



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, July 20th, 2016

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As Bus Ridership Plummet, Leading Experts Release Solutions to Fix NYC's Struggling Buses

Based on Report, Transit Advocates Launch Bus Turnaround Campaign to Push for Common-Sense Fixes and Win Faster, More Reliable Bus Service

NEW YORK — Seeking to reverse years of declining bus ridership and worsening bus speeds and reliability, New York's leading transit advocates released a new report today that lays out how the city can fix its underperforming bus system. The advocates also launched the NYC Bus Turnaround Campaign, which will apply pressure to win implementations of the report's recommendations.

Reversing the decline in bus ridership and performance has become urgent as quality indicators have plummeted: from 2002 to 2015, bus ridership fell 16%, despite citywide population growth and record subway ridership. Today's report, "Turnaround: Fixing New York City's Buses," draws best practices from other global cities that have reversed their own declining bus ridership and recommends a series of New York-specific changes that can fix buses in our unique city.

Despite declining ridership, adopting these changes would have an immediate impact on millions of New Yorkers' lives: on an average weekday, New Yorkers take approximately 2.5 million rides on city buses.

Today's report was released by the new NYC Bus Turnaround Coalition, which is composed of Riders Alliance, NYPIRG's Straphangers Campaign, TransitCenter, and Tri-State Transportation Campaign. In light of plummeting ridership and declining quality of bus service, the coalition is calling for City and State agencies to fix the failing NYC bus system by rethinking bus service from the ground up, working with community leaders, bus riders and public officials to rethink our streets, routes and bus operations.

The Metropolitan Transit Authority's (MTA) and Department of Transportation's (DOT) own data support the groups' contention that buses are failing New Yorkers: according to the DOT's "Mobility Report 2016," New York City has seen increases in population, tourism, and employment, adding more than 500,000 jobs since 2010. However, this rapid growth has not been accompanied by increasing bus use—ridership has declined in the same period—and has led to more congested roads, which play a major factor in declining average bus speeds: citywide bus speeds have fallen by more than 2% since 2010; Manhattan south of 60th Street has the worst year-on-year declines in speed, dropping 6% in 2014 and an additional 5% in 2015.

Recommendations included in today's report, which can be read in full here, include

- Redesign NYC's bus network and routes for more frequent and efficient service
In order to run buses that suit New York's current needs, the MTA and the City should redesign bus routes to fit people's modern commuting patterns, remove detours and indirect routes, break up routes that are too long and consider more distinctions in service between busy routes and local access routes.
- Transform how we get on and off the bus
New York should utilize modern technology that can allow riders to tap-and-go as they board and to board at every door instead of lining up at the front. The MTA should also redesign bus interiors to facilitate movement and easy boarding and departing.
- Adopt better methods to keep buses on schedule
The MTA should use real-time information to better control buses in the field, in order to prevent bus bunching and excessive waits. The MTA can also improve bus dispatching to guarantee buses start their routes on time, and can prioritize maintaining headways instead of schedules for buses on heavily traveled routes with frequent service.
- Design streets to prioritize buses
The City should add more dedicated bus lanes, which help buses move through congested areas, and the State should allow additional camera enforcement to make bus lanes effective. The City can also increase use of bus bulbs and boarding islands to help riders, and can time lights and install bus queue jumps to help buses move faster.
- Make using the bus easy and intuitive
The MTA and the City should prioritize improvements that make buses more understandable to riders, including countdown clocks and on-board announcements, and should consider clearly branding different types of routes that serve different purposes, such as subway connectors, neighborhood circulators and long-distance routes.

- Increase transparency about bus performance
In order to improve accountability, the MTA should release bus performance information in ways that riders and analysts can understand and communicate.

Some of these proposed changes can be made by the MTA, some by NYCDOT, and some will require legislation or policy changes that can be made only by elected officials. The new campaign launched today by a coalition of the city's leading transit advocates will work in the coming months and years to win those changes, and to implement these comprehensive recommendations for how to fix buses in New York.

Tabitha Decker, NYC Program Director at TransitCenter, said, "Many of New York's global peers, such as London and Seoul, have turned around bus systems that were in decline, even though these cities have large-scale urban rail too. They have done this by making bus travel fast, frequent, and reliable using tools like smart card based fare payment and the use of real time data to keep buses on schedule."

John Raskin, Executive Director of the Riders Alliance, said, "Buses are the unsung heroes of our transit system, reaching into every part of the city to guarantee that New Yorkers can live in affordable neighborhoods and still have access to jobs and education. But buses are suffering: they're slower than ever, notoriously unreliable and increasingly unpopular. New Yorkers are voting with their Metrocards to abandon the bus, and we need to provide service good enough to convince them to come back."

Gene Russianoff, staff attorney at the NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign, said, "Riders can turnaround New York's notoriously unreliable and slow bus system. What it takes is the same determination and optimism that helped turned around the City's subway system from its greatest liability into to its greatest asset."

Veronica Vanterpool, Executive Director at the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, said, "Select Bus Service has brought significant improvements to ten routes, but the entire bus network needs an overhaul. Congested streets, slow speeds and frustrating service are reasons why ridership is declining on New York City's buses. It's time to turn bus service around from a last transit resort to a preferred transit option."

Public Advocate Letitia James said, "Every New Yorker deserves access to affordable, reliable, and efficient transportation, no matter where they live. Our lagging bus routes have become a source of anxiety and frustration to millions of commuters each day, and strain our already-overcrowded subway system as riders try to avoid taking the bus whenever possible. Rather than shifting the problem from one area of the transit system to the next, we must take concrete steps to improve our bus routes, and make life easier for the millions of New Yorkers who rely on them each day."

Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams said, "Public transportation pumps the lifeblood through the arteries that keep our beautiful city alive. In our ever-evolving and expanding New York City, it is critical to constantly improve our transit system, especially our buses that serve as a lifeline for tens of thousands of riders, including historically underserved 'transit desert' communities across Brooklyn. The Bus Turnaround Campaign report shows that, thanks in large part to 21st century technology, we have the ability to advance beyond a 20th century bus network. Upgrades such as bus queue jumping, real-time tracking, and off-board payment can

no longer be delayed. These reforms will make traveling through our bustling borough better, faster, and safer."

Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer said, "New York City has the largest bus fleet in the United States, but travel times that lag well behind other cities have made buses unappealing. We must work to reduce congestion and speed travel times, and many of this report's proposals -- from creating bus-only lanes to improving fare collection -- should be top priorities."

State Senator Brad Hoylman said, "With nearly 15 million individual rides each week, New York City's bus service is an essential component of our public transportation system. For too many straphangers, however, bus rides have become an exercise in frustration and tempered expectations. A vibrant and growing city demands efficient public transport that includes properly functioning and efficiently run buses. I'm grateful to the Bus Turnaround Campaign for this report, which will serve as a useful road map for legislators, agencies and communities alike as we continue the long-term project of transforming New York's transportation network."

State Senator Liz Krueger said, "Efficient public transit is at the heart of any successful city, and none more so than New York. But if we don't take bold action soon, our success will be stifled by a transportation network stuck in the last century. Buses are a vital lifeline for so many New Yorkers, particularly our elderly and low-income neighbors. The conclusions and recommendations in this report must be taken seriously if we're going to have a bus system that continues to work for our growing population. I thank Riders Alliance and their partners for their invaluable advocacy."

State Senator Jose Peralta said, "If we are to keep the City moving, and moving it appropriately, having an effective and frequent local bus service is essential. Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers have no choice but to take the bus to go to work, to go to school, because they live far from the subway, and this is why it is crucial to have a bus service that is faster and reliable. Currently, buses are very unpopular with New Yorkers. I am sure a modern bus network will not only attract more riders, but it will be a model for other large cities to follow. I want to thank the Riders Alliance, the Straphangers Campaign, and all those involved in this effort to fix and bring the City's bus system into the 21st century."

State Senator Gustavo Rivera said, "Improving the efficiency of our City's bus system is critical for communities, like the ones I represent, who rely heavily on this essential transportation service. I commend the efforts of the Riders Alliance, NYPIRG's Straphangers Campaign, TransitCenter, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign and other leading transit advocates for elaborating this report that puts forth solutions to help our bus system adapt to the constant changes facing our City."

State Senator James Sanders said, "As someone who has taken public transportation for most of my life, I understand how important it is to have fast reliable options to get to work, school and important appointments. Our mass transit system is in need of many improvements, as illustrated by this report, which also outlines some solutions that are innovative and worth exploring. We need to encourage this kind of outside-the-box thinking, and I look forward to being a part of this conversation as we move forward."

State Senator Daniel Squadron said, "For lots of New Yorkers in lots of neighborhoods, the bus is the best option to get around. Anyone who depends on buses knows there's room for

improvement. Thank you to Riders Alliance, NYPIRG's Straphangers Campaign, TransitCenter and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign."

Assembly Member Jim Brennan, Chair of the Committee on Corporations, Authorities and Commissions, said, "Bus service is essential for many New Yorkers. This is especially true for our growing elderly population and people with physical disabilities. The entire New York City bus system needs to be evaluated from the bus routes, to the boarding process and even the buses themselves. This Report proves that there is a lot of work that needs to be done to fix New York City's buses. I join the transit advocates and call on New York City and MTA to learn from the Report and work together to improve the City's bus system."

Assembly Member Michael Blake said, "The 79th Assembly District is a subway desert. We have very few subway stops within our borders, and over half of our district is more than 10-minutes walking distance from the nearest subway stop. That means buses are a critical component of public transportation for our residents. When the bus system fails, our community is left stranded—unable to get to work on time, unable to make doctors' appointments, and unable to move throughout the city easily, efficiently, and affordably. I am proud to back the city's transit advocates in their fight for better, more reliable bus services in The Bronx and throughout New York City. Improving our transportation systems is one way we are #BuildingABetterBronx."

Assemblyman William Colton said, "Public bus transit can make a real difference in improving the ability of people to travel to their necessary destinations without contributing to traffic congestion and the environmental energy issues. Creative planning on how to utilize an efficient and affordable NYC bus system to meet the needs of changing communities is essential if our city is to continue to grow and prosper."

Assembly Member Jeffrey Dinowitz said, "The MTA's Bus Service is an integral part of New York's transportation infrastructure, carrying commuters to and from work and school each day, yet they consistently fail to provide adequate service for the communities they supposedly serve. A particularly egregious example in my district are the constant delays, overcrowding, and long waits that countless commuters on the Bx7 and Bx10 bus lines face every day. I applaud the Riders Alliance for releasing this report uncovering the depths of New York City's failing bus service, and I strongly urge the MTA to take action immediately to remedy the issues highlighted in this report."

Assembly Member Deborah J. Glick said, "While New York City's transit system is remarkable in its reach, it still suffers from inefficiencies. That is most readily seen in our bus service. Better use of new technologies and more rapid response to changing travel patterns would greatly enhance New York riders' experiences."

Assembly Member Richard N. Gottfried said, "Two and a half million New Yorkers rely on MTA buses. But bus service has become even slower and more irregular. I support the new campaign to improve bus service through better planning, improved technology, and traffic management to promote mass transit."

Assembly Member Pamela Harris said, "Having a safe and reliable transportation network is critical to the success of our community. In order to better meet the needs of city residents, we must take another look at our outdated bus system and make the necessary investments to bring it into the 21st century."

Assembly Member Ron Kim said, "I would like to thank the Riders Alliance, NYPIRG's Straphangers Campaign, TransitCenter and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign for organizing this campaign, and for coming together as transit advocates to bring attention to the important issues facing bus riders and services. Our city remains one of the largest and fastest growing in the world, and effective, accessible public transportation has always been an essential part of our identity as New Yorkers. The stark reality of declining bus ridership and an outdated system unable to fully meet riders' needs is clear - the launch of today's initiative is about finding solutions to those problems, and giving voice to the millions of commuters living in New York."

Assembly Member Guillermo Linares said, "Our system of public transportation and its bus service in particular, is the face of this city. We must be able to talk about it with pride", said Assembly Member Guillermo Linares. "I am confident that this program will have a profound impact on the revitalization and development of the New York City bus service."

Assembly Member Felix Ortiz said, "Improved bus service is a top transportation priority. Residents simply have to be able to travel across Brooklyn to hospitals, schools, workplaces and the downtown business district. In my district, we need better service from Sunset Park and Red Hook to downtown, not less. Routes including the B37 have not been fully restored north of the Atlantic Terminal. We need more buses and better buses."

Assembly Member Dan Quart said, "Although buses play a crucial role in helping New Yorkers get around, riders are all too aware that our current bus system does not properly serve our needs. In areas of the city without subway lines, buses are an indispensable link to schools, jobs, doctor's offices, and more. New York City's transit system, and especially our buses, need to be brought into the 21st century. New Yorkers deserve nothing less. A better bus system is possible--let's work together to make it happen!"

Assembly Member Linda B. Rosenthal said, "Bus service is a critical lifeline to thousands of my constituents and thousands more citywide. After years of cuts resulting in unreliable service and reduced ridership that is used to justify more significant cuts, it's crucial that we invest in bus infrastructure to help all New Yorkers get to their destinations safely, accessibly and sustainably."

Assemblywoman Nily Rozic said, "As a representative of a district that does not have a single subway or train station, I know far too well the importance of buses as a means to connect people to jobs, schools, and other day to day obligations. This campaign to address the decline of reliable, efficient bus service will go a long way in identifying troubling similarities across routes that all too often become an added burden no matter how short or long the commute. I look forward to continuing my work with transit riders, advocates, and colleagues in government to ensure investments to improve bus service are being made with all communities in mind."

Assembly Member Rebecca A. Seawright said, "We need critical improvements to the bus service that meet the needs of an increased number of commuters in our urban communities. We need more frequent local buses, bus schedules that are reliable, and a bus system that is efficient and ensures adaptability in the 21st century. Many families, children, and seniors rely on the bus service as their primary means of transportation. New Yorkers need public transportation they can depend on to get to their grocery store, work, or school."

Assemblywoman Latrice Walker said, "Buses are a critical part of New York City's transportation infrastructure. New Yorkers rely on the public bus system to shop, go to work and school, and

get to medical appointments. Slow or inconsistent bus service discourages riders from using the system they depend on. I look forward to working with transportation advocacy groups and the MTA to brainstorm ways to improve the bus system.”

Assemblyman David Weprin said, “Bus transit is integral to the transportation network of New York. Millions of New Yorkers, including elderly and disabled riders, use New York City Buses on a daily basis. Each of these riders deserves to have a transit system that works for them and I am proud to join the Transit Center today as we call for innovative improvements to our public transportation network.”

Council Member Ydanis Rodriguez, Chair of the Transportation Committee, said, “Buses in New York City should be a great way to get around, yet remain mired in traffic and are too unreliable for New Yorkers who can’t afford to wait. The Bus Turnaround Campaign has addressed these issues and more, with common sense ideas to improve service and speed up travel times. With our subways overcrowded and no quick fixes in sight, moving buses faster is one of the best ways to improve transportation in New York City across the board.”

Council Member Daniel Dromm said, “It’s time for a complete overhaul of bus service in New York City. Our city is experiencing unprecedented growth—yet our bus service fails to meet the needs of the many New Yorkers who rely on mass transit to commute to work and school each day. The time to act is now. I commend the Bus Turnaround Campaign for issuing this important report and am pleased to work alongside them to improve bus service in the Big Apple.”

Council Member Dan Garodnick said, “Bus service in New York City has become far too slow and very unreliable. Thanks to the Riders Alliance for setting forth a variety of concrete and achievable ways to help ensure that our buses are faster, more efficient, and easy to use. I look forward to working with them to put these ideas into action.”

Council Member Vincent Gentile said, “The Bus Turnaround Campaign is certainly on the right track towards improving our local bus service. Representing a district with a large population of seniors who mainly rely on bus service for transportation, I have seen firsthand how local bus service is simply not up to par with what our riders deserve. While some tall measures would have to be implemented for bus service to dramatically improve, this action plan is a great start to get the wheels rolling towards efficient and timely bus service. I thank the Transit Center, Riders Alliance, NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign for laying this foundation of ideas that would greatly benefit bus riders citywide.”

Council Member Ben Kallos said, “Buses should run on time and we have transparency tools like Bus Time that should be expanded to help us measure performance and improve service in real time. Time is money and the shorter the commute the better it is for our economy and for the quality of life of every New Yorker.”

Council Member Peter Koo said, “My district in downtown Flushing is a bus transit hub that is constantly growing, yet we recently lost an express bus line that provided critical service from Queens to Manhattan. If we are serious about fixing the myriad of problems with our bus transit system, we need bold, innovative ideas that explore new and creative methods of dealing with the age-old problems of congestion, over-crowding and inadequate infrastructure. I'd like to thank Transit Center and all the transit advocates involved in this report for getting serious about tackling one of our city's largest 'too-big-to-solve' problems.”

Council Member Brad Lander said, "New York City buses are unreliable and slow, pushing those who can to choose other modes of transportation, said Council Member Brad Lander. But many people in less affluent neighborhoods still depend on buses every day to get to work and school, and to see family and friends. As NYC continues to grow, we need to invest in improvements to our bus system – both big and small -- from real-time information at bus stops to implementing reliable and full featured Bus Rapid Transit across the city. Thanks to Riders Alliance, NYPIRG's Straphangers Campaign, TransitCenter and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign for bringing this important call to action."

Council Member Stephen Levin said, "New York City is a world leader in many aspects – speedy, reliable bus service is not one of them. Being able to charge a phone on a bus is great, but investing in a bus transportation system residents can count on is even better."

Council Member Helen Rosenthal said, "I want to thank the Transit Center, the Riders Alliance, the NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign, and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign for this Report to make our public buses more efficient. Policies like all-door boarding, providing real time information at bus stops, and optimizing traffic signals have already proven to be effective on routes with Select Bus Service, like the M86 in my district. I look forward to working with the MTA to see these successful policies implemented more widely on routes across the City."

Council Member Rafael Salamanca said, "Residents deserve safe, fast and reliable bus service, notably in areas that are not serviced by the subway system such as the Lafayette-Boynton area of Soundview in my district. As a result, I'm pleased to see these organizations coming together to help advocate for better bus service throughout New York City."

Council Member Ritchie Torres said, "Bus service across the City has become increasingly unpopular due to slowness, unreliability and lack of access. In transit-starved areas across the City, including many sections of the Bronx, modernized and user-friendly bus service can improve quality-of-life for residents and help spur economic development. These recommendations should receive a closer look and could provide a roadmap for how to improve our City's bus system."

Assemblyman Steven Cymbrowitz said, "Nearly every day, I hear from constituents who are frustrated by the amount of time they spend waiting for buses. Many of these constituents are seniors who want nothing more than to remain a vital part of their community but are discouraged by how poorly the bus system works. I commend this report for outlining the problem effectively and proposing some viable solutions that can improve the quality of life for the millions of New Yorkers who depend on our buses daily."

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The Riders Alliance is a grassroots organization of subway and bus riders, pushing for better service at affordable fares and a stronger public investment in mass transit. Visit us at ridersny.org.

The Straphangers Campaign, a project of the New York Public Interest Research Group, has advocated for New York's public transit system since 1979. <http://www.straphangers.org>

TransitCenter is a foundation committed to improving public transit. transitcenter.org

Tri-State Transportation Campaign is a nonprofit advocacy organization working toward a more balanced, transit-friendly and equitable transportation network in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. <http://www.tstc.org>.

