

FLORIDA TRANSIT PLANNING NETWORK NEWSLETTER



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With Ridership Still Down, Transit Agencies Rethink Priorities

The metro area saw transit ridership drop by over 80 percent at the beginning of the pandemic and it remains depressed. In late October, bus ridership was 50 percent of pre-pandemic levels and light rail remains down a whopping 73 percent.



Transit systems across America are facing an existential moment. Ridership remains dramatically down from its 2019 levels and budgets are only kept afloat by federal subsidies that will not continue indefinitely. But this moment of peril for public transportation is also an opportunity to break old routines.

“Transit agencies get stuck in their service patterns, without considering the fact that those service patterns may not be reflective of what people want,” says Yonah Freemark, senior research associate at the Urban Institute. “They have bus routes, in some cases, that they’ve had literally since they were running streetcars.”

Freemark and his co-authors — Jorge González-Hermoso and Jorge Morales-Burnett — wrote a lengthy report for the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) on how an array of transit agencies are planning for the post-pandemic future.

None of the institutions featured are from the handful of robust legacy systems in old, cold cities that tend to dominate the transit conversation. Instead, the report focuses on Denver, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Richmond, Virginia, and Spokane, Wash.

A common theme is that transit officials were spurred to think differently as a result of the protests over George Floyd’s murder. This forcible reckoning with questions of racial justice, and the realities of who kept riding transit before the availability of vaccines, broke agencies of at least some old habits.

“It cannot be overemphasized how the political movements of last year changed perspectives within transit agencies and helped them prioritize equity in their pandemic response,” says Morales-Burnett, research assistant at the Urban Institute.

Historically, transit agencies have seen a tradeoff between equity concerns and efficient services, according to Morales-Burnett. Policymakers felt they had to choose between a system that goes everywhere, but not very frequently, and a more effective

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option that serves fewer parts of a region.

During the pandemic, however, some officials reoriented their service patterns to better serve lower-income areas, increasing frequency in neighborhoods that saw higher ridership in 2020. Wealthier and often more suburban communities where remote work was most prevalent were more likely to see service declines.

It's not by coincidence that the Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC) is the only transportation system in the study that has largely recouped its ridership, Freemark and Morales-Burnett argue.

Virginia's capital city redesigned its bus system with an eye towards racial equity before 2020. That resulted in higher frequencies through denser neighborhoods with lower median household incomes. During the pandemic, they then cut service to suburban-focused commuter routes while preserving those higher inner-city services.

"The other agencies had not done that kind of change in advance of the pandemic, which may explain why they experienced such significant declines," says Freemark.

In an analysis posted on the Urban Institute's website, the researchers showed that Pittsburgh increased bus and rail service in 37 percent of the neighborhoods the transit system covers, principally in areas home to more people of color and those living below the poverty line.

This is in the context of larger ridership decline. The Port Authority of Allegheny County, which operates transit in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area, saw ridership drop by over 80 percent at the beginning of the pandemic and remains massively depressed. In late October, bus ridership was 50 percent of pre-pandemic levels and light rail remains down a whopping 73 percent.

"The ridership world we had on March 13, 2020, is not coming back," said Katharine Eagan Kelleman, CEO of the Port Authority, in an interview with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. "Ridership may continue to grow somewhat, but it will look different. We don't even know what that might look like yet."

Freemark and his co-authors also examined fare-free policies during the pandemic. All of the agencies eliminated fares for at least part of the COVID-19 period, largely to limit potentially dangerous interactions between riders and transit workers. This happened to coincide with a longer term push for fare-free transit from left-wing politicians, like Boston's new Mayor Michelle Wu (who championed

the idea when she was a city councilmember).

Smaller cities like Raleigh, N.C., and Richmond, Va., are extending these experiments into the post-vaccine period. In these cities, ridership is largely concentrated among lower income people and fares comprise a smaller share of the budget than they do in places like New York or Boston. Across the cities studied in the APTA report, fares made up 16 to 25 percent of 2019 transit budgets.

"If I can find a way to fill that [\$5 million hole] and still expand service, then we might be able to do this permanently," Julie Timm, CEO of GRTC, told *Governing* in August. "We're going to test it out and do a proof of concept for a couple of years. But if we can't find the money to fill it, if there is no appetite for finding the funds to preserve this, then fares will come back."

Fare-free policies haven't always brought the boons that advocates claim they will. In Los Angeles the period of free transit did not induce higher ridership. That seems to indicate that Richmond's fare-free experiment was successful in combination with higher frequencies in denser neighborhoods.

Some policymakers Freemark and Morales-Burnett interviewed also feared that their services might see vastly increased usage by the unhoused population under a free-fare regime. Many transportation officials made moves to restrict access to their systems by homeless residents during the pandemic, sealing entrances or shuttering whole stations. (It's worth noting that this was often done under pressure from transit workers, who feared for their own health and safety.)

Even as Mayor Wu has announced a series of additional free bus services during her first weeks in office, the question of fiscal impact remains. Freemark says that transit systems like the MTA in New York or Metro in Washington, D.C., which get 30 to 50 percent of their operating costs from fares, will have a tougher time adopting such policies.

"The argument that having free fares will make it so transit agencies can't expand service is more salient in cities with a very large share of revenues coming from fares," says Freemark. "But most American transit systems collect relatively little from fares. We should be open to the idea that fares are not a top priority if your goal is to ensure access to as many as possible."

Source: *Governing*, December 3, 2021

Public Transit Pivots Toward Equity, Accessibility in 2021

As America moved forward from the pandemic's initial throes, transportation experts examined their role in social equity as they considered eliminating fares, expanding transit lines and starting a "mobility revolution."

As the nation's transportation systems emerged from the COVID-19-imposed lockdowns, it became clear that a certain Rubicon had been crossed, a deeper understanding of transportation's place in society had been reached, and a vision for the future had been glimpsed.

"We're in the public health business. We're in the climate change business. We're in the economic mobility business. We're in the correcting racial inequities business," was how Seleta Reynolds, general manager for the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, summed up the work of public transit and transportation at the CoMotion MIAMI conference in June.

What Reynolds and so many other public transit officials have been repeating in various forms over the last year is this larger societal role that transit and transportation have been called to serve as they embark on their next chapter. For decades transportation has been the business of building roads, bridges and rail lines to serve cars, buses and trains. But in the last several months the conversation — and the business of transportation — has taken a noticeable turn. It has become a conversation dominated by debates around equity, sustainability and the essential role of transit and transportation in society.

"We're having a conversation about strategic investment, which I really appreciate," reflected Danielle Harris, director of mobility innovation at Elemental Excelsior, a funder of startups.

"What is the best way to get the economy back and going? What is the best way to help people get back to work? And what's the best way to put that funding in place? I think we're questioning all things, today. And that's what gives me a lot of hope," said Harris on a panel discussion in July.

When transit ridership plummeted in 2020 — which meant fare revenue also took a nosedive — fresh debate began to emerge around fares, and how they impact the most vulnerable riders and can make for an unstable



funding stream. Major systems like L.A. Metro are taking steps to eliminate fares for students and other residents living on the economic edge. It's part of a larger mission toward "universal basic mobility," which is itself a declaration to improve equity across the entire transportation ecosystem.

"We really think it's made a difference," remarked Robbie Makinen, CEO of the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority in Kansas City, Mo., on the move to eliminate fares altogether. "We really think we designed our system around the people that need us the most."

"The return on investment for compassion, for empathy, for social equity ... far outweighs the return on investment in concrete and asphalt. What do you want to invest in?" Makinen said in July.

And of course, humming in the background of all these conversations is the federal infrastructure bill, approved by both the U.S. Senate and the House as of early November. The measure will send about \$39 billion to public transit, and about \$66 billion to commuter rail, Amtrak and other passenger rail services. A centerpiece of President Joe Biden's domestic agenda, the legislation represents a major source of investment in innovation across all transportation sectors.

It's in this vein that cities are moving forward with rethinking the public right of way, following many pandemic-inspired "slow streets" projects, which prioritized pedestrians, cyclists and even diners above parking and travel lanes. These hastily assembled configurations served as de facto proving grounds for what is possible on tomorrow's city streets.

John Rossant, a leading urbanist and CEO and founder of the mobility-focused think tank CoMotion, referred to this period of transition as "a historic, unprecedented sea-change in how we approach equity and inclusiveness."

"We're only at the beginning of this historic mobility revolution," Rossant said.

Source: *Government Technology*, December 2021

PSTA Unveils Public Transportation Game-Changer with First Completed SunRunner Station

It's a major milestone for transportation in the Tampa Bay area. On Friday December 3, 2021, the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority unveiled its first bus stop along the SunRunner line, which will stretch between downtown St. Petersburg and the beaches, running along St. Pete's 1st Avenue north and south. "Today we are one step closer to a solution for the ever-growing problems of congestion and traffic in St. Petersburg in this corridor," said PSTA CEO Brad Miller.

The bus, and its dedicated 10.3-mile route running east and west, could be a game-changer that works in both directions. First, a no-brainer for people who live or visit downtown and want to get to the beach.

"A bus would be great, you know?" said Cameron Carroll. "Quick easy transportation and it can't be more expensive than an Uber I would think."

"You don't need to find parking spots," added Babci Whalley, "There's expensive parking here. And you can enjoy the beach." And for people visiting our beaches, it's an easy way to experience downtown attractions like Beach Drive, Central Avenue and the St. Pete Pier. "It's



very nice. Not only for the workers who work out on the beach at the hotels in the restaurant but for us that live out there to come down here," said Richard Bennett.

The SunRunner might also be a catalyst for growth. Already, developers are planning a 28-story hotel-condo tower right next to this first station at N. 1st Avenue and 5th Street. "We could not be more happy about the SunRunner being right here in front of our site," said Mike Flood with the DeNunzio Group. "To think about our hotel guests coming downstairs and going directly to the beach it's just such a wonderful thing."

And this may be just the beginning for SunRunner. PSTA has an ambitious plan that could eventually push the service across the Bay using a dedicated lane on the Howard Frankland Bridge, giving people access to Tampa's Westshore District and beyond toward USF.

This first phase of service between downtown St. Petersburg and the beach is set to begin in August 2022.

Source: WFLA News Channel 8

Gainesville RTS Now Free for Seniors and Young People

Local bus rides are now free for the oldest and youngest populations in Gainesville, which some say is helping seniors and parents with children on limited incomes save money for everyday essentials.



Starting October 1, the Gainesville Regional Transit System began offering free bus rides for people 65 and older and 18 years or younger.

It's a yearlong pilot project slated to end on Sept. 30 of next year, when officials will then decide whether it's worth keeping on a permanent basis.

"It helps," said Daphne Noble, who qualifies for free fares because she is older than 65. "It's good because a lot of people, especially now because of the pandemic, are not working."

As she waited for a bus at the Rosa Parks Transfer Station on Tuesday morning, she said the free passes will save her \$17.50 a month.

Noble said the bus ride is more than her critical link to shopping and other essential services.

"I like taking the bus because you meet people and see what is going on out of your world," she said. "I've lived in New York where the bus is everything, but here in Gainesville, it's different. But I like taking the bus."

Source: *The Gainesville Sun*

Federal Grant Supports More Transit-Oriented Development

Tampa's steady progress and commitment to make streets and neighborhoods more walkable, affordable, and transit-oriented has resulted in a second grant from the Federal Transit Administration to support these ongoing community planning & design efforts.

The \$300,000 grant will go to the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority (HART), the City of Tampa, and the Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission's Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Planning Pilot Program. The program works with neighborhoods to develop transportation, land use, and zoning code recommendations to improve the quality, form, and design of redevelopment in neighborhoods and along transit corridors.

More specifically, it will provide funding to work closely with neighborhoods to develop urban design plans for an additional four proposed stations along Tampa's future streetcar extension and HART's bus rapid transit line that will link downtown Tampa and the University of South Florida along Florida and Flower Avenues. This work will build upon the ongoing station area planning in Tampa Heights as well as expand community visioning throughout more of Tampa's neighborhoods. The

next community design charrette for Tampa Heights is scheduled for February 12, 2022.

"Providing more housing opportunities in our neighborhoods and meeting our evolving transportation needs are critical steps as we Transform Tampa's Tomorrow," said Mayor Jane Castor. "Our undeniable commitment is reflected throughout the plans and projects currently underway to promote sustainable growth and mixed-use development throughout Tampa. We could not be more grateful for grants like these that fuel our efforts and help us cover more ground in a shorter timeframe."

The first grant from the FTA was awarded in 2019. More information about the TOD Planning Pilot Program can be found at <https://goharttod.org/>.

The stacked fourplex is an example of a sustainable, pedestrian, and transit-oriented building that can be found in several of Tampa's neighborhoods.

Source: tampa.gov

LYNX to Receive \$300,000 Federal Transit Administration Grant

LYNX has been notified it will receive a \$300,000 grant from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Pilot Program for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Planning.

This nationwide funding program of \$11 million has been awarded to 20 projects in 12 states. Each project will support President Joe Biden's call to combat climate change, advance environmental justice and promote equitable delivery of benefits to underserved communities.

LYNX will use the grant funding to construct nine proposed bus rapid transit stations along 6.25 miles of SR 436 near Orlando.

"The Central Florida community will be extremely grateful that we received this grant award for our bus rapid transit stations project," said LYNX CEO, James (Jim) E. Harrison, Esq., P.E. "This grant funding will play a pivotal role in our continued commitment to improving the efficiency of our services, and we are confident that it will prove beneficial to increasing our access in the



communities we serve."

Funding through the FTA's TOD program will help organizations nationwide plan for transportation projects connecting communities and improving access to transit and affordable housing.

Support from U.S Reps. Stephanie Murphy (FL-07), Darren Soto (FL-09) and Val Demings (FL-10) has helped LYNX secure the grant funding through a competitive process.

Source: LYNX

2021 40 Under 40

Mass Transit magazine presents its annual opportunity to recognize outstanding young individuals making a name in the public transit industry. Mass Transit recognizes 40 individuals for their contributions. It is not a ranking, but rather a listing of individuals who have shown a capacity for innovation, demonstrated leadership and a commitment to making an impact in transit.

Criteria for selection include job commitment, industry involvement and contribution, achievement in his or her position and innovation in his or her field. This year Mass Transit magazine recognized two from Florida.

Omar De Leon, Public Transit Manager, Collier Area Transit

Omar De Leon started his transit career as a call center reservationist with McDonald Transit, greeting the public and helping them navigate the system for Collier Area Transit (CAT). He was promoted to lead customer service representative after two years on the job. One year later, he was promoted to administrative coordinator responsible for helping with grant preparation, preparing statistical reports, participating in the local coordinating board evaluations and assisting with triennial reviews. De Leon moved up in ranks for various vendors who served as operators for CAT and gained experience in fixed route, paratransit, information technology and planning.



In September of 2015, Collier County hired De Leon to be senior planner for the transit system, a key role with the agency due to its growth through the intervening years. He was responsible for preparing the annual Transit Development Plan updates and serving as project manager for the major updates. In this planning role, he also coordinated with the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the preparation of the Long Range Transportation Plan, as well as serving on MPO advisory committees. De Leon also coordinates with transit colleagues in adjacent Lee County to ensure the service between the jurisdictions is seamless for the public.

Similar to his private sector experience, Omar's expertise and professionalism was rewarded with a promotion to transit manager for CAT. In this, his current role, he has envisioned and facilitated many programs, system upgrades and enhancements; always with the objective

to streamline customer interaction and improve the rider's transit experience. His role in implementing mobile ticketing and Wi-Fi access on the buses are just two examples of that commitment.

Read more: www.masstransitmag.com/40-under-40/article/21246378/2021-40-under-40-omar-de-leon

Alexander Traversa, Sustainability Program Manager, Jacksonville Transportation Authority (JTA)

Sustainability Program Manager Alexander Traversa has been with the JTA five years and has fostered teamwork and transformational leadership in advancing key JTA initiatives in the areas of environmental and sustainability planning, Transit Oriented Development (TOD) and improving equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccine.



Traversa demonstrated his environmental commitment through the development of a comprehensive sustainability action plan that was adopted by the JTA Board of Directors to become the strategic vision for the sustainability program office. The plan outlines 15 goals and 23 projects that aim to address six key focus areas. In addition, it anticipates a conservation of 108 million gallons of water, 6.5 million kilowatt-hours of electricity, 2.9 million gallons of petroleum fuels and avoids sending 6.850 tons of waste to the landfill.

Traversa also plays a key role in leading the implementation of the JTA's TOD policy. The policy is set to encourage new development and redevelopment in Jacksonville's downtown area and outside the urban core that connects to expanded transit modalities. Traversa currently oversees the TOD Pilot Program being conducted to analyze what types of developments or land uses can best support transit service in the downtown area and around the Ultimate Urban Circulator (U²C) system. Post pandemic, Traversa wanted to increase the level of public participation throughout the U²C TOD process. In January 2021, he made an innovative decision to utilize a contactless public involvement resource called "Public Input" to host the U²C Virtual Pilot Open House.

Read more: www.masstransitmag.com/40-under-40/article/21246387/2021-40-under-40-alexander-traversa

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New Publications

Getting to Work: New Commute Duration Heatmaps

The Mineta Transportation Institute's new interactive website produces heatmaps that illustrate commute duration—the number of minutes that workers spend traveling to their jobs—plus related information, for most U.S. communities.

www.planetizen.com/news/2021/09/114689-getting-work-new-commute-duration-heatmaps

Transportation Equity Toolkit

The Transportation Equity Toolkit is a resource for MPOs, transportation agencies, and communities as they work to advance equity in traditionally underserved communities and more equitably distribute transportation investments. The toolkit was developed by a research team at the Center for Urban Transportation Research at the University of South Florida with funding from the Center for Transportation Equity, Decisions, and Dollars at the University of Texas at Arlington.

www.cutr.usf.edu/2021/09/transportation-equity-toolkit/

APTA's Smart Guide to Bipartisan Infrastructure Law

www.apta.com/advocacy-legislation-policy/bipartisan-infrastructure-law-hub/

Save the Dates

FDOT/FPTA/CUTR Professional Development Workshop & Transit Safety and Operations Summit

June 6-8, 2022 | Tampa, FL

FPTA Annual Conference

September 18-20, 2022 | Naples, FL

FDOT is interested in your ideas about resources it can provide in support of your transit planning initiatives and professional development. Please contact Gabrielle Matthews with your suggestions for future training topics or guidance and technical assistance needs.