vehicle trips on the Boulevard during peak traffic periods. The Town and the City of Belvedere would pay for the subsidy on a one-time, experimental basis; the bus program would be administered by RUSD. If the program succeeds in meaningfully reducing traffic on Tiburon Boulevard, a permanent source of funding would need to be identified for future subsidies. The program is slated to launch immediately to be effective for this school year, which starts on August 21, 2014.

BACKGROUND

CART Process

For many years now the residents of Tiburon and Belvedere have witnessed worsening traffic congestion on Tiburon Boulevard, particularly during the school year. To address this problem, CART (Community Action to Reduce Traffic), led by then Tiburon Mayor Fraser and former Councilmember Slavitz (succeeded when he left office by Vice Mayor Doyle), was formed in October of 2011. CART included elected officials from Belvedere, Managers of the Town and City, both Chiefs of Police, representatives of RUSD, the Marin Transit Authority and occasional subject matter experts. CART met approximately twice monthly for well over a year trying to understand traffic congestion and develop solutions to it.

A substantial amount of time was spent defining the problem. Traffic surveys were conducted in July and September (after the start of the school year) and it immediately became evident that the worst periods of congestion coincided with the start and end of the school day (Exhibit 1).

Summertime levels, while at or near capacity, were deemed acceptable. The committee engaged in an exhaustive effort to identify possible solutions. Many avenues were explored and a list of

over twenty items offering some potential relief was developed. Most offered only the possibility of improvement in small increments. One concept identified by CART did hold the promise of a significant traffic impact, and that was increasing school bus ridership.

Since the CART process concluded in May of 2013 several of the steps it identified has been implemented to ease traffic. These include experimentation with a bike train and work with Caltrans to improve signal performance. The notion of tackling bus ridership, a potentially big fix but one with a relatively high and recurring cost, was not identified as feasible at that time.

Traffic on Tiburon Boulevard

The graph in Exhibit 1 shows the difference in 15 minute increments in traffic on Tiburon Boulevard at Avenida Mira Flores (chosen as a midpoint) between August when school is not in session and September when it is. The difference is over 700 more vehicle trips through that intersection in roughly a one hour period. By 8:30 AM during the school year, traffic has returned to levels typically seen during the peak period in the summer months. Traffic is often at, but not over capacity at that time. A graph comparing traffic in one hour increments from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM is seen in Exhibit 2.

Bus Subsidy Program

Several months ago, Councilmembers Fraser and O'Donnell formed a study group with Belvedere representatives Mayor Bob McCaskill, Councilmember Sandra O'Donnell and City Manager Mary Neilan, and RUSD Superintendent Steve Herzog and Business Manager John Frick, to explore whether the Town and City subsidizing school bus transportation could achieve the desired outcome of reduced traffic. The concept was to structure an experiment to see if halving the cost of a bus pass would result in significantly greater ridership – enough to make a real difference in traffic. The characterization as “experimental” is important, and acknowledges the unsustainable nature of an ongoing subsidy from the Town and City for this purpose. Funding this experiment will require both Tiburon and Belvedere to dip into reserves. Doing that for a one-time program or effort is reasonable from a budgetary perspective, but ill-advised as a means to fund an ongoing expense.

RUSD contracts with First Student to provide student bus service to Reed, Bel Air and Del Mar schools. The cost to ride the bus is \$427/year one-way (\$854/year round-trip) and is paid for entirely by the users. There are 1,534 students enrolled in RUSD for the upcoming school year; 346 have purchased a bus pass for the ride to school in the morning and 331 have purchased a pass for the ride home, 677 one-way trips total. The study group examined the factors that influence school transportation decisions and discussed ways to increase bus ridership by students enrolled at all three schools.

During this process, RUSD conducted a transportation survey in May 2014 to discern why more families do not use the school bus service. The reason given most often by the 454 parents that responded was “cost is too high”. Other reasons included the inconvenience of pickup/drop off locations, the length of time students spend on the bus and concerns about safety. The recent discussion by the study group has focused on solutions that encourage and incentivize families to

use the school bus service instead of driving personal vehicles. The ultimate goal of what is being called *The Yellow Bus Challenge* is to “double the ridership and halve the cost”.

The study group has reviewed student addresses and proposed two additional routes that would address the concerns expressed in the survey related to bus pickup locations and time on the bus. With regard to the issue of price, the study group is asking the City and Town to consider underwriting the cost of school bus service for one year to test how much ridership improves and traffic congestion is reduced. The subsidy would be to lower the cost of a bus pass for everyone in the system, those who have already bought passes and new purchasers alike. If the one-year experiment proves successful, a permanent source of financing would need to be identified and secured.

Based on traffic counts and observed traffic patterns, the study group believes school bus ridership would have to increase by a minimum of 360 one-way trips, reasonably distributed between morning and afternoon, to have a discernibly positive impact on traffic congestion. If less than 360 new one-way passes are sold, the *Yellow Bus Challenge* may not go forward. This is because there is an embedded cost of reimbursing one-half of the bus pass cost to all existing purchasers of \$144,540. Enough new riders to make a real dent in traffic is necessary to justify the subsidy of the overall program. The study group is hopeful that once well publicized, the *Challenge* will yield an even greater number of new riders than 360 and yield a significant decrease in school related traffic. It should be noted that each trip by a bus rider is counted as two car trips off the Boulevard, since dropping a child at school typically involves a round trip for the driver.

An email communication (Exhibit 3) and an FAQ intended for the RUSD website (Exhibit 4) would inform RUSD parents about the *Yellow Bus Challenge* and will describe the benefits, including enhanced safety, of school bus transportation over riding in a personal vehicle.

If both City and Town approve the request (the Belvedere City Council will have met on July 14), RUSD parents will be notified immediately, as time is very short, and will have until August 11 to sign up for the new bus service. The study group will meet on that day (the 11th), analyze the response and decide whether the program will proceed in FY14/15.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The proposed subsidy would decrease the cost of a one-way trip to \$213.50, a reduction of 50%. All riders would benefit from this subsidy, whether they have already purchased a pass for the coming year, or sign up as a result of the *Yellow Bus Challenge*.

The cost of the program has been estimated at \$228,000 if 360 new one-way bus trips are sold. A more robust response (400 new one-way trips) would cost a total of \$260,000. Cost of the program would be shared 80/20 by Tiburon and Belvedere. Belvedere is considering funding 20% of this cost (\$52,000) on its July 14 agenda. The Town's 80% would be \$208,000.00. The Town Council previously appropriated \$25,000 for a routing study that proved unnecessary, so that sum is available for this purpose. Thus \$183,000 is anticipated to be needed at this time. However, because time is so short and it is possible there is a very strong response to the program that requires a greater subsidy, staff recommends Council appropriate an additional \$225,000 to

cover this contingent outcome. Funds would come from the unallocated reserve. If the program is deemed successful, a permanent funding source will need to be identified to continue it in future years.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Town Council:

1. Formalize a Town Council Committee of Councilmembers O'Donnell and Fraser and direct them and staff to work with Belvedere and RUSD to implement the bus subsidy program on an experimental basis as described in this report; and
2. Appropriate \$225,000, to be used in conjunction with the \$25,000 previously allocated for a bus study, for the bus subsidy program.

Exhibits:

1. Graph titled "Tiburon Blvd at Avenida Mira Flores AM Period"
2. Graph titled "Tiburon Blvd at Avenida Mira Flores 6:00 Am – 6:00PM"
3. **DRAFT** email outreach to RUSD parents
4. **DRAFT** FAQ sheet for RUSD website

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