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Council offers a lift to traffic-fighting nonprofit

City approves additional \$200,000 for Palo Alto Transportation Management Association's pilot projects

by Gennady Sheyner

It's a tiny nonprofit with a giant mission: solve downtown Palo Alto's ever-worsening traffic problem.

But even as commuters continue to clog up local highway arteries every day, the ambitious but underfunded Palo Alto Transportation Management Association sees some reasons for optimism. The numbers of employees who have used the Scoop carpooling app or signed up for public-transit subsidies have exceeded expectations. According to a recent report from TMA Director Wendy Silvani, new businesses have enlisted to participate in the transit program, and the organization is on pace to max out of passes in March or early April.

The City Council has invested plenty of hope in the TMA, with Mayor Greg Scharff proclaiming in his "[State of the City](#)" speech earlier this month that he and his colleagues will look for ways this year to help the organization "mature and thrive."

When it comes to funds, however, the council's investment has been more modest. Even though the council spent more than \$500,000 to create the Palo Alto TMA [three years ago](#) (the organization incorporated as a nonprofit in January 2016), it has been loath to contribute the \$3.5 million that according to the TMA's estimates would be needed to shrink the number of solo drivers by 30 percent over three years.

Those funds are expected to ultimately come from new fees generated by downtown's parking facilities and from a potential business tax, the details of which are yet to be hashed out.

As the association is entering its second year as an official nonprofit, downtown's rate of solo driving is stuck at about 57 percent, according to a recently conducted ridership survey (the rate was 55 percent in 2015). Yet the organization also reported 137 individuals had used Scoop as of Dec. 31 and 59 who were getting transit subsidies from the TMA as of January, with Caltrain passes accounting for 37 of them.

The number of employers participating in the subsidy program has also increased, with Lytton Gardens, Project Juice, Tea Time and Downtown Streets Team enrolling earlier this month. Coupa Cafe, which is one of 10 employers already participating, had about 20 employees enrolled in the program as of Feb. 1, the report notes.

Given the growing demand for fully subsidized transit passes, the limited funding at the TMA's disposal and the organization's belief that after a year of fully subsidized transit passes, workers will see the benefits of not driving, the organization is considering scaling back the subsidy to 50 percent for participants who have been receiving full subsidies for a year (new participants would continue to get full subsidies), according to the director's report.

Not all programs are proceeding as planned. Only 17 employees signed up for Lyft subsidies as of Dec. 31, below the TMA's modest goal of 25 workers. The TMA is continuing to refine the program, Silvani wrote in her report, "and will return to those employees who signed up for it to assist them in taking advantage of it."

Even with the challenges, the nonprofit is confident that given sufficient funding, it can meet its 2017 target of changing the commute behavior of about 450 workers, which would constitute an 8 percent reduction in solo

drivers, the report states.

"If successful, the TMA will have achieved in less than two years what has taken cities like Seattle eight-plus years to accomplish," the director's report states. "We also believe that we can now scale programs to (1) serve additional downtown workers and/or (2) expand to other communities if provided funding to do so."

Last week, the TMA received another positive sign when the council reaffirmed its commitment to the nascent organization by approving two additional contributions of \$100,000, one in the current fiscal year and one for fiscal year 2018 (which begins July 1, 2017). As part of the agreement the council unanimously approved on Feb. 13, the money would be administered by the Silicon Valley Community Foundation and restricted to pilot programs downtown. The organization expects these funds to tide it over until permanent funding streams from parking revenues begin to flow into its coffers.

Though the council has yet to formally approve new parking fees for downtown, City Manager James Keene and transportation staff have long advocated for the policy change. The council is scheduled to review next month a new Downtown Parking Management study, which is expected to recommend parking fees as a strategy for addressing congestion.

In his "State of the City" address, Scharff alluded to the new fees as a possible solution to the TMA's funding problems.

"We all know that parking is tight down here, and the new garage that we're currently designing cannot fully address the issue," Scharff said, referring to the parking structure the council recently approved for the corner of Hamilton Avenue and Waverley Street. "The parking management study will give us recommendations about better managing the parking supply we have and suggest ways we might generate revenues to support the fledgling Transportation Management Association."

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