It’s a question we all grapple with in our day-to-day lives – whether it’s progress towards a fitness goal, or progress towards modernizing a 50-year old transit system – it seems as though the goalposts are constantly moving.

For public transit systems, that progress is further complicated by extremely complex funding arrangements. In the private sector, a business runs on the revenue it brings in. That money covers employee payroll, overhead, materials, and everything else needed to operate day to day. Public transportation is subsidized so that it is affordable for everyone regardless of income-level. In fact, the fare most customers pay to board the bus covers around 20% of the total cost of that trip.

So where does the other 80% come from?

In our case, as with all transit systems, that’s where things get complicated. Some of our revenue comes from a local permanent, dedicated sales tax; some of it comes from Measure D funding that local Santa Cruz County residents voted for in 2018; some of it comes from formula funding allocated at the state and federal levels; and some of it comes from state and federal grant funding programs for which METRO has to compete annually with every other system in the state or the country.

To embark on a big capital project, we must first compete for the funding. That can take six months to two years, to learn whether we will be awarded a particular grant. Once we know the grant is on its way, we must then undertake a competitive bidding process to ensure we are getting the best vendor at the best rate for the project. That process can take as little as three months or as long as a year, depending on the complexity of the project.

Only once we have procured the necessary contractors and materials can the project begin, as much as two or three years, after it was first conceptualized.

Once underway, there are always unanticipated complications. Big projects are a bit like building a house, there’s always at least one totally unanticipated issue to address. And sometimes those issues take time.

All of this is to say, we hear you when you ask “why” a project seems to be taking longer than originally projected. Our real-time arrival project is a good example of this phenomenon. It’s no easy task retrofitting a bus fleet that includes buses as old as the 1998 New Flyers and as new as the 2019 Gilligs with new technology that must speak to the legacy systems already on the buses. What works with the make and model of one bus, has not proven to work uniformly across the system. This means some re-thinking of our approach to ensure when our buses roll out with real time information, we are getting a complete picture of the system.

And the staff overseeing the vendor, helping to troubleshoot these issues? They have a lot of other hats to wear too. At smaller agencies, like METRO, employees have to take on many areas of responsibility.

I’m extremely proud of the work we are doing to bring you METRO 2020. I know our loyal customers having been waiting patiently, as we have worked behind the scenes to move METRO Forward. With the launch of our new mobile ticketing and overnight parking apps this month, I couldn’t be more proud of the progress we’re making.

Later this year we will mark METRO’s 50th anniversary, it won’t just be a celebration of what we’ve done but also what’s to come.

In Service,

Alex Clifford, METRO CEO