

It has been [widely reported](#) in recent weeks that California's public transit systems are seeking billions of dollars in support from the state budget to avoid the fiscal cliff they are facing due to slow ridership recovery following the pandemic and shifts in work commute patterns. Without this support, the agencies will need to begin service cuts that will erode ridership further, leading to a potential ridership/revenue/service death spiral. Legislative leaders [offered a compromise](#) on Monday that would cover approximately \$4 billion of the \$6 billion anticipated deficit.

Local and (many) state leaders want to prevent this death spiral, most importantly because of the impact it would have on the millions of Californians who depend on public transit to get to work, school, and services. Cuts to transit service would harm California cities' economic recovery with a disproportionate impact on lower-income residents and communities most reliant on transit access.

Cuts would also deal a heavy blow to California's statewide climate targets. Governor Newsom, the state legislature, and state regulators are aligned in leading the state toward carbon neutrality by 2045, codified in [statute](#) and in the California Air Resources Board's [Scoping Plan](#) in 2022. Achieving this target relies on significantly increasing public transit access and use across the state—electrifying automobiles is important, but so is getting more Californians into convenient, affordable trains and buses.

A brief look at the state's plans highlights just how essential it is for state leaders to help maintain service levels now and increase them in the coming decades, rather than letting them drop and potentially inviting years of decline.

CARB's Scoping Plan [calls for and assumes](#) a 25 percent reduction (below 2019 levels) in [vehicle miles traveled](#) (VMT) per capita by 2030 and 30 percent by 2045. A [top strategy](#) to achieve this: "Invest in making public transit a viable alternative to driving by increasing affordability, reliability, coverage, service frequency, and consumer experience." The Scoping plan [relies heavily on local government action](#) for these VMT-reducing transit and land use actions, noting that cities and counties have [primary authority](#) over decisions in these sectors, which are responsible for approximately [half](#) of state emissions.

So how are cities planning to get it done? Their Climate Action Plans (CAPs) envision massive investment in public transit networks:

- [San Francisco's CAP](#) calls for 80 percent of all trips to be made by low-carbon modes (transit, active transportation, micromobility, or shared) by 2030—spearheaded by an expanded, reliable transit network with more frequent service and multiple new lines.

- [Los Angeles's CAP](#) calls for a 50 percent increase in low-carbon trips and 39 percent decrease in VMT per capita by 2035, including major bus rapid transit and subway expansion projects.
- [Oakland's CAP](#) calls for increasing public transit ridership 3 percent each year through 2050, with increased reliability, frequency, and speed on existing and new routes at the top of the list of strategies.
- [San Diego's CAP](#) calls for 15 percent of all residents' trips to be made by transit by 2035, with a focus on increasing access to and frequency of existing service.

These CAPs and others developed in our major cities highlight a straightforward but crucial logic: California state leaders will rely on local action to reduce vehicle travel and cut transportation emissions, and local leaders plan to achieve this by investing in increased public transit service, access, and quality throughout the state. We need more commitment to transit networks, not less. And as [CLEE's analysis](#) of San Francisco's CAP found, that commitment will require sustained local, state, and federal investments even greater than the amounts discussed in the current state budget negotiations and forthcoming from the federal infrastructure and inflation reduction bills.

While our transit problems extend beyond one budget's worth of financial support, as a state California cannot afford to lose any ground if we hope to achieve the ambitious climate transformation that state leaders have promised over the next two decades. Without better (and better-funded) public transit, California will not meet its carbon neutrality goal—and it will not come close to CARB's vision that ["good climate policy \[creates\] affordable and pleasant places to live, with effective transport and clean air for all."](#)