

## SAN DIEGO METROPOLITAN TRANSIT SYSTEM

Public Hearing for:  
AB-2561 (McKinnor) – Status of Vacancies, Recruitment and Retention

The Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) Board of Directors will hold a Public Hearing for AB-2561 (McKinnor) – Status of Vacancies, Recruitment and Retention. AB-2561 (McKinnor) requires public agencies to present the status of vacancies, recruitment and retention efforts at a public hearing at least once per fiscal year. This is an informational item, no action will be taken.

The Public Hearing will be held on April 17, 2025 at 9:00a.m., James R. Mills Building, 10<sup>TH</sup> Floor, Board Meeting Room; 1255 Imperial Avenue, San Diego, CA, 92101-7490. The public may alternatively participate via webinar during the meeting itself. Instructions for joining the webinar can be found under Agenda & Materials in the link below. Those who wish to submit remarks but cannot participate in the webinar may provide their comments to MTS no later than 4:00 p.m., April 16, 2025, by writing to Dalia Gonzalez, Clerk of the Board, 1255 Imperial Ave. Suite 1000, San Diego CA 92101, or by email at [clerkoftheboard@sdmts.com](mailto:clerkoftheboard@sdmts.com).

In-person inspection of the materials are available at the MTS Transit Store located at 1255 Imperial Ave. San Diego CA 92101. Business hours are Monday – Friday from 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. A 24-hour digital copy of the materials shall be posted 15 days prior to the hearing on the MTS website, and can be accessed by following the link below.

<https://www.sdmts.com/about/meetings-and-agendas/board-meetings>





## Agenda Item No.

MEETING OF THE SAN DIEGO METROPOLITAN TRANSIT SYSTEM  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

April 17, 2025

**SUBJECT:**

AB-2561 (McKinnor) – Status of Vacancies, Recruitment and Retention

**DISCUSSION:**

AB-2561 (McKinnor) requires public agencies to present the status of vacancies, recruitment and retention efforts at a public hearing at least once per fiscal year. If the number of job vacancies within a single bargaining unit meets or exceeds 20% of the total number of authorized full-time positions, the bill requires the public agency, upon request of the recognized employee organization, include specified information during the public hearing.

MTS does not have any bargaining units with vacancy rates that meet the 20% threshold. Below are the current vacancy rates per bargaining unit.

	Aggregate Vacancy Rate
Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)	5.4%
International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers (SMART)	4.1%
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW)	4.9%
Transit Enforcement Officers Association (TEOA)	6.8%
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) (Construction Safety Flagpersons)	12.9%

Below are MTS’s most challenging positions to fill and their current vacancy rates.

San Diego Transit Corp.	Budgeted FTE	Actual FTE	Vacancy Rate
Bus Operator	500	476	4.80%
San Diego Trolley, Inc.			
LRV Assistant Lineman*	89	72	19.1%
MOW Assistant Lineman*	36	27	25.0%
Construction Safety Flagperson	42.5	37	12.9%
Code Compliance Inspectors	95	90	5.26%



*\*The LRV and MOW Assistant Lineman FTE counts include the total allotments for the positions these roles advance into (Lineman and Electromechanic) based on completed education requirements and tenure.*

## **Bus Operator**

Since 2021, the Bus Operator position has been our most challenging to fill. This shortage has been exacerbated by a combination of factors, including demographic trends, job market changes, and the unique challenges associated with the profession.

### **Factors Contributing to the Shortage:**

1. **Demographic Shifts:** An aging workforce and insufficient interest of younger individuals into the profession has led to a gap in the number of qualified Bus Operators. Nearly all transit agencies in the United States are experiencing this problem and have been for several years.
2. **Job Market Competition:** The transportation industry faces stiff competition for labor from other sectors, making it difficult to attract and retain qualified drivers. MTS competes with all service industry employers to staff most front-line positions. Competition was so great for this labor category that staffing shortages have forced many employers to offer unprecedented wage increases, hiring incentives, and retention bonuses. The unemployment rate in San Diego hovered around 3.5% most of 2023, notably below the historical average of 5.1%. The tighter labor market reduced the pool of available candidates and further intensified the workforce shortage through this period.
3. **Working Conditions:** The demanding nature of bus driving, irregular working hours, unique work rules, and potential safety concerns contribute to the challenge of attracting and retaining drivers. Driving a bus is an extremely challenging job for several reasons. It requires a minimum of nine (9) weeks of training, and new drivers must work day and night shifts, weekends, holidays and split shifts. Further, they must deal with an increasingly rude and aggressive population of passengers. Generally, drivers who leave MTS state that they are leaving to work less difficult jobs, like delivering packages for Amazon or collecting trash for Republic Services.
4. **Training Constraints:** While our initiatives have increased the pool of qualified candidates, the training department has established an optimal instructor-to-student ratio to ensure proper training and adherence to high safety standards.

### **MTS Initiatives Are Improving Recruitment and Retention:**

MTS has been taking steps to address the retention issue by improving the pay, benefits and working conditions for this position over the last few years.

Some recent examples are:

- Since 2021, increased starting pay for Bus Operators by 42% and top step pay by 22%
- Increased employer contribution for defined contribution plan to 6% (from 5%)
- Reduced the time it takes Bus Operators to reach top step pay by two (2) years
- Negotiated premium pay (additional \$4.00/hour) for working “split runs”

- Paid various bonuses to new hires and to employees who refer successful candidates
- Improved on-site amenities, such as better furniture, created quiet areas and a soon-to-open fitness area
- Installed protective barriers separating Bus Operators from passengers and assigned Code Compliance Inspectors to patrol bus routes

MTS recently negotiated a new 3-year Collective Bargaining Agreement with the ATU that has Bus Operators starting at \$27.13/hour (\$56,430/year) and topping at \$36.63/hour (\$76,190/year). Additionally, we negotiated 4% wage increases each year for the next two (2) years.

There is now significant interest in the Bus Operator position, suggesting the pay and benefits improvements are working as intended. MTS's aggressive and comprehensive recruitment plan generates over 120 applications per month for 15 – 20 training openings every 3 weeks. Some examples of our efforts include:

- Launching an extensive marketing campaign with advertisements across various platforms, including but not limited to bus wraps, shelters, benches, digital ads, social media, billboards, radio, job boards, and other media channels
- Expanding our interviewing strategy by increasing the frequency of interviews and hosting offsite hiring events at transit centers to reach a wider audience
- Streamlining our application process to eliminate unnecessary barriers and enhance accessibility

#### **LRV Assistant Lineman and MOW Assistant Lineman**

LRV Assistant Lineman is the entry level position into the joint apprenticeship program. After completing certain classroom and on-the-job training milestones, this position progresses to Lineman and then Electromechanic. This position primarily inspects and repairs light rail vehicles, while the MOW Assistant Lineman performs electrical work on the right-of-way. The vacancy rate for these positions is currently 19.1% and 25%, respectively.

#### **Factors Contributing to the Shortage:**

The four (4) most challenging positions (Bus Operator, LRV Assistant Lineman, MOW Assistant Lineman, and Construction Safety Flagperson) all face similar factors contributing to shortage. LRV Assistant Lineman and MOW Assistant Lineman come with their own challenges. The schedule requires employees to work full-time (day and night shifts, weekends, holidays) while completing coursework at our partnering community colleges.

Recently, seasoned mechanics have left MTS for higher paying positions at other transit agencies in lower cost of living locations.

#### **MTS Initiatives Are Improving Recruitment and Retention:**

MTS recently negotiated a new 3-year Collective Bargaining Agreement with SMART that has these positions earning \$33.49/hour (\$69,659/year) with a 3-year path to Electromechanic at \$44.55/hour (\$92,664/year). Additionally, we negotiated 4% wage increases each year for the next two (2) years.

We have established strategic partnerships with workforce developers to build a pipeline for future talent. In 2024, we collaborated with the San Diego County Office of Education to host a tour for over 30 educators from schools across the county, showcasing our maintenance facilities and apprenticeship programs for them to share with their students. This initiative sparked significant interest, leading to additional requests for student tours and exploring other partnership opportunities to introduce young people to careers in transit. Additionally, we currently serve on four advisory boards—including those for the Poway Unified School District Career Technical Education, Grossmont Union High School District's Automotive and Industrial Technologies Program, and the San Diego City College AIRE and Electronics Advisory Committees—to help shape curricula that will best prepare students for our apprenticeship programs.

Historically, MTS has predominantly hired at the Assistant Lineman which requires individuals to go through our 4-year apprenticeship program. Understanding the skills gap in our current workforce, we are now developing a thorough recruitment process to hire directly at the Lineman and Electromechanic level.

### **Construction Safety Flagperson**

Flagpersons are required to work on or near the trolley tracks to protect construction personnel and their equipment, as well as to ensure the safe passage of trains. There are 10 full-time and 65 part-time positions. The vacancy rate for this position fluctuates and is currently 12.9%. Flagpersons currently make \$19.10/hour.

As mentioned, Construction Safety Flagperson share many of the same challenges as Bus Operators.

The current CBA between IBEW and SDTI expires on September 30, 2025 and we have already begun negotiating a successor agreement. In an effort to improve recruitment and retention, we intend to increase wages significantly to help make this position more attractive. Additionally, we have established partnerships with community organizations such as Vantage Inc. and Second Chance, allowing us to receive direct recommendations for candidates they have worked with and thoroughly vetted.

### **Additional Recruitment Efforts**

Overall, MTS's recruitment strategy aims to enhance brand awareness and attract top candidates for all positions through the following initiatives:

- Participate in approximately 50 local job fairs annually, with HR team members and representatives from LRV, MOW, and other departments engaging directly with job seekers to offer firsthand insights into their roles
- Distribute a list of current job openings to a network of over 300 contacts across various organizations, including but not limited to educational institutions, rehabilitation centers, military and veteran organizations, EDD, and disability support centers

/S/ Sharon Cooney  
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