5 Recommended Next Steps
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Based on all of the observations described earlier in this report, and on conversations with AC Transit staff, we recommend the following major steps.

Plan for a New System Map

At the start of this project, there was an optional question of whether or not transit agencies even need a system map anymore. Most people do their trip planning using an online tool or app. Publishing and updating printed system maps require a lot of time and effort. And the shape of AC Transit’s service area makes online map publication difficult.

Yet in our review of best practices across the country, through our general web survey, and through focus group discussions, we are convinced that a system map is an essential component of a transit agency’s public-facing information.

Transit system maps allow individuals, and organizations, to do a number of things that trip planning tools cannot support:

• They allow for discovery and the development of network awareness, in which people notice where transit goes, what kinds of services are offered, and how they relate to the city.

• People who are engaged in building the city can use a system map to see where their investments (whether in housing, business, social service, or anything else) can build on AC Transit’s investments and dovetail with AC Transit’s priorities.

• If someone wants to understand how to make a multi-destination trip, or what their choices are if they need to change plans, a system map builds understanding at a glance, rather than requiring that someone make multiple queries based on multiple origin-destination pairs.

System maps also play more minor roles, which are described starting on page 6.

Hold an Internal Service Categorization Workshop

The task of transit service mapping is made much easier, and the resulting map is made more effective, when an agency designs and manages its services into a limited number of service categories. This is often called “Service Branding,” because these categories are not solely for internal use – they are also used to make service features clear to customers. To avoid confusion with the overall branding of AC Transit itself, it may be prudent to call them “categories” or “labels” in this process.

AC Transit is already on its way towards clearer and simpler service categories. We recommend that staff continue this effort, and make sure it is connected to the design of the next system map (and any derivative products).

This could be done through an internal workshop for service planning, long range planning, public information and marketing staff. The task of this workshop would be to define the service categories for the next system map, and their visual hierarchy in relation to one another. Doing this work collaboratively, across disciplines, will help staff understand:

• How their work relates to the work of their colleagues;

• How long-term goals compare to short-term goals and constraints; and

• How their decisions will ultimately become visible to the public.
There will be a set of difficult questions relating to regional service mapping. AC Transit staff are already familiar with the MTC wayfinding guidelines, which express some opinions about how multiple agencies’ services should be shown on a single map. Some vocal transit stakeholders in the Bay Area have expressed a desire for a unified, Bay-Area-wide transit map, which would necessarily be built on a single set of service categories.

It may be strategic for AC Transit public information staff to meet with colleagues at other Bay Area transit agencies before and after this workshop. This way, decisions made by AC Transit about service categories and labeling can be informed by, and can inform, decisions made by neighboring agencies. This will help with clear mapping of services in the places where service areas overlap (as well as, in the long term, a potential region-wide service map).

VTA’s services seem to have the most in common with AC Transit’s services, in terms of frequency and span. (In contrast, SFMTA offers higher frequencies and longer spans.) This suggests that if any neighboring agency could share a set of service labels with AC Transit, it would be VTA.

Communicate Frequency and Span Information Through Service Labels
From the input of current AC Transit riders and non-riders, through the web survey and focus groups, it is clear to us that frequency and span are the most important distinctions to communicate through service labels, on a system map and potentially in other public information products too.

This also makes intuitive sense, because a key offering of high-frequency and long-span services is that a customer needn’t look up additional information in order to use the service. In contrast, to use a limited-span or low-frequency service a person really needs to find and check a timetable, to confirm that the service is running when they need it. Thus if high-frequency long-span services are in a clear category, and are labelled clearly on a system map (and in other places), that may be all the information someone needs.

Identify the Affected Suite of Map Products
Designing a new system map can and should trigger updates to a range of public information products, such as neighborhood maps posted at major stops and the single-line maps included in Line brochures.

How many products are affected isn’t a given, but will affect the level of effort and cost associated with a new system map design and with future updates. The first step should be to identify all of the products that could potentially be linked to a new system map, and then decide whether they must or they should be linked to a new system map, in the near-term or in the long term.

That said, the system map cannot simply be re-purposed for other information products, like neighborhood maps or timetable maps.

Procure a New Mapping System
For the design of the next system map, we recommend that AC Transit procure map development services including:

- The collaborative development, with AC Transit staff, of a visual hierarchy and visual language for service labels.

- For example, making a decision about whether AC Transit’s one “Rapid” bus line is treated with its own line type, or grouped with other frequent services.
- If one vendor can be retained to design and publish all map products, consistency among products will be better, and there are also likely to be time savings (i.e. cost savings) compared to what is required if different vendors produce different map products.

- Strategies for representing AC Transit’s long service area in a variety of media.

  - For example, perhaps only frequent and rapid services can be shown on the complete service area map. All other services, and greater geographic detail, is shown on multiple maps, each focusing on one zone of AC Transit’s service area.

- A system for updating all new map-related products.

  - A major consideration will be the degree to which AC Transit staff can make updates to all products themselves, rather than rely on a contractor for updates to some or all products.

  - When procuring a system map and any related products, AC Transit can ask bidders to propose rates for ongoing support and update services.

- New published versions of a system map, and any associated products identified as essential in the near-term.

Whatever map products are included in such a procurement, they should be listed separately and their intended use described in detail. If other agencies’ services will be included, that should be called out specifically as it increases the necessary level of effort.

AC Transit’s system is fairly complex, and part of the work of making a new map will be understanding the service and the service categories. When evaluating proposers, it may be wise for AC Transit to weight their past experience designing maps for similarly complex systems.

**Support the Continued Development of Other Tools**

We do not recommend that AC Transit lead the development of a custom trip planning app. The private sector has thus far been agile and responsive in developing free or low-cost trip planning tools, especially in large urban areas.

However, there may be opportunities for AC Transit to support continued development of trip planning tools, by:

- Continuing to produce the high-quality open data that is critical to good transit apps. In the future, AC Transit should avoid procuring software that makes it harder to push out good data quickly, or that otherwise inhibits third-party developers’ efforts to create new, innovative trip planning tools.

- If new standards for open transit data emerge, AC Transit should embrace them. AC Transit may also consider welcoming partnerships with tech entrepreneurs (as TriMet did with Google, to create GTFS), even if it is not always clear how the new technology will become useful.

- Be aware of opportunities to improve the quality of transit data or trip planning tools across the many transit providers in the Bay Area (such as 511.org, or private sector tools).

If a transit agency wants to be on the forefront of new developments in transit information and trip planning technology, it’s best shot is to be a large agency, in a dynamic urban area, that produces high-quality open data compliant with existing and future standards. Luckily, AC Transit is always going to be an early choice for any developer by virtue of its Bay Area location, which may benefit AC Transit’s current and future riders.

It is important that public agencies are careful
not to obstruct innovation, for example by not releasing data. We also recommend that neither AC Transit nor any public agency try to compete with the private sector in this arena.

AC Transit could certainly work on developing productive partnerships with private sector companies, in which each partner contributes its core expertise. For example, any large transit agency could invite Transit App to roll out their automatic route line mapping technology for a bus network, which would be the first time this feature would be used for non-rail transit.

From the general web survey (and from verbal conversations in the focus groups) we know that 511, NextBus, the AC Transit website and Google are the most used trip planning apps, followed by the Transit App and a few others.

Since we know that public agencies struggle to develop and maintain apps that can compete with privately-developed apps, it makes sense for AC to avoid developing its own tools for this purpose in the future. If it becomes important for AC Transit to have its logo on some trip planning technology, we recommend that the agency either integrate another party’s tool (as is done with 511.org), or purchase off-the-shelf reskins of industry leading products.