Clean Air Express Short Range Transit Plan (2027–2035)

Introduction

The Clean Air Express is a commuter bus program serving residents of Santa Maria, Lompoc, Buellton, and unincorporated areas of North Santa Barbara County who commute to jobs in Santa Barbara and Goleta. The 2019 SRTP was the first-ever Short Range Transit Plan and in-depth study of the service's performance, funding, and customer experience; this update reflects the intervening years — including the disruption and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the introduction of the Midday Connector reverse-commute service, the first battery-electric bus in the fleet, and a three-year fare restructuring completed July 1, 2026. This study again describes the market the Clean Air Express operates in, evaluates how that market is currently served, reviews operational and ridership data, provides an updated financial review of a service still funded almost exclusively by local revenue, and makes near-term recommendations to secure long-term financial stability, grow ridership and passenger revenue, and evaluate future lines of service.

Overview of Clean Air Express Service and History

The Clean Air Express provides service to employment locations in Goleta and Santa Barbara from residential communities in North Santa Barbara County. The service currently operates 10 daily peak-period round trips — 5 originating in Lompoc and 5 originating in Santa Maria — down from the 13 round trips documented in the 2019 SRTP but supplemented since November 2024 by the Midday Connector, which adds 4 additional daily trips connecting Santa Maria, Buellton, Goleta, and Santa Barbara outside the traditional peak commute windows. Together, the 10 peak trips and 4 Midday Connector trips bring total daily service to 14 trips, the first meaningful expansion of the route structure since the Solvang/Buellton service was added in 2011. Clean Air Express trips continue to operate weekdays only. A private contractor continues to operate and maintain the vehicles under contract with SBCAG.

The Clean Air Express began in 1989 as a technology demonstration program of the Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District. Administration transferred to SBCAG in 2001, which subsequently procured new vehicles and expanded service.

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Ridership has followed a markedly different trajectory than the 2019 plan anticipated. The 2019 SRTP reported average weekday ridership of about 360 riders in 2018, within a historical range of roughly 310 (2017 low) to 440 (2008 high). The COVID-19 pandemic drove ridership down sharply in 2020 as remote work reduced commute travel, followed by a gradual, multi-year recovery as service was incrementally restored. As of the most recent published figures (2026), Clean Air Express carries approximately 448 riders each day — a rebound to the previous high in 2008.

Although the SBCAG Board is the policy board for the service, the SBCAG North County Subregional Committee — a designated subcommittee of the SBCAG Board of Directors providing policy guidance and funding recommendations for transportation, transit, and infrastructure projects across northern Santa Barbara County, including the cities of Santa Maria, Lompoc, Guadalupe, Solvang, and Buellton — continues to review and recommend Clean Air Express policy matters such as fares and significant service changes before they reach the full Board.

Study Objectives

The primary objective of this SRTP remains evaluating the funding for the Clean Air Express and identifying recommendations for long-term financial stability. The 2019 plan warned that, without action, Clean Air Express could face complete elimination of service between 2028 and 2031, as the primary subsidy would not cover rising operating and capital costs. That warning falls squarely within this plan's own 2027–2035 horizon, which makes assessing what has changed since 2019 a central task of this update: the Board has since approved a phased, multi-year fare increase (2023–2026) explicitly intended to improve financial sustainability, and SBCAG and its partners have secured over $14 million in state funding (including Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program dollars) supporting electric bus procurement and a countywide contactless fare system and has recently become an FTA recipient and will see those funds begin in 2027. These actions have partially resolved the 2019 funding cliff, however this SRTP will lay out additional actions the Board can take to help resolve funding shortfalls.

Secondly, the study evaluates operations and customer experience to identify opportunities for improvement. The Clean Air Express has long been, and by available evidence remains, a successful operation — carrying customers safely and comfortably to work at an affordable price, even through a fare increase cycle and a pandemic-driven service disruption.

The study also considers potential opportunities to expand service and improve options for the market already served — building on the Midday Connector as a proof of concept

for demand beyond the traditional AM/PM peak commute pattern, in addition to any new corridor connections under consideration. As in 2019, any new service should be weighed against the farebox recovery ratio and overall financial picture developed in the funding chapters, since maintaining strong recovery reduces the risk of expansion.

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Chapter 1: Introduction & System Overview

1.1 Agency Mission & Vision

Clean Air Express was created in 1989 by the Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District (APCD) to improve regional air quality by reducing the number of commuters driving alone. Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG) took over administration of the service in 2001, and has since expanded the service by purchasing new buses, adding payment flexibility, installing wireless internet access on all buses, and modernizing the customer's online experience.

Within the regional transportation network, Clean Air Express fills a role that no other single operator provides: a dedicated, long-distance commuter link between the more affordable, largely residential communities of North County and the job-rich, housing-constrained South Coast. The service serves residents of Lompoc, Santa Maria, Buellton, and adjacent unincorporated areas in North Santa Barbara County commuting to jobs in Goleta and Santa Barbara. This mission — providing a fast, reliable, and affordable alternative to a solo commute of up to 150 miles round trip — remains the organizing principle for the service, and the vision for this SRTP is to sustain and modernize that role.

1.2 Planning Horizon: 2027–2035 and Regulatory Requirements

This SRTP covers an eight-year horizon, 2027 through 2035, consistent with the interval since the last SRTP (2019) and with state expectations that SRTPs be updated on a regular cycle to remain eligible for state and federal funding programs.

Two regulatory frameworks primarily shape this plan:

- **Federal Transit Administration (FTA) requirements.** As a recipient (directly and as a subrecipient through SBCAG) of federal transit funds, Clean Air Express operations must support compliance with FTA program requirements tied to those funds — including Title VI service equity analysis, National Transit Database (NTD) reporting, ADA paratransit/accessibility standards, and Public Transportation Agency Safety Plan (PTASP) requirements. The Clean Air Express currently reports independent of SBCAG to NTD and is up to date with all necessary compliance documents.
- **State of California requirements.** SRTPs are the primary vehicle by which California transit operators document service, financial, and capital plans to remain eligible for Transportation Development Act (TDA) funding and to compete

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for discretionary state programs such as the Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program (TIRCP) and the Zero-Emission Transit Capital Program. SBCAG and its partners secured a $70+ million TIRCP award in 2024, part of which funds new electric buses and a countywide contactless fare system for Clean Air Express as just one example of state-program eligibility tied to SRTP currency.

The 2027–2035 horizon should also be understood against California's broader decarbonization timeline — including the state's zero-emission vehicle transition goals — which will directly affect fleet procurement and facility planning discussed in later chapters.

1.3 Service Area Geography: The Suburban-Rural to Urban Corridor

Clean Air Express operates along a single, elongated corridor connecting two distinct geographies within Santa Barbara County:

- **The North County origin communities** — Lompoc, Santa Maria, Buellton, and Solvang, along with adjacent unincorporated areas — are more suburban and rural in character, with lower housing costs and, historically, more limited local job bases relative to population.
- **The South Coast destination communities** — Goleta and the City of Santa Barbara — are the county's primary urban employment centers, but face significant housing affordability and supply constraints that push many workers to live in North County and commute.

This geographic split is the reason the service exists, and it shapes every operational and financial decision in this plan. Park-and-ride lots anchor the North County end of the corridor in Lompoc, Santa Maria, and Buellton, each with one Clean Air Express Park and Ride lot where the buses pick up and drop off, with free parking at all locations. At the South Coast end, stops are located throughout Goleta and Santa Barbara, serving the employment centers where most riders work.

The corridor's length is significant to cost and equipment planning: the longest Clean Air Express round trip is approximately 150 miles, which has directly influenced vehicle selection, including the range requirements for the electric buses discussed in the capital chapter.

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1.4 Current Governance: Board Structure, Stakeholders, and Inter-Agency Coordination

Clean Air Express is not a freestanding transit agency; it is a program administered by SBCAG, an independent public agency operating under a joint powers agreement executed by Santa Barbara County and each of the county's eight city governments. SBCAG's governing board consists of all five county board of supervisors plus one representative from each city council, giving the Clean Air Express program a governance structure rooted directly in elected officials from every jurisdiction the service touches — both the North County origin cities and the South Coast destination cities.

This structure gives SBCAG standing as a forum for regional collaboration and transformative regional change, which is particularly relevant for a corridor service that depends on cooperation across jurisdictions with different priorities. Within that structure, day-to-day policy guidance for Clean Air Express runs through the SBCAG North County Subregional Committee, a designated subcommittee of the full Board that provides policy guidance and funding recommendations for transportation, transit, and infrastructure projects across northern Santa Barbara County — including Santa Maria, Lompoc, Guadalupe, Solvang, and Buellton. Fare changes and significant service modifications are reviewed by this committee before advancing to the full SBCAG Board for final action.

Key inter-agency relationships include:

- **Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District (MTD)** and other South Coast/urban transit partners, whose local fixed-route networks provide the connecting trips Clean Air Express riders need once they reach Goleta or Santa Barbara. Coordinating schedules, stop locations, and fare/payment systems with these urban partners is central to the "last-mile" experience for Clean Air Express riders.
- **City of Lompoc Transit and other North County operators**, similar to MTD, these North County operators provide connections to riders in their city of origin. These operators present an opportunity for coordinated procurement, maintenance, and charging infrastructure planning as well as electric vehicle fleets are built out.
- **Caltrans and the California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA)**, as funding and oversight partners for state programs (SB 1, TIRCP) that have supported recent fleet and facility investments.

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Chapter 2: Existing Conditions Report

- ***2.1 Current Service Profile:*** ** Route descriptions, stop locations, and peak/off-peak frequencies.*
    - *Park-and-ride lot locations and utilization rates.*
- ***2.2 Performance Analysis:*** ** Key Performance Indicators (KPIs): Passengers per revenue hour, on-time performance, and cost per passenger.*
    - *Ridership trends (historical 2020–2025).*
- ***2.3 Fleet and Facility Status:*** *Inventory of commuter coaches, age/mileage, and maintenance facility capacity.*
- ***2.4 Technology Baseline:*** *Status of AVL/GPS, automated fare collection, and passenger Wi-Fi.*

Chapter 2: Existing Conditions Report

2.1 Current Service Profile

Route descriptions, stop locations, and peak/off-peak frequencies

Clean Air Express operates two service tiers on weekdays:

- **Peak commuter service**: 10 daily round trips, split evenly between the two North County origin points — 5 originating in Lompoc and 5 originating in Santa Maria — serving destination stops in Goleta and downtown Santa Barbara.
- **Midday Connector**: 4 additional daily trips connecting Santa Maria, Buellton, Goleta, and Santa Barbara outside the AM/PM peak windows, operating roughly between 7:15 a.m. and 3:24 p.m.

Stops are concentrated at three North County park-and-ride lots (Lompoc, Santa Maria, and Buellton) and at multiple on-street stops throughout Goleta and Santa Barbara.

Park-and-ride lot locations

Lot	Location	Year Built	Free Parking?	Parking Spaces
Santa Maria	Hagerman Softball Complex, Skyway Dr.	1990	Yes	175
Lompoc	Municipal lot between I and J streets (south end of town)	1948	Yes	200
Buellton	Ave. of Flags, south of SR 246	2021	Yes	44

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2.2 Performance Analysis

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

SBCAG Board adopted performance measures for the Clean Air Express at the November 2024 Board meeting. Below is the list of adopted measures that SBCAG tracks to assess the Clean Air Express's performance. Such performance indicators are used widely across the industry, and the Federal Transit Administration requires monitoring of them.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES adopted in November 2024 followed by Q4 FY 25-26 (April – June 2026) measures:

1. Passengers per route – calculated by recording the number of unlinked trips (passenger boardings) by service route.

2. Passenger per service hour - calculated by dividing unlinked trips by vehicle revenue hours.

3. Farebox Recovery Ratio - the percentage of a transit system's operating expenses covered by passenger fares. It is calculated by dividing the total fare revenue by total operating expenses.

4. Cost per passenger - is the transit operations expense divided by the number of unlinked passenger trips.

5. Valid complaint rate – number of complaints per 1,000 passengers. A valid complaint is a concern received, in writing, electronically, or verbally, that is investigated and deemed well-founded and justified.

6. Miles Between Road calls - the average distance a transit vehicle travels before a vital component fails (e.g., mechanical failures, flat tires, wheelchair lift malfunctions) and the vehicle must be removed from service.

7. Accident-Injury rate - number of injuries or preventable accidents per 100,000 revenue miles.

8. Passenger Miles Traveled – the average trip length taken by passengers multiplied by the total number of unlinked passenger trips.

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<table>
<tr><th>KPI</th><th>April – June 2026 Measure</th></tr>
<tr><td>Passengers per route</td><td>
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<tr><th></th><th>Apr-26</th><th>May-26</th><th>Jun-26</th><th>Totals</th></tr>
<tr><td>Lompoc /Goleta</td><td>3,906</td><td>3,604</td><td>3,934</td><td>11,444</td></tr>
<tr><td>Santa Maria / Goleta</td><td>2,783</td><td>2,377</td><td>2,520</td><td>7,680</td></tr>
<tr><td>Lompoc / Santa Barbara</td><td>2,190</td><td>1,956</td><td>2,159</td><td>6,305</td></tr>
<tr><td>Santa Maria / Santa Barbara</td><td>1,425</td><td>1,167</td><td>1,281</td><td>3,873</td></tr>
<tr><td>Midday Connector</td><td>205</td><td>226</td><td>265</td><td>696</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>Total Quarterly Ridership</td><td>29,998</td></tr>
</table>
</td></tr>
<tr><td>Passenger per service hour</td><td>15.50 average for April – June 2026</td></tr>
<tr><td>Farebox Recovery Ratio</td><td>12.14%</td></tr>
<tr><td>Cost per passenger</td><td>$24.26</td></tr>
<tr><td>Valid complaint rate</td><td>.13;</td></tr>
<tr><td>Miles Between Road calls</td><td>; EN 34,513 miles</td></tr>
<tr><td>Accident-Injury rate</td><td>0</td></tr>
<tr><td>Passenger Miles Traveled</td><td>1,608,792</td></tr>
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Ridership trends

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The 2019 SRTP's historical ridership data ended in 2018 (~360 average weekday riders). Since then, ridership has followed the below trends.

Period	Monthly ridership	Notes
Jan 2020	~15,120 monthly riders (13 daily round trips)	Pre-pandemic peak
Apr 2020	~4,300 monthly riders	Pandemic collapse; service cut to ~8 round trips
Apr 2023	9,150 monthly riders	Partial recovery; ~10 daily round trips
April 2025	9,909 monthly riders	Midday Connector added; free-fare promotion in April 2025
April 2026	10,509 monthly riders	Current reported level, across all services

2.3 Fleet and Facility Status

Inventory of commuter coaches, age/mileage, and maintenance facility capacity

Vehicle type	Count	Year	Fuel type
Over-the-road diesel coaches	17	2011-2017	Diesel
Battery-electric coach	1- introduced 2022; additional units funded via 2024 TIRCP award	2021	Battery-electric
*Planned battery-electric coaches	Secured funding for 4 additional battery electric coaches	TIRCP funding secured 2024	Battery-electric

Vehicles are operated and maintained by a private contractor under contract with SBCAG. As in the 2019 SRTP, AmericanStar Trailways, is the current contractor with current contract ending in June 2027. An RFP is to be released in late 2026 for a new contractor agreement to start July 2027.

Maintenance Facilities	Location	Owned	Service
SBCAG Regional Transit Facility	Goleta, CA	SBCAG	Combined Maintenance and

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			Administrative Facility. Charging capacity : 4 level 3 charging guns and 4 level 2 charging guns; 1 BYD proprietary charger
AmericanStar Maintenance Facility	Grover Beach, CA	Contractor – AmericanStar	Combined Maintenance and Administrative Facility

2.4 Technology Baseline

Technology	Status	Notes
Open Loop Fare Collection	In place	Tap-to-ride contactless payment (credit/debit card and mobile wallet) was rolled out starting 2021
Passenger Wi-Fi	In place	Wireless internet access has been installed fleet-wide since shortly after SBCAG assumed management in 2001 and remains a standard onboard amenity; rider feedback has periodically called for improved reliability. *Plans to upgrade routers and increase passenger Wi-Fi reliability and speed in FY 26-27
AVL/GPS (real-time vehicle location)	In-progress	Clean Air Express currently does not publish GTFS-Realtime data or offer real-time bus tracking to riders;

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