

# COVID RECOVERY PLANNING

Joint Powers Board  
Item #4j



# Introduction

This presentation is an informational update on monitoring of Caltrain's service and ridership patterns in relation to corridor-wide travel behavior trends.

## Today's Presentation

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**Travel Behavior Trends**

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**Initial Survey Results**

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**Near-Term Outlook**

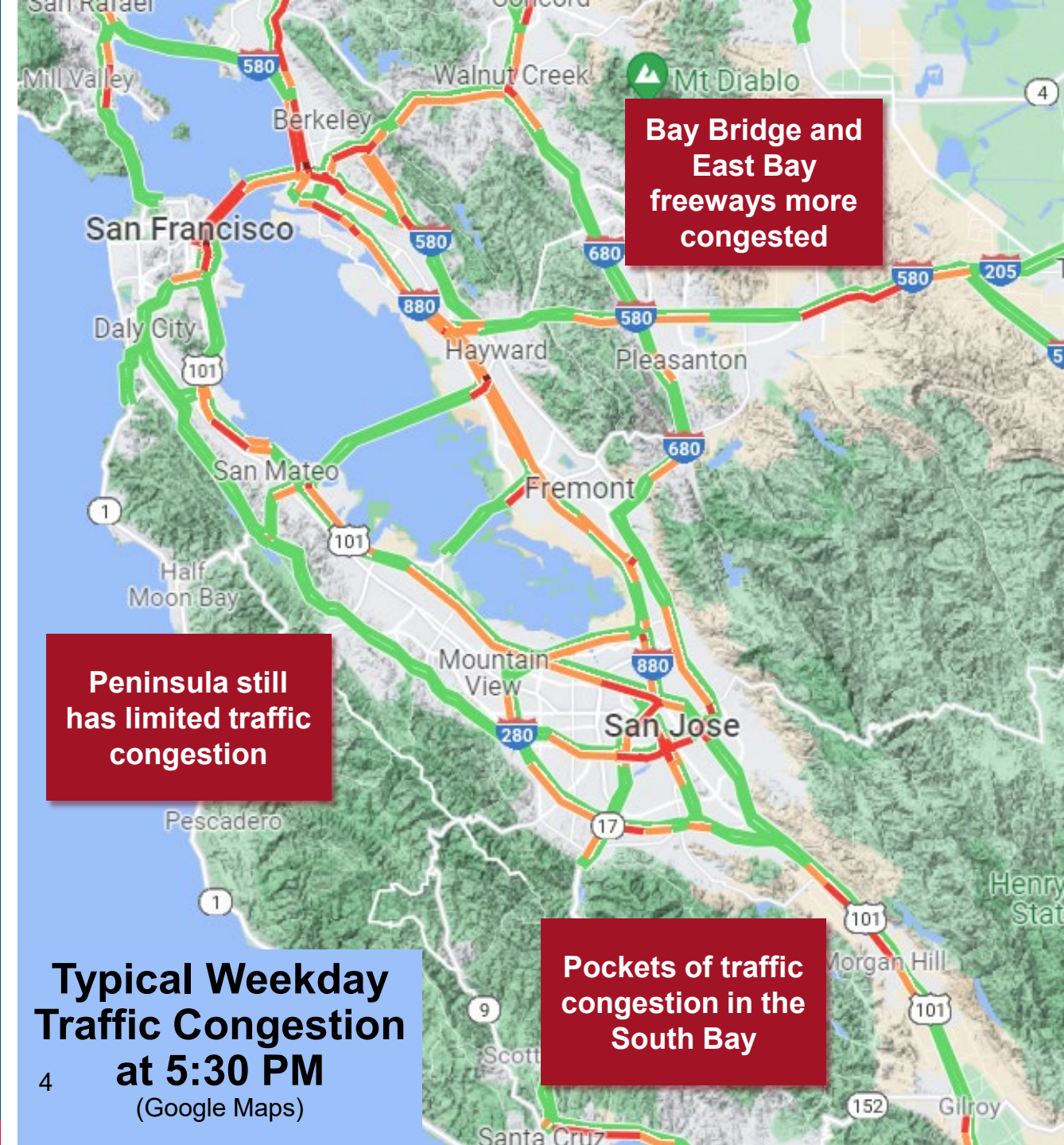
# Travel Behavior Trends



# Pandemic Travel Behavior

While traffic congestion has returned to the Bay Area, it has been unevenly distributed across the region. Along the Caltrain corridor, 101 and 280 have seen less congestion compared to the Bay Bridge and East Bay. This is partially due to the corridor's high proportion of office commute trips that have yet to return.

The following slides illustrate travel behavior changes along the Caltrain corridor, and how Caltrain ridership reflects these changes.



# Travel Activity Remains Lower, Especially Office Commutes

Along the Caltrain corridor, travel activity remains well below pre-pandemic levels, especially commute trips to offices. A lower baseline of travel activity leads to a smaller market for Caltrain to capture.

## Overall Weekday Travel Activity

 **31%** vs. pre-pandemic conditions

## Average Office Occupancies

 **72%** vs. pre-pandemic conditions

*Source: StreetLight Location-Based Services Data from cell phones for movement between Caltrain station areas, September 2021*

*Source: Kastle Access Control System Data for sample of office buildings in San Francisco and San Jose markets, October 2021*

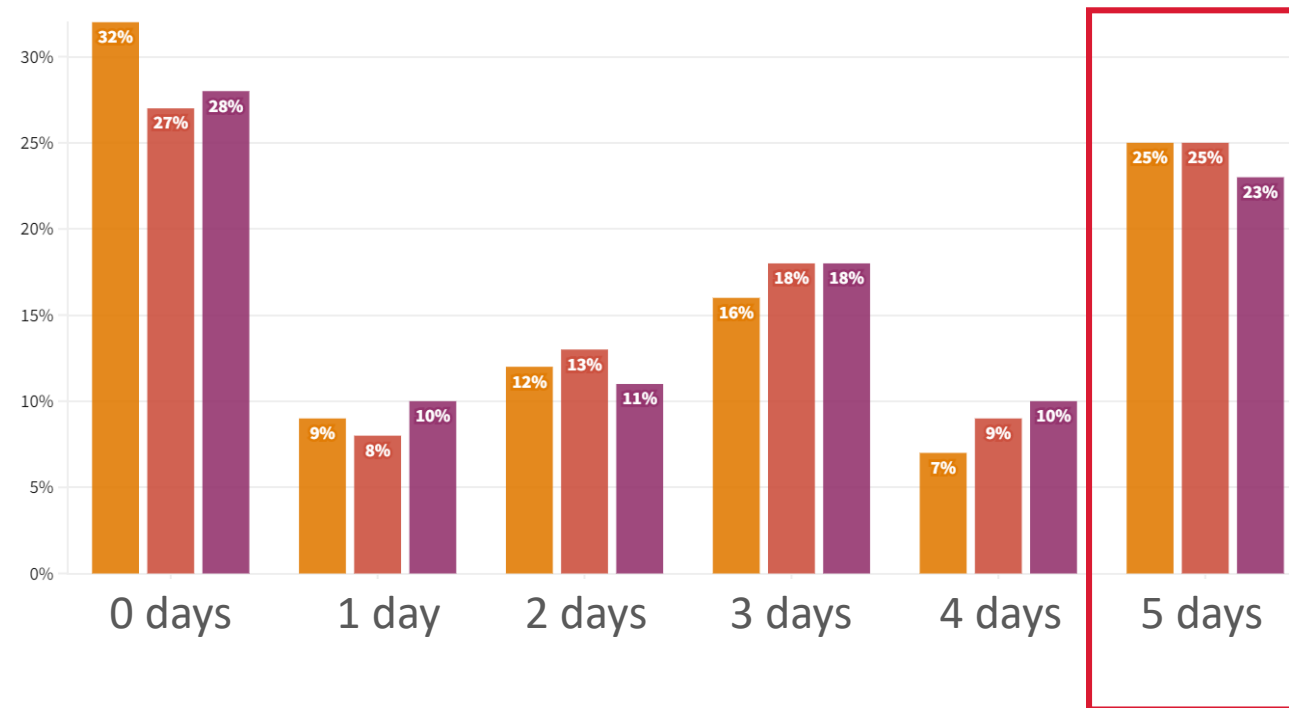
# Bay Area Council (BAC) Survey

Only 23% of employees are currently in the office 5 days per week

Right now, what is your best estimate at the frequency your Bay Area workforce comes to the workplace each week?

Percentages are averaged across responses.

October November December



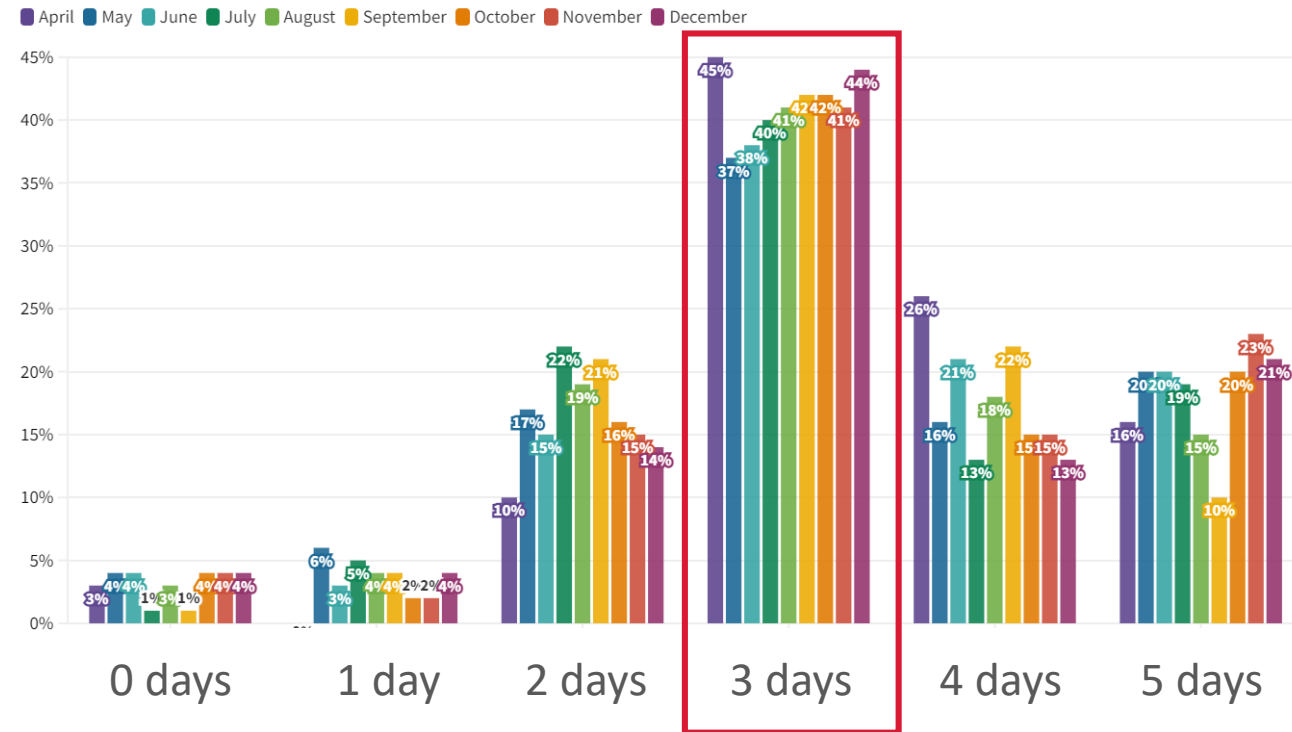
Source: Bay Area Council Employer Network: Return to Transit Tracking Poll, December 2021



# Bay Area Council (BAC) Survey

Employers predict less time in the office once the pandemic is behind us

Once the pandemic is behind us, how many days per week do you expect your typical employee will come to the workplace?



Source: Bay Area Council Employer Network: Return to Transit Tracking Poll, December 2021





# Case Study: Downtown SF, 2021 vs. 2019

Peak period vehicle trips in Downtown San Francisco have declined by ~50 percent compared to 2019, with larger declines occurring for Caltrain's core market of longer trips and commute trips to offices.

Commuting to Downtown SF via Caltrain has decreased by over 90 percent (1,400/day). Previously, it accounted for about one-third of Caltrain's ridership (20,000/day).


Travel behavior remains unsettled as the pandemic drags on; it's too soon to say how things will evolve post-COVID.

## AM Peak Trips to 4th & King

Analysis Period	<b>Fall 2019 to Sept 2021</b>
Day Type	<b>Weekday</b>
Day Part	<b>AM Peak</b>
Change in Total Vehicle Person Trips	<b>-89,000 (-52%)</b>
Change in Caltrain Compatible Trips	<b>-6,000 (-47%)</b>

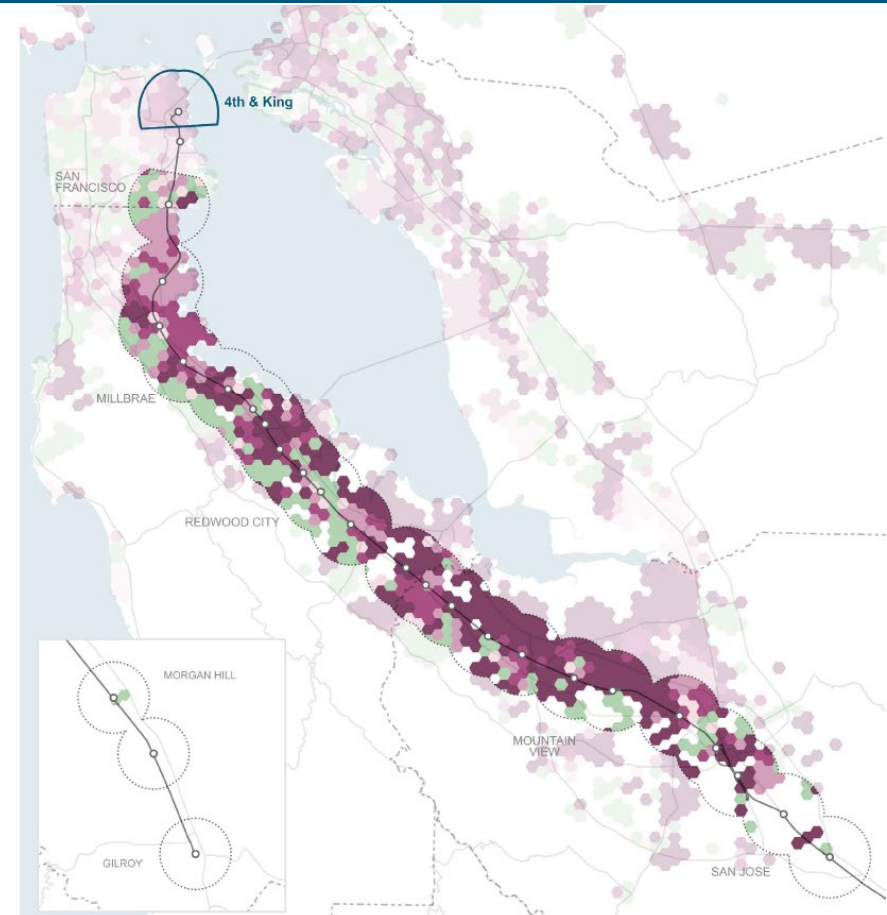
\*Trips that start within 2 miles of a Caltrain station more than 4.5 miles away

### Change in Trips from 2019:

Increase: 

Decrease:

 0 to 25%  25 to 50%  50 to 75%  75 to 100%



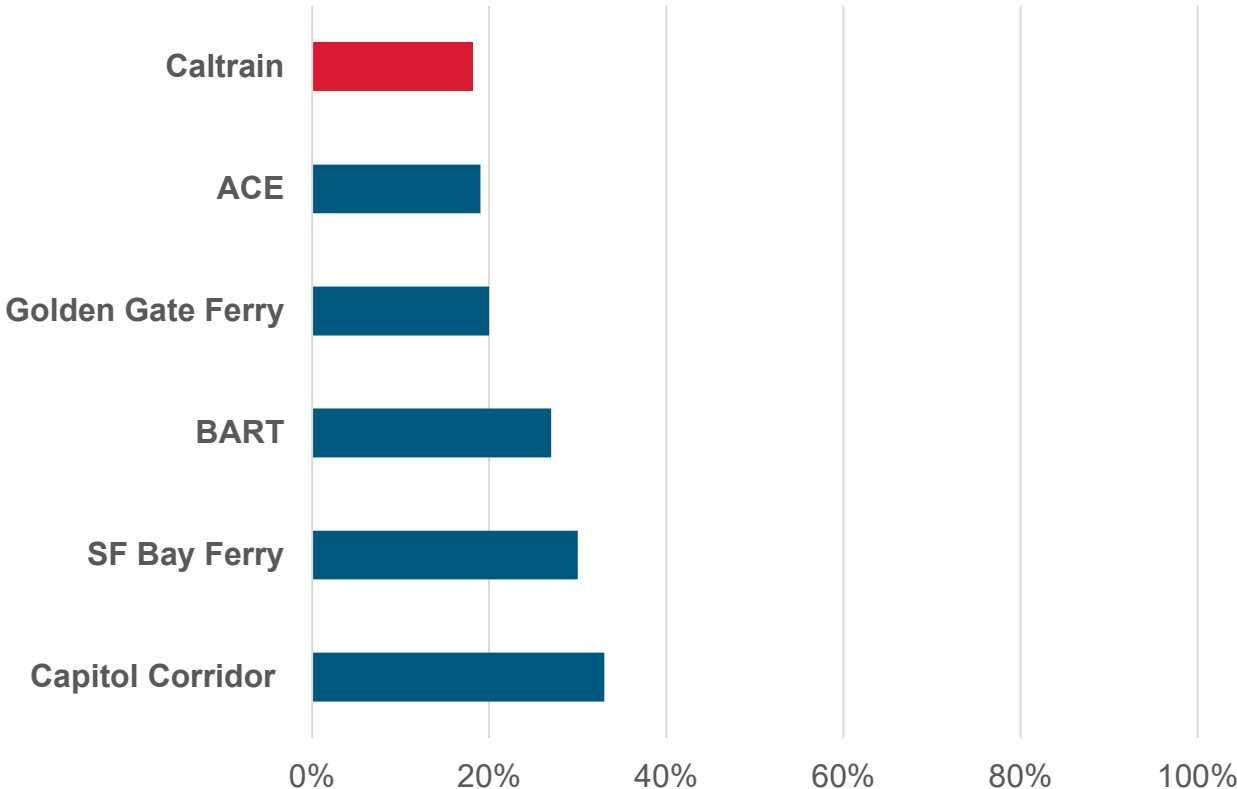


# Regional Transit Ridership Still Well Below Pre-Pandemic Levels

**Weekday ridership on Caltrain and other regional transit agencies has gradually increased yet remains around 20-30% of pre-pandemic levels.**

Like its peer agencies, Caltrain's ridership primarily consisted of office commute trips to Downtown San Francisco and Silicon Valley prior to the pandemic. A significant recovery in ridership is unlikely to occur until office occupancies recover.

Ridership Recovery - 2021 as a % of 2019

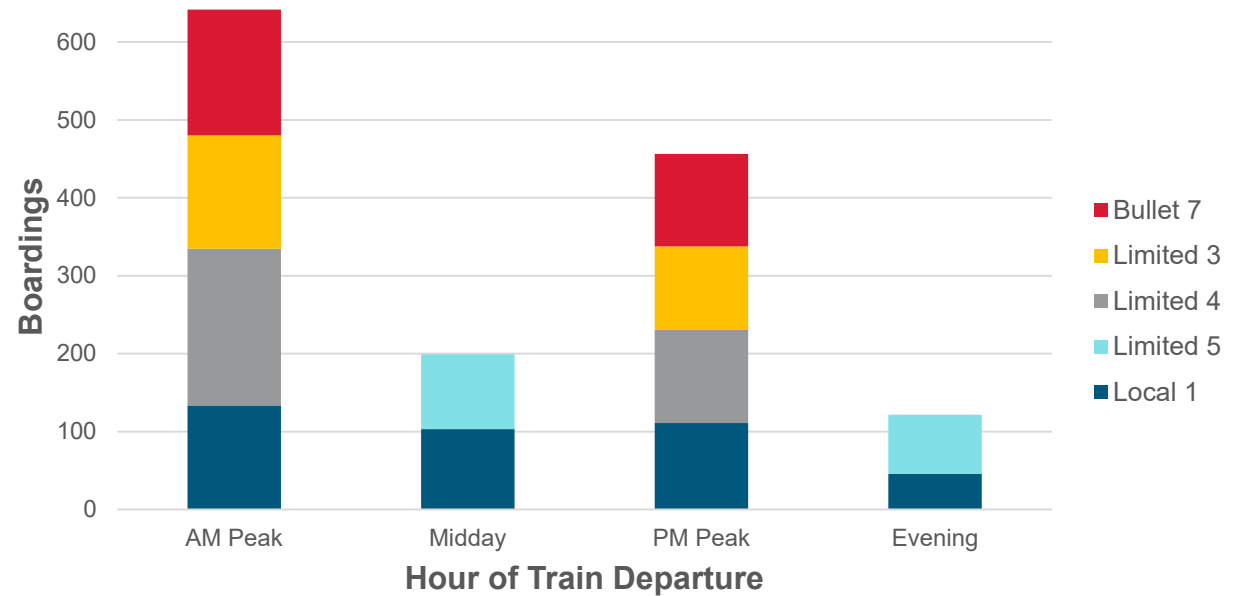


# Caltrain Ridership Patterns

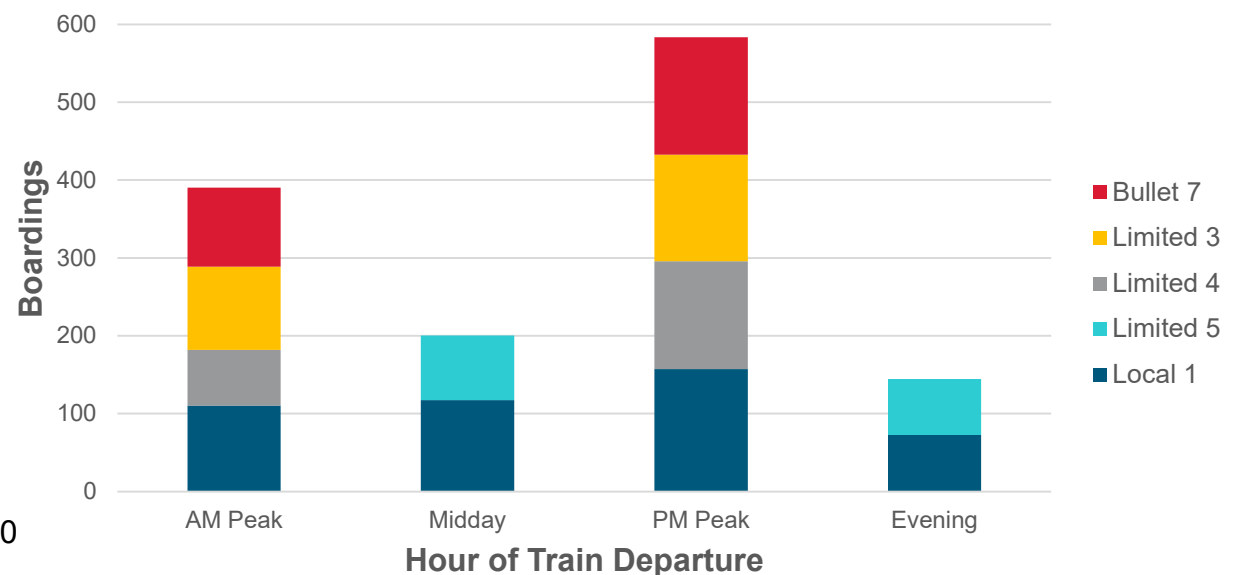
Compared to pre-pandemic conditions, Caltrain is serving more decentralized travel and fewer long-distance trips.

- AM and PM peak periods continue to occur, but are a bit more spread out and spill into the midday.
- Bullets are mostly underperforming compared to limiteds and locals.
- Most stations are between 15% and 30% of pre-COVID ridership, with the weakest recoveries occurring at 4<sup>th</sup> & King, Hillsdale, Mountain View, and Sunnyvale, and the strongest recoveries occurring at South San Francisco, Millbrae, Redwood City, and Palo Alto.
- Weekend ridership is recovering faster than weekdays: through Nov 2021, Saturdays were 52% of pre-pandemic, and Sundays were 57%.
- Gilroy ridership recovery is tracking systemwide trends (19% of pre-pandemic levels)

Average Weekday Ridership per Hour by Train (NB)



Average Weekday Ridership per Hour by Train (SB)

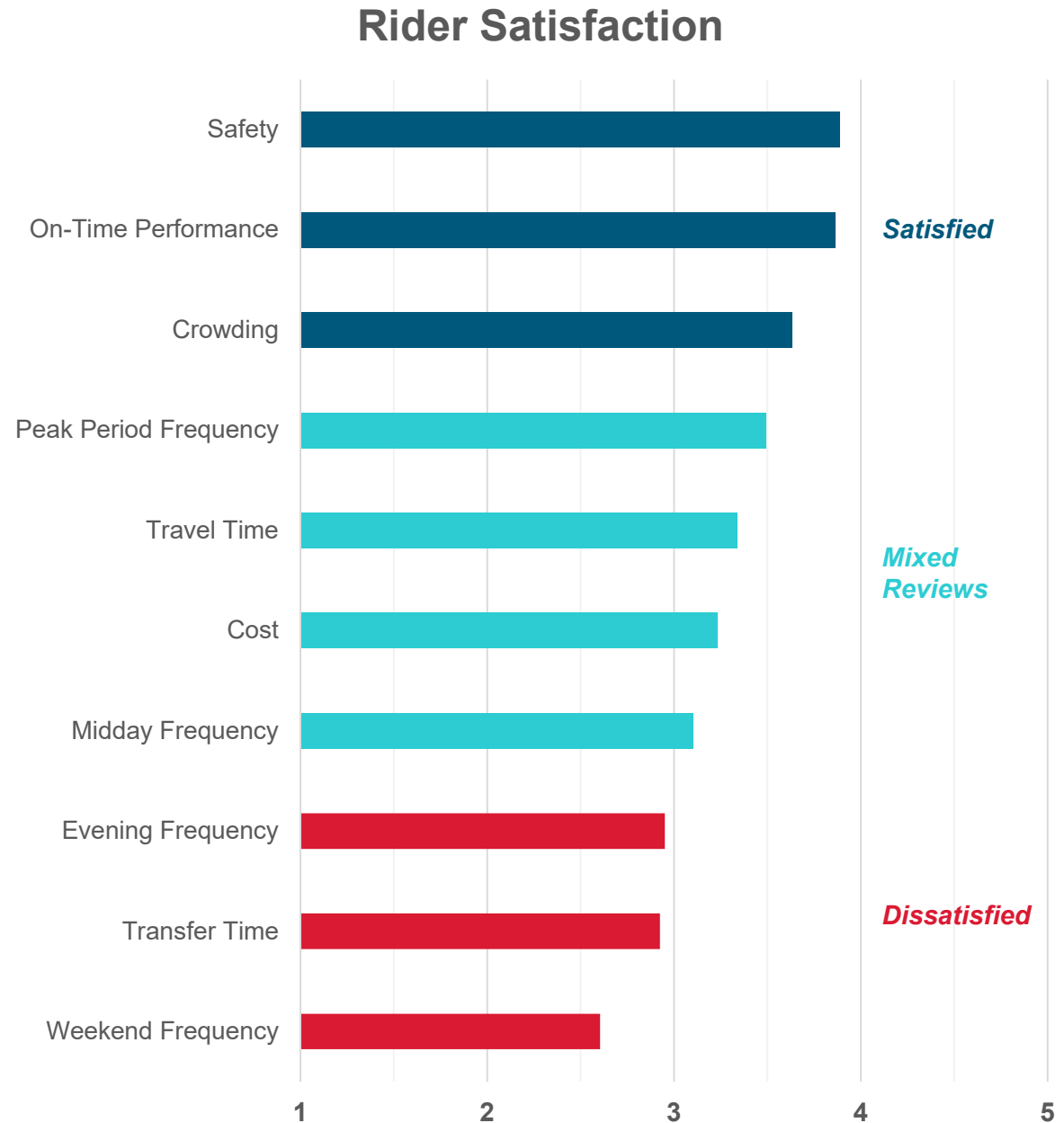


# Initial Survey Results

Fall 2021 Survey of Current/Former Riders and General Public

# Rider Satisfaction

- Riders are generally satisfied with their overall experience riding Caltrain, especially safety, on-time performance, and crowding.
- Riders provided mixed reviews on Caltrain's peak period and midday frequency, travel time, and cost.
- Riders are least satisfied with Caltrain's evening and weekend frequency and transfer times between operators.

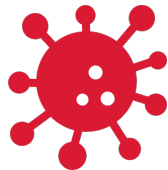


# Former Rider Responses

Most former riders continue to work remotely but expect to return to Caltrain eventually once the pandemic ends and their employers return to in-person or hybrid workplaces.



**61% are not currently making any trips in which they'd normally ride Caltrain**



**46% have substantial concerns about contracting COVID while riding Caltrain**



**70% expect to return to Caltrain once the pandemic is over**

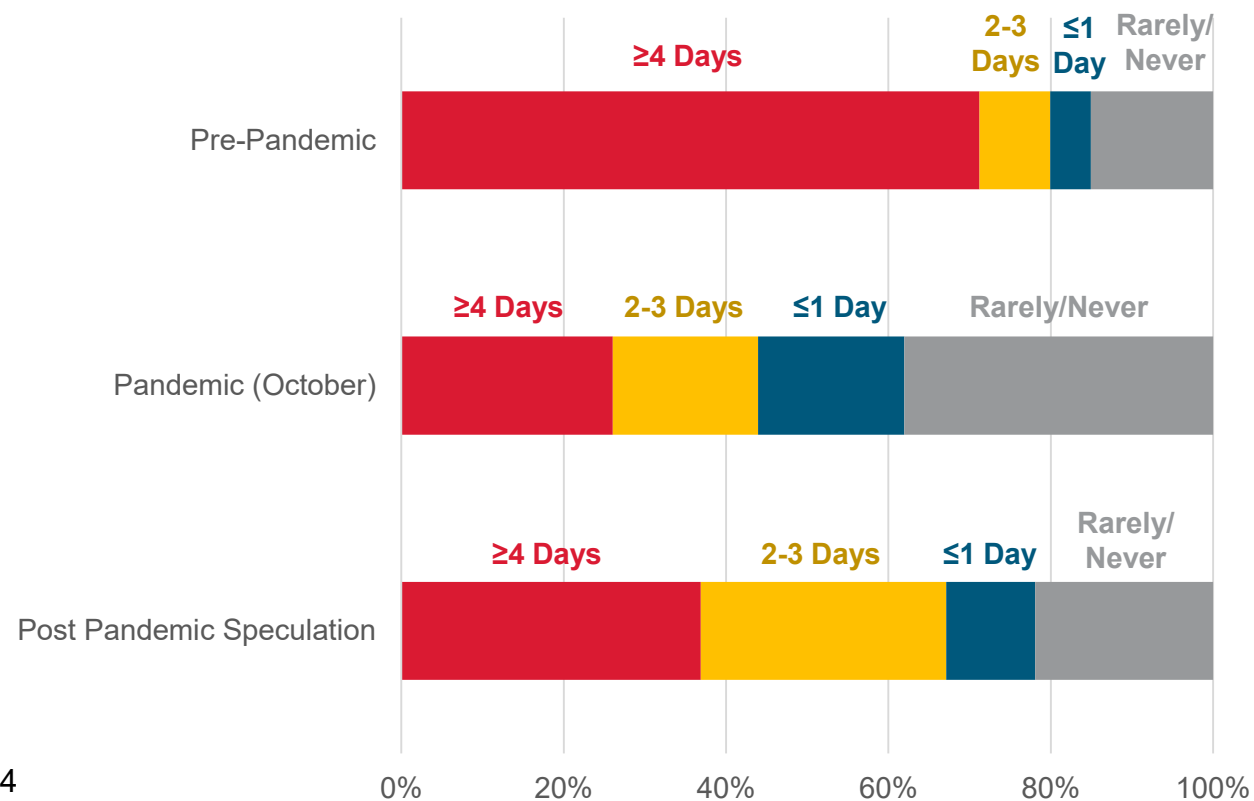


# How Commuting Behavior is Changing

People speculate they'll commute less often once the pandemic ends, but do not expect to abandon commuting altogether.

- **Everyday Commuters:** 37% of respondents speculate they'll commute  $\geq 4x$ /week post-pandemic, down from 71% pre-pandemic.
- **Sometimes Commuters:** 41% of respondents speculate they'll commute a few days per week or a few days per month post-pandemic, up from 9% pre-pandemic.
- **Never Commuters:** 22% of respondents speculate they'll rarely or never commute post-pandemic, up from 15% pre-pandemic.

## Frequency of Commuting per Week



# Near-Term Outlook

# Near-Term Outlook: Continued Uncertainty



## Winter COVID Surge

Cases increased sharply in December and early January due to the Omicron variant.



## Return to Work Plans

Some employers continue to move forward with phased reentry plans, while others have extended their remote work timelines indefinitely



## Settling Into a New Normal

Establishing a new normal will take time; surveys suggest a higher level of remote work is here to stay



## Preparing for Corridor Growth

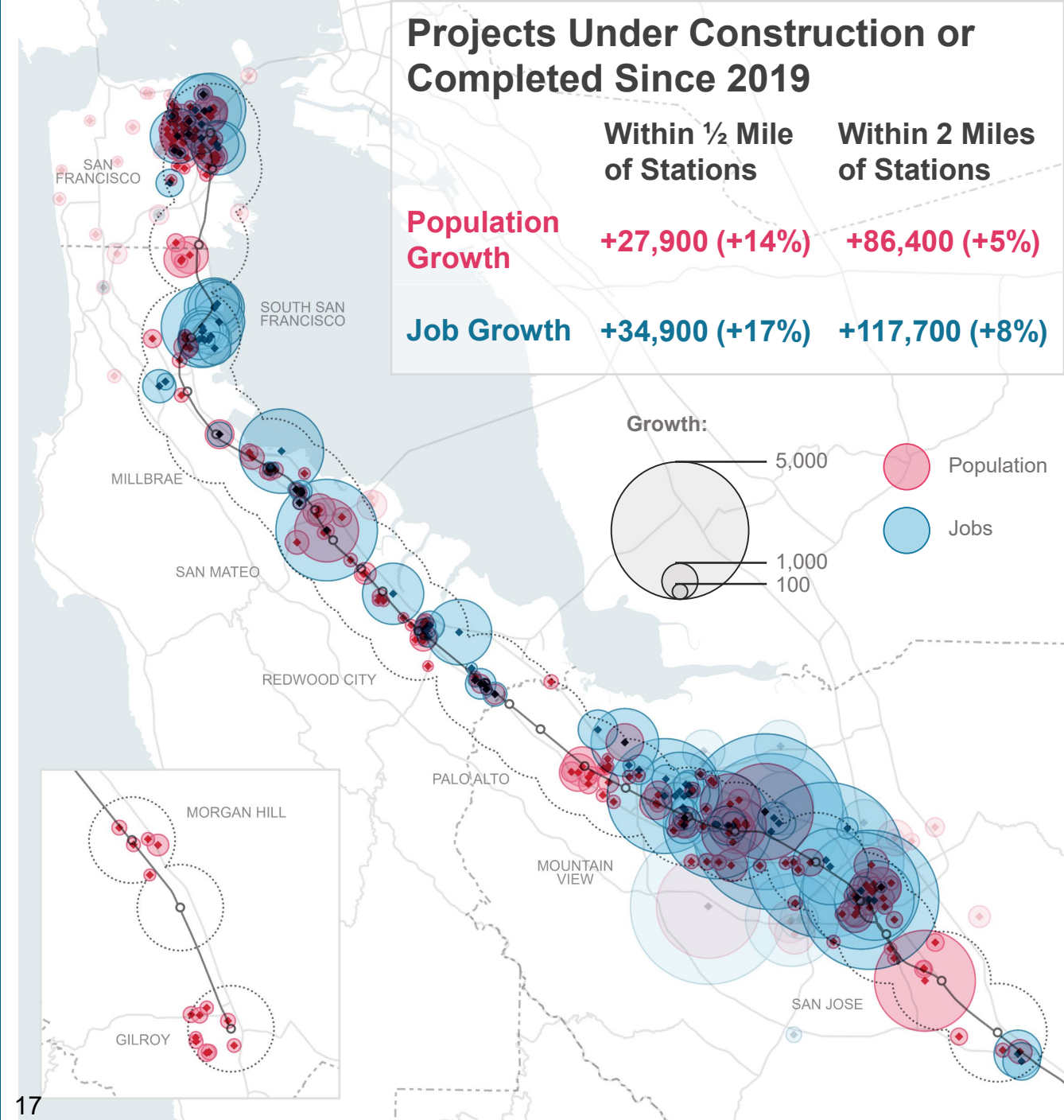
An ongoing construction boom presents new ridership markets for Caltrain.

# Corridor Development Activity

A development boom is changing the Caltrain corridor, especially near stations.

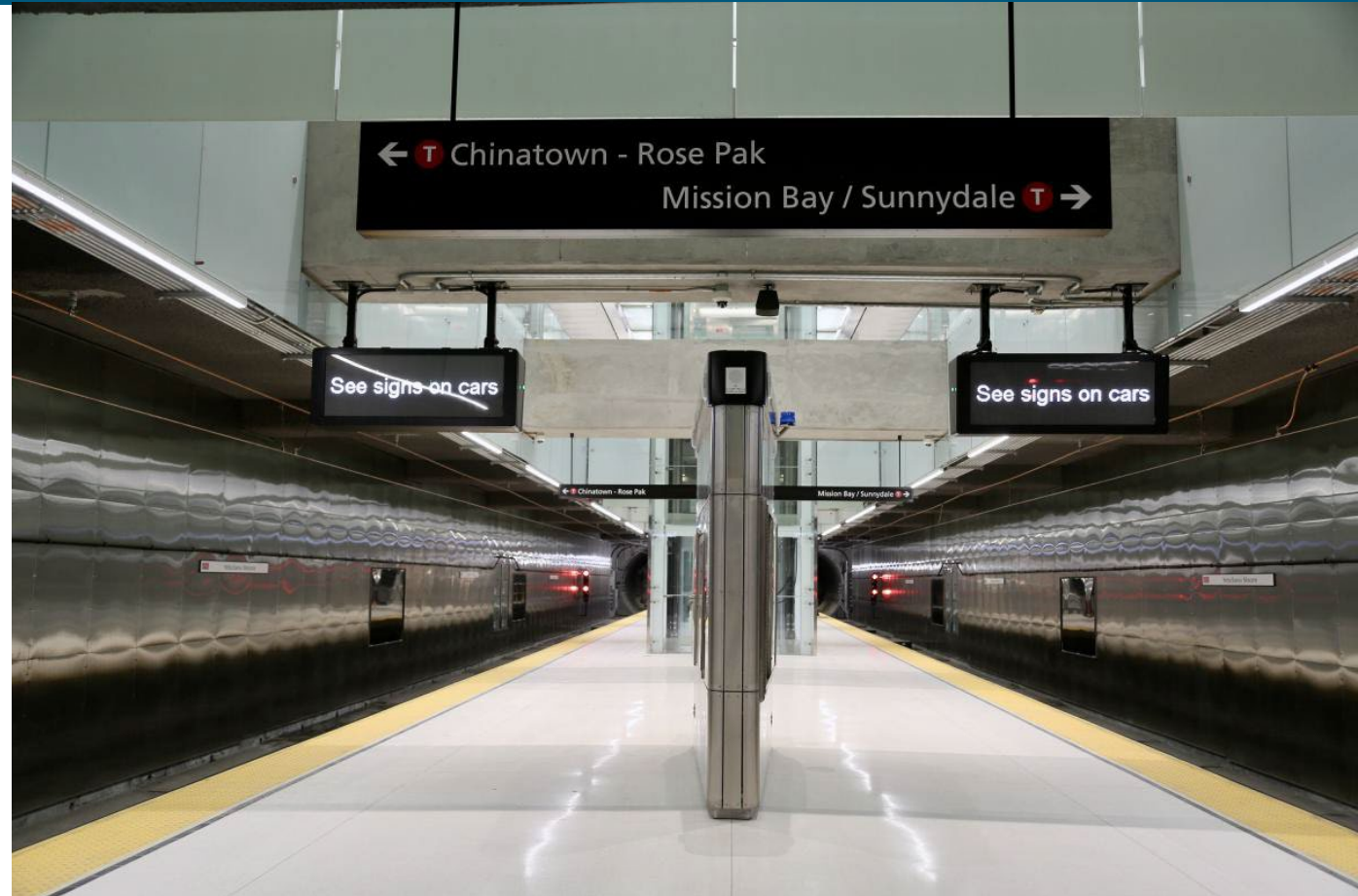
Construction activity since 2019 is increasing population and jobs within ½ mile of Caltrain stations by about 16%. The strongest development markets include 4<sup>th</sup> & King, South San Francisco, Hillsdale, Redwood City, Sunnyvale, Lawrence, Santa Clara, and Diridon.

While ridership may not materialize immediately, Caltrain's station areas will look very different in the next few years compared to before the pandemic.



# Central Subway Opportunities

- Service anticipated to begin October 2022
- Provides direct connection from 4<sup>th</sup> & King to SoMa, Union Square, and Chinatown
- Presents opportunity for Caltrain to improve first/last mile access and tap into new markets within San Francisco





# South San Francisco Station Opportunities



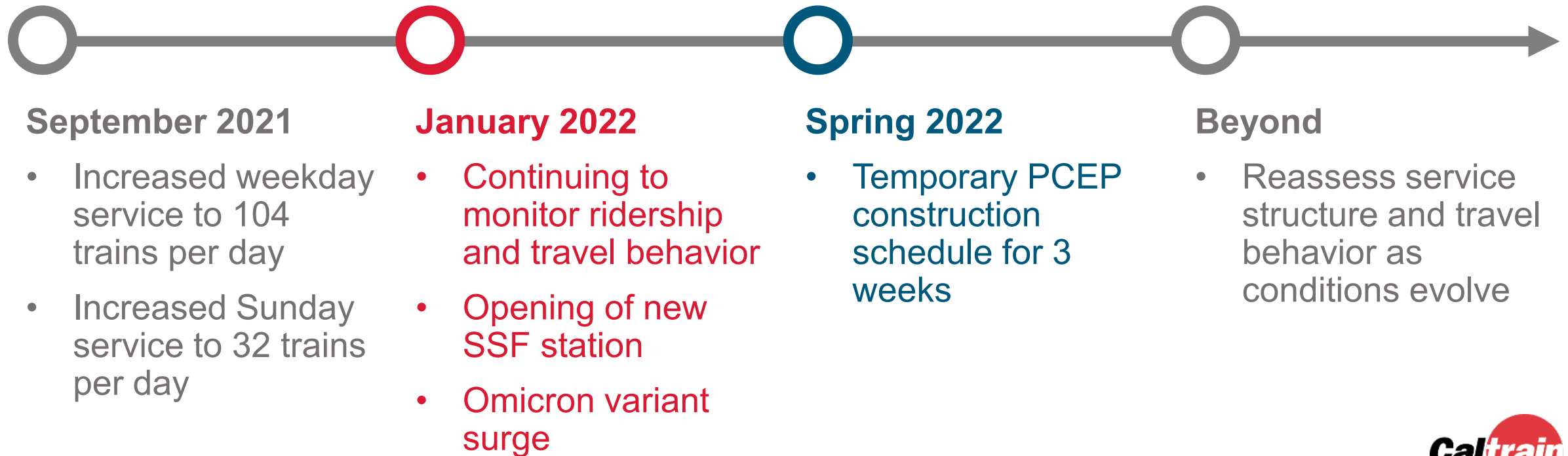
**The new South San Francisco station presents an opportunity to better serve untapped ridership markets:**

- Strongest ridership recovery out of the entire Caltrain corridor (30% of pre-COVID levels)
- Accounts for half of all office/R&D construction in San Mateo County & represents fourth-largest development market along the Caltrain corridor
- Life science labs and City's TDM requirements suggest opportunity to capture more commuters who are already returning to work
- One of the Caltrain corridor's largest Equity Priority Communities
- Continued collaboration with City and employers underway to coordinate shuttle services, improve access, and plan TOD projects

# Caltrain's Near-Term Outlook

- **Pandemic Uncertainty:** Caltrain continues to navigate an evolving pandemic and shifting travel behavior trends, with significant uncertainty lingering in 2022.
- **Gradual Recovery:** Ridership recovery will take time - not everyone will return to their pre-pandemic behavior, but most expect to return to riding Caltrain eventually.
- **Developing New Markets:** The corridor's strong construction pipeline signals a growing underlying market for rail service and presents an opportunity to attract new riders.

# Next Steps – Service



# Next Steps – Ridership, Finances and Caltrain's Business Model

- Caltrain has been a historically fare dependent system, generating as much as \$100 million in fares pre-COVID (nearly 70% of operating costs).
- While Measure RR and federal relief funding have allowed Caltrain to weather the near-term financial impacts of the pandemic, the sustained depression of ridership poses a severe financial challenge to the viability of the railroad's business model.
- Staff is preparing a series of financial projections and analysis and this critical topic for discussion at an upcoming Board workshop.