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August 9, 2012

On Monday, August 7, 2012, SFMTA received an advanced copy of the Civil Grand Jury's report "Better Muni Service Needed, Without Switchbacks". We respectfully disagree with the Civil Grand Jury's recommendation that Muni "eliminate switchbacks except in cases of equipment breakdowns, accidents, and unavoidable emergencies" and with statements including that the MTA "expressed very little interest in finding alternatives to switchbacks" and that we are "mistaken in [our] belief that switchbacks are used extensively by other transit systems in their day-to-day operations".

Our ultimate goal is to minimize the impacts of switchbacks on our customers, but this service tool is an essential service management strategy. While we implement switchbacks less than 1 percent of the time, we utilize this tool to improve service for the vast majority of our daily passengers. Switchbacks allow us to reduce vehicle bunching and gaps which are routinely mentioned as a primary concern and area for improvement by Muni riders¹. Unlike systems across the country and globe which operate primarily on exclusive, dedicated right of way, Muni light rail vehicles (LRVs) operate extensively in mixed flow traffic with private automobiles and as a result are subject to routine delays caused by automobile traffic, double parked cars, and other incidents not experienced by trains operating on private, exclusive right of way. In addition, our light rail operation features a modern, fully automated train control system in the subway blended with manual operations on the surface requiring a seamless transition in train control as trains enter and exit the three portals. This system is not duplicated anywhere in North America. Because of these infrastructure challenges, our service is very susceptible to delays out of our control and we must rely on a host of methods to keep the trains on schedule. Besides switchbacks, other methods used to restore scheduled service include holding in headways, changing the route of trains, and deadheading when possible. Each of these strategies return vehicles to their schedules and have unavoidable passenger impacts in the instance of deployment in order to restore service reliability to a line overall.

Switchbacks are a regular service management strategy deployed by operators across the United States in order to restore the scheduled service. We reached out to our colleagues at several transit properties including:

- TriMet, Portland, Oregon
- SEPTA, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- New Jersey Transit, Newark, New Jersey
- Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority, Cleveland, Ohio
- Chicago Transit Authority, Chicago, Illinois

¹ SFMTA Annual Ridership Survey for 2010 and 2011 completed by Corey, Canapary, and Galanis Research



All stated that switchbacks are used in operations of their systems. In addition, as mentioned in the report, Santa Clara VTA, our neighbor in Santa Clara County, uses switchbacks. We also contacted BART and they confirmed they use both scheduled and unscheduled switchbacks routinely. The MBTA in Boston also confirmed their use of switchbacks to address significant delays on their Green Line (light rail line).

In addition to the unique operating characteristics of our service, SFMTA is facing increased service delays due to aging infrastructure, systems, fleet, and operator availability issues. The Grand Jury chose to ignore our progress in proceeding with the radio communications systems replacement and upgrade, train control system upgrade, tablet based supervision management tool, and vehicle and infrastructure rehabilitation and replacement. While these projects are in progress, improvements will take time and the level of service management actions needed to address these delays will remain high for the short term.

The Grand Jury also chose to ignore our progress on reducing switchbacks. The report states that SFMTA had “200-440 switchbacks a month” on LRVs alone. We have significantly reduced that number and had 82 switchback occurrences in July 2012. These events are heavily concentrated on off-peak times (77%) when ridership is generally lower and 95% occur when another train is either directly behind the switched back vehicle or less than five minutes away. Switchbacks are also heavily concentrated towards the end of rail lines in order to minimize the number of passengers impacted. We have also made significant progress in verifying proper headsigs on switched back vehicles, and making announcements and using social media to announce delays. Switchbacks are tracked daily and reported on monthly to SFMTA management.

Based on our service operating environment and infrastructure, and industry use of switchbacks, we reassert that switchbacks are a valid and necessary service management strategy. The best way to reduce switchbacks is to provide reliable, consistent service through adequate operator and supervision staffing and investment in vehicle and infrastructure maintenance. Switchbacks are not the problem; they are a tactic deployed to remedy service disruptions. We agree that improvement is needed and the root causes of our service delays need to be addressed by renewing our fleet, replacing outdated systems and infrastructure, and improving operator and staff availability.