

September 2020

In 2019<sup>1</sup>, there was a weekly average of more than 1.84 million trips on public transit in the San Diego region. This mode of transportation is used by many in the region to get between home and work (34%), home and school (22%), and from home, work, or some other location to somewhere else (44%)<sup>2</sup>. While the stay home order has affected the travel behavior of many residents to work, school, and special events in 2020, survey data has shown that about 2 in 5 residents (44%) who are not regular riders of transit are very interested in using it more. Those who do regularly use transit note reasons including the cost savings they realize, lower stress, gift of more time to do other activities than drive, and positive impacts to the environment<sup>3</sup>.

Since the March 19, 2020 stay home order was issued, SANDAG has monitored [freeway travel](#) and [bicycle use](#) on corridors around the region. With jurisdictions across the country (e.g., New York City<sup>4</sup>), noting an increase in transit ridership as businesses reopened and safe transit ridership best practices were implemented, SANDAG worked with the Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) and North County Transit

District (NCTD) to analyze ridership data since the stay home order was issued. SANDAG also conducted a survey of San Diego County residents to better understand how transit ridership may be affected post-pandemic.

### Discussion

When comparing the number of transit trips since the stay home order went into effect (Figure 1), findings show ridership overall was down 70% in April, compared to the same month in 2019, with recovery occurring in May (-66%) and June (-55%). When San Diego County was placed on the State's watchlist in July, ridership overall appeared to be impacted with a slight drop to -57%. Ridership on the COASTER was most significantly impacted (range -93% to -96%), which experts believe was expected due to the increase in telecommuting and the moratorium on sporting and other special events. It should be noted that both MTS and NCTD have continued to operate at pre-COVID-19 service levels in order to facilitate social distancing.

### Did you know?



Transit ridership since the stay home order was issued was down 57% overall in July 2020, compared to July 2019. The COASTER had the greatest drop in ridership.



Transit ridership in San Diego County was at its lowest in April 2020 and has trended up since then. In April, transit ridership was 2.48 million trips, which increased to 3.49 million in July, a 41% increase.



3 in every 5 residents surveyed said they would use public transit at least occasionally once a vaccine for COVID-19 is available.

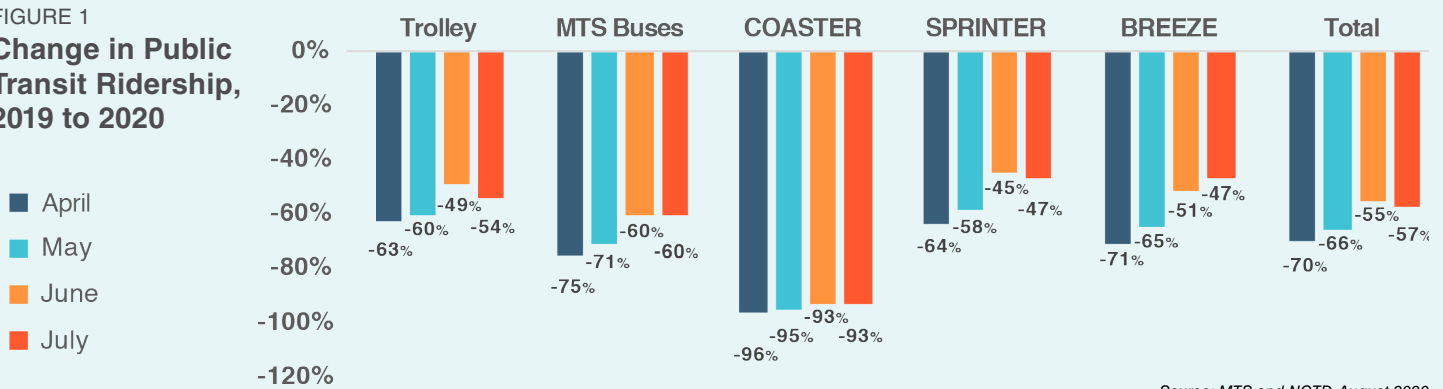
<sup>1</sup> This mean is based on the 2019 ridership data provided by MTS (49.3 million) and NCTD (5.9 million) in the first approximately 30 weeks in this seven month period of January to July.

<sup>2</sup> This statistic is presented in the most recent (2015) *On-Board Transit Passenger Survey Final Report* which is available here [https://www.sandag.org/uploads/projectid/projectid\\_494\\_21412.pdf](https://www.sandag.org/uploads/projectid/projectid_494_21412.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *2019 Transit Public Opinion Survey Final Report* which is available here [https://www.sandag.org/uploads/publicationid/publicationid\\_4649\\_27278.pdf](https://www.sandag.org/uploads/publicationid/publicationid_4649_27278.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.masstransitmag.com/management/press-release/21143315/mta-headquarters-new-york-mta-announces-nyct-ridership-surpasses-two-million-as-new-york-city-begins-phase-2-reopenin>

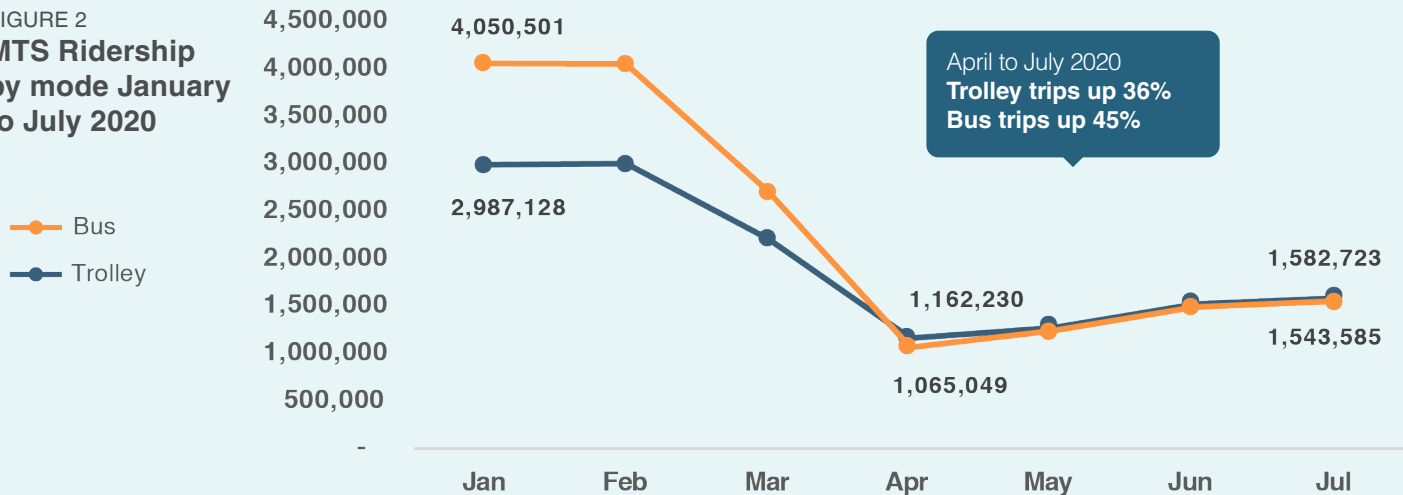
FIGURE 1  
Change in Public Transit Ridership, 2019 to 2020



Source: MTS and NCTD, August 2020

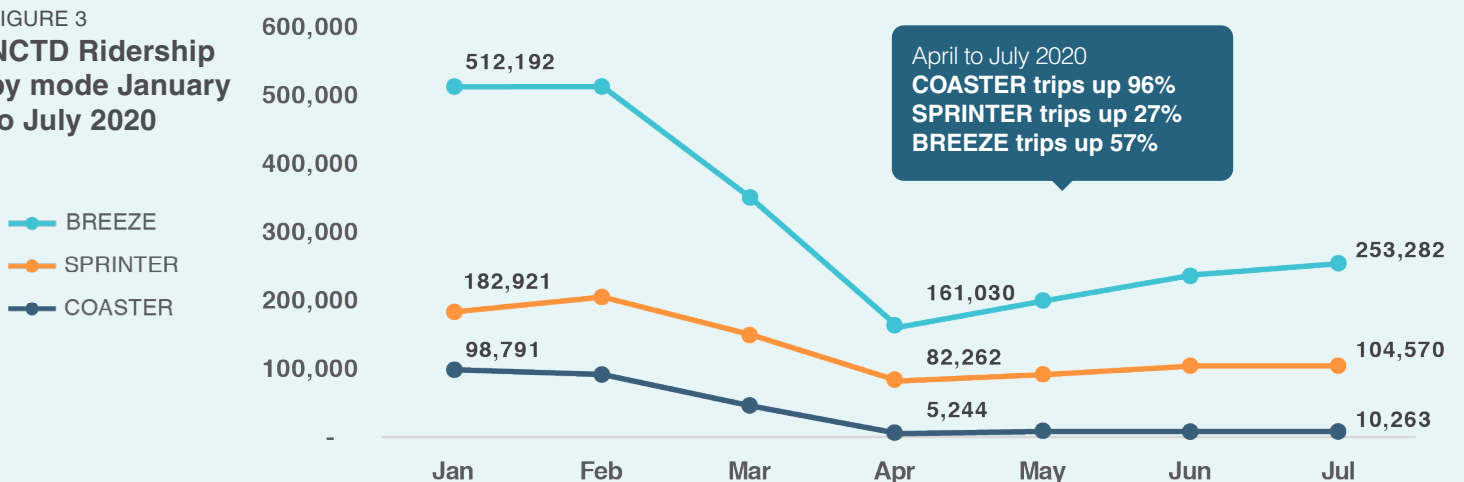
Figures 2 and 3 show the number of trips completed on the five public transportation services since January. A dramatic drop is shown between February to April, with increases seen in recent months. Overall, the number of trips between April and July on local transit increased 41%, ranging from 27% on the SPRINTER to 96% on the COASTER.

FIGURE 2  
MTS Ridership by mode January to July 2020



Source: MTS, August 2020

FIGURE 3  
NCTD Ridership by mode January to July 2020



Source: NCTD, August 2020

## About infobits

SANDAG serves as the region's clearinghouse for information and data. InfoBits publish timely, relevant information informing the public while providing context on complex issues facing the region.

[sandag.org](http://sandag.org)

As with other significant events in history, the current health crisis will not last forever. Throughout the pandemic and beyond, public transportation in our region continues to operate, utilizing best practices to regularly sanitize vehicles, as well as socially distance riders. Regional data show that only about 2 in every 5 employees in the San Diego region are eligible to work from home<sup>5</sup>, and many transit riders rely on public transportation as their primary mode of transportation to get to work, school, and run errands<sup>6</sup>. With ridership continuing to increase and 60% of those surveyed by SANDAG this summer indicating they would use public transit once a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, it is important we continue to look at the role of this mode of transportation in our regional long-term planning. This includes how it can be a viable alternative for a greater proportion of the population, as well as a reliable and cost-effective mode for those who do not have alternatives.

<sup>5</sup> This estimation on eligible jobs was presented to the SANDAG Transportation and Regional Planning Committees on July 17, 2020. Supplemental materials from this meeting are available here [https://www.sandag.org/uploads/meetingid/meetingid\\_5301\\_27760.pdf](https://www.sandag.org/uploads/meetingid/meetingid_5301_27760.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> According to the 2015 On-Board Transit survey, 78% of transit riders used public transportation 4 or more days per week and the three most common trip purposes included going from home to work (34%), home to another location (32%), and home to school (22%).