Rideshare News for Southern California Employee Transportation Coordinators (ETCs)

MARCH / APRIL 2021

ONTHEGO

News for Your Employees

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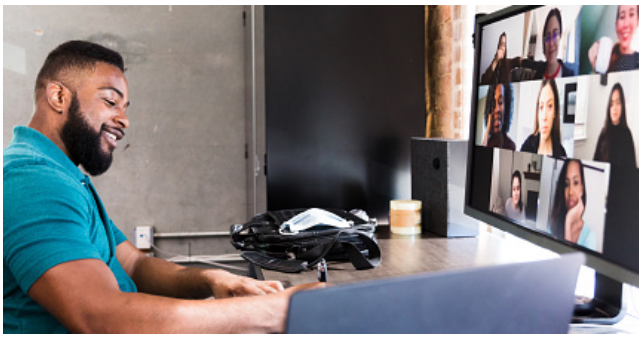
Oh, What a Year It's Been

A Look at the Changes in Commuting Due to the Coronavirus



It was a year ago on March 19 that Governor Gavin Newsom issued a Stay at Home Order due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The Order instructed Californians to stay home except for essential work, local shopping or other permitted errands.

Of course, nearly every aspect of how we live has been affected by the pandemic—and that includes how we work and the ways we commute.

Here, *On the Go* takes a look at how commuting in Southern California has changed in the past year—as well as a glimpse at what's to come.

Employers scrambled to make telework happen as quickly as possible.
One of the bigger adjustments at the workplace was the need for a speedy shift to telework for non-essential

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Important Changes for the 2020 Tax Year

There's No Longer a Business Deduction for Employer-Provided Commute Benefits—How It Affects Your Worksite

As if the events of 2020 haven't had enough impact on businesses...

It was also the year that a law eliminating the tax break for employers who subsidize transit, vanpool and parking costs went into effect.

The change in the tax code not only affects employers that provide these benefits, but the employees who receive them as well.

What it means in a nutshell: Employers that pay (full or in-part) for employee transit, vanpool or parking can no longer write off those costs as a business expense. Employees who receive free (or subsidized) transit, vanpool or parking no longer receive those benefits tax-free but must, in fact, include them as taxable income.

So, what does this mean for your commute program?
"It's a pretty big deal in particular for employers that had parking they paid for

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Remember—Wear a Mask!

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recently issued an Order requiring transit riders to wear masks at transportation hubs and while riding. This includes buses, rail, taxis, ride-shares, and any other public shared transportation.

The mask must cover the nose and mouth. A scarf, handkerchief, or face shield is not acceptable. Transit operators must also wear masks.

Find out more and get answers to frequently asked questions at **cdc.gov.**

New So Cal Best Workplaces for Commuters

Best Workplaces for Commuters released its annual list of U.S.-based employers who provide exceptional commuter benefits such as telework, discounted transit passes, bicycle-friendly amenities and rideshare solutions.

More than 450 workplaces have been named in 2021, among them several Southern California employers.

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Calendar of Events

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What A Year

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workers. While many area companies previously allowed employees to work at home, the vast majority of telework programs tended to be informal and on an as-needed basis. Fewer than 6% of employees in Southern California previously worked offsite on a regular or full-time basis.

As restrictions are being lifted and employees starting to return to the office, it is still not business as usual—and may never again be.

In one study of 300 employers in Orange County conducted in July, more than half of those surveyed plan to continue allowing employees to work from home when restrictions on gathering in offices are lifted.

Adds the Association for Commuter Transportation in a **guide to help employers manage their commute programs during the pandemic,** "As organizations look to re-open their worksites, many plan to continue allowing employees to work from home permanently or part time to reduce onsite numbers to support physical distancing."

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We got a peek at how traffic and air quality *could* improve.

Fewer cars and trucks on the road as people stayed home meant fewer emissions being spewed into the air.

Shortly after the Order got underway, the South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD) reported slightly improved air quality (though that was due to favorable weather as well as car traffic dropping by about a third).

Bus and rail made major adjustments in safety and scheduling.

Local transit agencies stepped up efforts to provide a safe environment for riders and transit workers and continue to do so.

This includes a mix of increasing cleaning protocol, providing hand sanitizing stations, providing masks to

riders, switching to rear-door boarding to limit contact between riders and drivers, among other efforts to reduce the spread of the airborne virus.

At Metrolink, additional train cars have been added on the busier lines to better allow for social distancing among riders. Some bus providers are doing the same—running two buses in quick succession so if the first bus seems too full, it's a short wait for the second bus.

With fewer people riding overall due to the pandemic, transit agencies have also had to adjust schedules—temporarily

eliminating underutilized routes or rerouting where necessary.

Most transit agencies' schedules are still not at their pre-COVID rates, so you can help employees find their best current route by telling them to call 511. They can also get 24/7 help online at **ridematch.info** (Los Angeles/Orange/Ventura counties) or at **IECommuter.org** (Riverside/San Bernardino counties).

Transit agency changes due to COVID-19 are also updated daily on weekdays at **go511.com.**

And an unexpected bright side: Road and freeway construction moved ahead of schedule.

The emptier streets and freeways allowed agencies to speed up roadwork schedules on major projects through the Southland in 2020. That progress is expected to continue in 2021 on projects ranging from rail tunneling to major improvements on the I-405 to streetcar construction and more.

As an ETC, your help through this crisis has been—and will continue to be—vital.

Thank you to all the Southern California ETCs who have risen to the occasion to help commuters through this unprecedented time.

You have helped employees manage new telework schedules, find alternatives to their usual route and—in many cases—changed entirely how you handle rideshare incentives and programs to meet new challenges. ■

Tax Changes

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as part of their benefits for employees," says Justine Sobczyk with **Benefit Resource, Inc.,** a pre-tax commuter benefit administrator. "If they own a parking garage and parking facility, or if they lease parking, it could be potentially thousands of dollars that they were writing off that they can't any longer."

The same is true for qualifying transit and vanpool costs, though for most companies those overall are typically less than that of parking.

For this first year under the new tax law, employers may not feel the sting as much due to the Coronavirus pandemic since they may not have been paying for as many commute costs as they normally would.

"Right now, we're not seeing a whole lot of utilization of commuter transportation because of COVID and more people working at home," says Sobczyk. "But as we start to open back up and get back to a usual state of commuting, that will change."

The same goes for employees working at home who haven't been receiving subsidized commute costs.

What isn't part of the tax changes: Employees who pay for qualifying transit, parking and vanpool expenses (up to $270 per month) with their own money using pre-tax dollars. This remains an allowable benefit under Internal Revenue Code Section 132(f) that can lower an employees' overall taxable income, saving them money.

Will employers be less willing to promote transit and vanpooling if it's no longer tax deductible?

For ETCs tasked with promoting alternatives to driving alone, the loss of tax write-offs for transit and vanpooling raises the question, Does this mean employers will be less likely to subsidize these options in the future? Will that remove the incentive for commuters to use them?

The answer is: nobody knows for sure.

In some areas, especially in large metropolitan areas like Los Angeles—local ordinances that require employers to offer a commuter benefit, both current and in the works, may start to see more adoption of pre-tax benefits, suggests Sobczyk.

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There is also the possibility that the tax law may be revised, or that the overall impact on a corporation's overall budget will be negligible and therefore won't negatively impact the rideshare program.

Where you can get more information: If you'd like to more in-depth information about the new tax law and your rideshare program, Best Workplaces for Commuters has posted a video conference, **"Is the Sky Falling? The Effects of Eliminating the Business Deduction of Employer-Provided Commuter Benefits,"** which is available free, along with supporting documents.

You can also contact your county rideshare representative or your tax consultant. ■

This is for informational purposes and is not intended as tax advice. Consult your tax specialist or the Internal Revenue Service for further information.

Nominations Due for ACT Awards

The Association for Commuter Transportation (ACT) each year recognizes the best in the field of transportation demand management.

The 2021 awards will be presented at the ACT International Conference at Walt Disney World Resort, Lake Buena Vista, FL on Aug. 4.

Nominations for an ACT award must be submitted by April 9. Although nominations must be submitted by an ACT member, the awards are open to any individual, company or organization that has made a difference in managing commuter transportation options. Self-nominations by ACT members are allowed and encouraged.

For more information or to submit a nomination, visit **conference.actweb.org.**

Check Out the Metrolink Store

Are you a Metrolink fan? Looking for rewards for your Metrolink riders? Find fun merchandise such as t-shirts, hats, mugs and more at the new online store at **store.metrolinktrains.com.**

So Cal Best Workplaces

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Congratulations to this year's inductees, which include:

- Cal State University Northridge, Fullerton and Los Angeles
- City of Anaheim
- Intuit, Los Angeles
- Kite, A Gilead Company, El Segundo and three locations in Santa Monica
- Los Angeles World Airports
- University of California, Irvine and Los Angeles

For more information, visit **bestworkplaces.org.** ■

LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Metro Micro Expands to New Service Zones

Metro Micro recently expanded into three new zones in Compton/Artesia, El Monte and North Hollywood.

Metro Micro is L.A. Metro's new ride-hailing service that offers shared rides, operating within certain zones. Rides cost an introductory rate of $1 per ride (transfer not included) for the first six months.

Metro Micro is designed to replace short, solo trips by offering a flexible, on-demand service operated by Metro employees in vehicles that hold up to 10 passengers. Along with other safety measures, capacity is currently limited to five passengers to reduce risk during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rides can be booked via app, at **metro.net/micro** or by calling 323.GO.METRO (323.466.3876).

North Hollywood/Burbank Zone
Monday-Sunday, 10am-10pm

Compton/Artesia Zone
Monday-Sunday, 9am-9pm

El Monte Zone
Monday-Friday, 9am-9pm
Saturday-Sunday, 10am-10pm

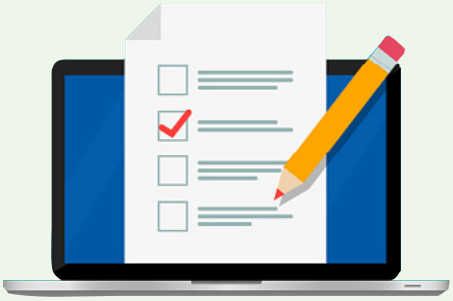
ORANGE COUNTY

What's Important to You in L.A. Metro Transit?

What are the most important issues Metro and other Los Angeles County transit providers should focus on as moving forward? Transit availability and routing? Roadways and freeways? Bike lanes? Metro wants to hear from you.

Weigh in by taking an **online survey** to rank your priorities.

You can also forward the survey link to employees so their opinions can be heard.



Easier Construction Alerts on the 405

OCTA, in cooperation with Caltrans, is widening the I-405 between SR-73 and I-605. Find out about construction that could impact your commute at the project's portal, which was recently updated to make it easier to navigate.

Find it at **octa.net.**

OC Streetcar Project Chugging Along

After nearly two years of construction, the OC Streetcar recently celebrated a milestone with the first rail being laid into place.

The OC Streetcar will be Orange County's first modern streetcar. When complete, it will run more than four miles in each direction—from the Santa Ana Regional Transportation Center to a new transit stop at Harbor Boulevard in Garden Grove.

In addition to serving major shopping, school and business destinations, it will connect to OC Bus, Amtrak and Metrolink.

OCTA held a **virtual open house** to educate the public about the project.

To get construction updates, timelines and details about OCTA's Eat, Play, Shop program that supports businesses affected by construction, visit **octa.net.**

OC Streetcar Fast Facts

- Will make its debut in 2022
- Runs 4.15 miles in each direction
- 10 stops
- 22-minute trip end-to-end
- Arrivals every 10-15 minutes
- Each streetcar carries up to 220 passengers

RIVERSIDE/ SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY

Telework Assistance from IE Commuter

In response to the Stay at Home Order issued last March, many worksites throughout the Inland Empire quickly responded by setting up employees to work at home. As employees start to make the transition back to the worksite, many employers are considering maintaining a telework program—at least for some employees, part- or full-time.

IE Commuter can work with your worksite to help you develop an effective, long-term telework program. They can help you define program guidelines, assess your specific needs, and transition from the emergency program you may have been operating with to one that will help your company achieve its goals beyond the pandemic.

IE Commuter is a service of Riverside County Transportation Commission and San Bernardino County Transportation Authority. Visit them at **IECommuter.org,** email **telework@iecommuter.org** or call 1.866.RIDESHARE (743.3742).

Riverside Metrolink Stations Get Upgrades

Metrolink stations in Riverside County are being spiffed up while fewer riders are at their stations. Crews have modernized the elevators at the North Main - Corona and Downtown-Riverside stations with new parts to make them more reliable and faster. Teams are also painting, repaving, installing new landscaping, and adding new ADA parking and walkways.

Next time you are at Metrolink Station in Riverside County, make sure to check out the improvements.

San Bernardino Commits to Health and Safety Pledge

Transit agencies in San Bernardino County have joined a national effort to commit to policies and practices that reduce health risks on transit during the Coronavirus pandemic.

The effort calls for transit agencies and riders to follow official public health guidelines as well as increased cleaning protocol on transit, enabling social distancing on buses, trains and at stations and requiring employees to stay home if they're sick or have been exposed to COVID-19—and asking riders to do the same.

San Bernardino County Transportation Authority has posted the details on its Health & Safety Commitment Program on its website at **gosbcta.com.**

VENTURA COUNTY

Interested in Keeping Ventura County Moving?

Attend any of several virtual workshops to learn about the Ventura County Freight Corridors Study and help shape future plans. The purpose of the study is to identify and prioritize important freight corridors to ensure they are as safe, efficient and sustainable as possible.

Workshops include a 20-minute presentation, along with a moderated question and answer period.

Upcoming workshops are scheduled for March 18 and April 15.

To learn more, visit Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC) at **goventura.org/vcfreight**.

Be Ready for the Next Wildfire or Other Emergency

Due to the devastation caused by recent disasters such as the Thomas Fire, VCTC in partnership with other local agencies developed a Transportation Emergency Preparedness Plan for Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

The plan outlines the roles and responsibilities of transit providers, emergency response agencies, government and non-governmental organizations, communication procedures, and summarizes transit resources.

Link to website where the final plan can be downloaded at **tepp-vctc.org.**

CALENDAR

Events

IE Commuter is hosting a virtual marketing workshop, date to be announced. ETCs in Riverside and San Bernardino will be invited by email, or call 1.866.RIDESHARE (743.3742) or email **info@IECommuter.org** for further information. Participants will earn a marketing certificate for their South Coast AQMD Rule 2202 plans.

Ventura County Freight Corridors Study virtual meetings are March 18 and April 15. Get details at **goventura.org/vcfreight.**

Nominations for an Association for Commuter Transportation (ACT) award are due April 9, **conference.actweb.org/awards.**

Earth Day is April 22, a day to address climate issues and ways ridesharing can contribute to cleaner air. Look for events at **earthday.org.**

The 35th Annual ACT International Conference is Aug. 1-4 at Walt Disney World Resort in Lake Buena Vista, FL. Due to the uncertainty of the times, ACT has adopted more lenient cancelation and refund policies. Get details and register at **conference.actweb.org.**

Network Opportunities

Please note: Due to COVID-19 concerns, network meetings may be canceled or conducted via online platform—please contact organizers for more information.

Burbank TMO serves businesses in Downtown and Media District areas; call 818.953.7788, **bronwen@btmo.org.**

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Century City TMO serves businesses in the Century City area; call Linda Paradise Lyles, 310.453.1714, **linda@cctmo.org.**

Compass at Playa Vista meets regularly; call Aaron Gaul, 310.929.5946, **aaron@playavistacompass.com**.

Go Glendale meets regularly; call 818.543.7641.

IE Commuter offers bi-annual marketing workshops for ETCs in the Inland Empire; call 1.866.RIDESHARE (866.743.3742).

Irvine Spectrum TMA meets regularly; call 949.727.4273, email **steve@spectrumotion.com**.

Orange County Network meets regularly; email **sharetheride@octa.net.**

Pasadena TMA meets regularly; contact Talin Shahbazian at **tshahbazian@cityofpasadena.net.**

Santa Monica TMO meets regularly; contact Puja Thomas Patel, 424.330.4298.

Torrance Transportation Network meets regularly; call Kim Fuentes at 310.784.7902.

Training

Metro Rideshare/Shared Mobility offers free ETC Briefings where Los Angeles area employers can learn about the transportation survey process. Until further notice, briefings are being offered online only. To sign up, send an email to **SharedMobility@metro.net;** you will be sent a link with a password to log into the meeting. If you can't make that meeting, email Metro to set up a one-on-one virtual meeting. Upcoming ETC Briefings March 9, April 13 and May 11, 9:30-11:30 a.m.; contact Metro for information on how to participate on these dates.

South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD) offers two-day ETC training via Zoom for $189.73. The next scheduled sessions are March 9 and 11, March 23 and 24, April 6 and 8 and April 20 and 22. For more information, contact the South Coast AQMD's training program at **etctraining@aqmd.gov** or visit **aqmd.gov.**

ONTHEGO

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For subscription information or to change your **ON THE GO** e-mail address, contact your representative at the rideshare office nearest you.

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