



The Path to Partnership:

*How Cities and Transit
Systems Can Stop Worrying
and Join Forces*

Introduction

In order to keep and attract riders, transit must be frequent, fast, and reliable. Maintaining frequent, fast, and reliable service in the congested conditions of most American cities requires prioritizing street level transit above automobile traffic, through measures like bus lanes, queue jumps, and signal priority.

Relative to large capital projects, bus priority measures provide immediate improvements in travel time and reliability at a small fraction of the cost, and can be accomplished overnight with the right combination of paint, light duty street installations, and enforcement. The projects profiled in this study, including a bus lane in Everett, MA, New York City's Select Bus Service, and Seattle's Rapid Ride have seen travel time savings of 10-30%.

While on-street transit improvements can be done quickly and cheaply, they aren't necessarily easy to accomplish. Getting them done usually requires two things:

- Political will and leadership from mayors, transit system managers and board members, and other leaders who must be willing to defend potentially controversial street and service changes like removing on-street parking spaces for a bus lane, or eliminating bus stops that are too close together.
- Structuring transit agencies and city street agencies to more quickly and effectively deliver on-street transit projects. This may mean forging new relationships and decision-making processes, gathering new data, hiring for different skills, and figuring out new ways to prioritize projects.



Transit street projects can be tough to get done when there's no history of doing them. Streets agencies and transit agencies are often in separate organizations that report to different levels of government. Even where agencies answer to the same elected official, there may not be a strong tradition of partnership.

In regions that have successfully prioritized transit on the street, agencies worked together to identify where street improvements would do the most good for transit, and what kinds of improvements were most needed. City engineers had to get used to seeing transit operations staff in project design meetings, and agencies had to iron out agreements defining who would pay for bus-stop improvements and bus lane thermoplastic. A successful partnership is one where both agencies commit to prioritizing transit on streets, work together to define projects using shared data and metrics, develop and fund an ongoing spot improvement program, and institutionalize their collaboration with regular meetings.

This research brief profiles efforts in six cities to build collaboration between street and transit agencies on bus priority projects. The brief seeks to understand how agencies can develop partnerships that set the table for transit in cities. What do successful collaborations look like and what practices lead to success? The research builds from a review of existing literature, and is centered on interviews with thirteen staff from ten agencies in six cities: Seattle, Portland, Denver, Chicago, New York, and Boston. All of these have some experience managing collaboration between city government and transit agency.

The report lays out a path to partnership based on the stories of the six cities. No one city followed all the steps, and some find themselves stuck halfway or circling back to find surer footing. The goal of the brief is for agencies and advocates to be able to identify where their city is along the path and from there be able to see next steps to strengthen the relationship. The brief first lays out the projects in each city that were discussed in interviews and then charts the path to partnership. The last section addresses some of the ongoing challenges agencies face in successful partnerships.



3RD AVENUE, SEATTLE, WA

Recommendations: The Path to Partnership

For agencies that are just starting collaboration on a transit priority project:

TRANSIT AGENCIES:

- Use data to identify top targets for projects (i.e. areas where many transit riders are delayed by traffic)
- Be opportunistic and suggest ways to insert transit priority into other projects (e.g. bridge replacements, street repavings)

CITY AGENCIES:

- Just try it! A pilot bus lane can be low-cost and high-return
- Develop ways to deliver small and medium-sized projects quickly, perhaps by reorganizing to bring project managers and planners together or identifying ways to use existing crews
- Build support for transit priority among leadership, project managers, engineers, and maintenance crews



For agencies that have committed to prioritizing transit and are preparing to work on their first few projects:

BOTH AGENCIES:

- Identify ways bus priority supports other goals like service expansion or are cheaper alternatives to current ideas, like streetcars
- Formalize conversations with a project agreement outlining responsibility for funding operations, maintenance, and capital improvements

CITY AGENCIES:

- Dedicate staff to transit, and grow in-house transit capacity, ideally by bringing on staff with experience at the local transit agency



For agencies that want to go beyond individual transit projects and develop ongoing improvement programs:

BOTH AGENCIES:

- Prioritize projects jointly with shared metrics
- Develop branding for an improved route network

CITY AGENCIES:

- Build a spot improvement program to work with the transit agency on a pipeline of ongoing small projects

For agencies that want to develop even closer partnerships:

BOTH AGENCIES:

- Establish regular coordination meetings including agency leadership
- Develop a communications strategy for joint projects and involve communications staff in coordination meetings and early on projects

- Clearly define roles and responsibilities for different project components, particularly ongoing operations and maintenance funding

CITY AGENCIES:

- Develop a transit plan with input from the transit agency(ies) operating in the city



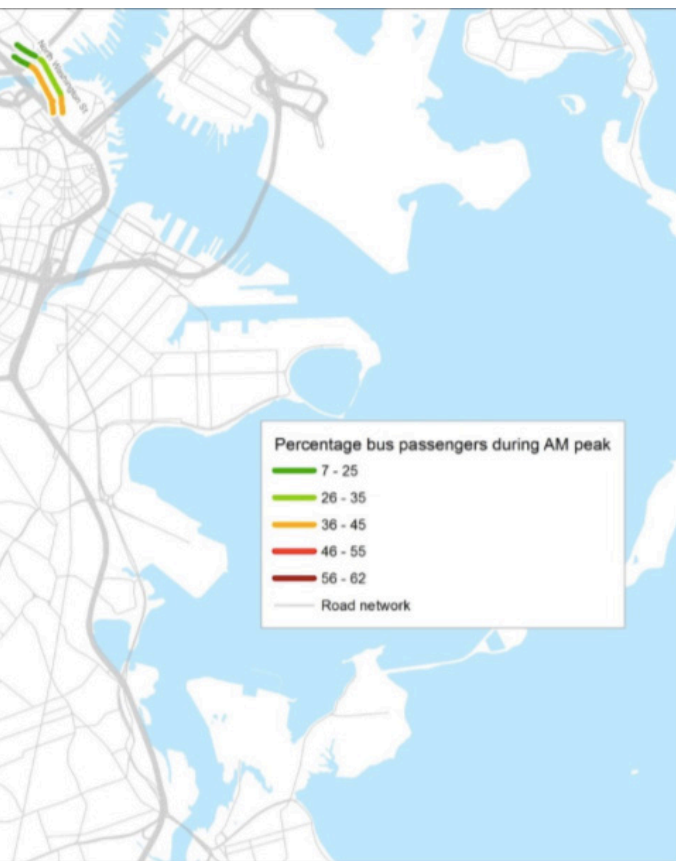


FIGURE 1. MASSDOT’S HIGH CONGESTION-HIGH RIDERSHIP CORRIDORS

In Boston, MassDOT, which is responsible for long-range planning for the MBTA, and the Central Transportation Planning Staff, Boston’s metropolitan planning organization, used data to identify the street segments that were the most promising candidates for bus lanes based on passenger delay hours and the share of bus riders in the corridor during peak hours. In 2016, they ranked street segments rather than routes in order to equally weight corridors with a single busy route and corridors with many lower-ridership routes (See Figure 1). The analysis has helped to change the conversation on bus priority in the region. The City of Boston ran a successful two-day bus lane pilot in December 2017 on Washington Street between Roslindale Village and Forest Hills station, one of the identified corridors, and is running a longer pilot in May 2018. The analysis also led to the addition of a bus lane in plans for the replacement of the North Washington Street Bridge, while a local foundation funded two additional bus lane pilots on Mt Auburn Street in Watertown and Cambridge and on Massachusetts Avenue in Arlington.

Like the MassDOT/CTPS study, the Regional Transportation District (RTD) in metro Denver completed a Bus Network Analysis for Transit Priority, identifying locations across the District that experience significant levels of delay and carry large passenger loads. It is now working with the cities of Denver, Aurora and Boulder to select specific treatments for corridors that were chosen according to the report findings. The Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) is currently producing a report on the city’s bus “slow zones.” CTA provided funding for CDOT to hire consultants to develop the report, which is being supervised by the city’s traffic engineers.

Sometimes the best way to start a conversation on bus lanes is to insert them into a project that is already happening. One of the street segments identified in MassDOT’s study is on a bridge already slated for replacement. MassDOT’s long range transportation planners convinced their colleagues in other MassDOT departments and with the city of Boston to add an inbound bus lane to plans for the North Washington Street Bridge, which will begin construction in Spring 2018. Similarly, King County Metro staff informally monitor when Seattle-area municipalities are planning big street repaving projects along major bus corridors and suggest improvements that can be added in to help transit.

Cities can have immediate impact on transit speed and reliability by trying out a bus lane—and all it takes to create a pilot transit lane are traffic cones, parking enforcement officers and an outreach strategy.

Even if transit agencies aren't actively seeking partnerships, they will use a bus lane if a city builds one. No place proves this point better than Everett, MA. As the only city bordering Boston without rapid transit, and separated from the city by water, Everett has very high ridership on the bus routes that cross the bridges into the city. It worked with MassDOT to produce the Everett Transit Action Plan, which identified peak-hour bus lanes on Broadway as low-hanging fruit for improving transit in the city. Eager to take action, Everett transportation planner Jay Monty met with the MBTA in the fall of 2016. He said the MBTA's response was simple: "We need a lane width of 11 feet [for buses], and if you give it to us, we'll use it." The city had also hoped for increased frequency but the MBTA did not have more buses to dedicate to the route. The agency agreed to explore the possibility that travel time savings could free up time for another trip, but that required data on how much time the route could save. The two agencies agreed to hold a week-long pilot to gather data in December 2016. Everett's Department of Public Works set out cones demarcating the lane and two parking enforcement officers policed it. The pilot went so well that in the middle of the week, just three days into the pilot, Mayor Carlo DeMaria decided the lane should be made permanent, leading to the Boston region's first bus lane. The bus lane was finally painted, rather than defined primarily by cones, in fall 2017. Travel times have been reduced 20-30% along the corridor and the MBTA is looking at consolidating routes to improve frequency on the corridor.

Everett's example shows the three key ingredients a city street department needs to implement bus priority effectively: the ability to deliver small and mid-size street design projects effectively and leadership commitment to transit which leads to an organization-wide understanding of the need for bus priority. In larger cities, making these changes can mean reorganizing departments and working to change organizational cultures, all of which requires strong leadership.

Delivering small and mid-size street design projects effectively can mean reorganizing internally or developing new procedures to accommodate projects too big to do entirely in-house and too small for a major contract. Portland's Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) recently reorganized to put planning, policy, and project delivery under the same group. During our interview, TriMet's Strategic Planning Coordinator Eric Hesse brought up PBOT's recent restructuring as a good model for the way the agencies were developing ability to collaborate, ensuring that project managers are involved in the planning process from the beginning. In smaller agencies, like Everett, this kind of coordination may not require restructuring, as a project team may simply be the department staff, but even small agencies need leadership to instill a transit mindset.



"The single most important ingredient for building a path to partnership is leadership alignment—that is, agreement among leaders at the city and transit agency that buses need priority on the street, and that collaboration is required to make it happen."



UPPER BROADWAY, EVERETT, MA

Many street improvements for transit fall into a contracting gray area that may be too big for an in-house team but too small for a contract. People for Bikes' 2016 report *Quick Builds for Better Streets: A New Project Delivery Model for U.S. Cities* provides a useful summary of ways cities have found ways to improve streets, including Denver's use of an in-house construction coordinator to manage small contractors for bike lanes and Seattle's use of DOT maintenance crews for street improvement projects, which reduces project delays related to contracting.

The single most important ingredient for building a path to partnership is leadership alignment—that is, agreement among leaders at the city and transit agency that buses need priority on the street, and that collaboration is required to make it happen. Strong leadership is particularly important within streets agencies, which may have no history of working on transit projects. Leadership requires not only beginning the conversation with the partner agency but also leading a conversation within the organization, developing the internal capacity for collaboration.

In Denver, strong leadership came from the 2014 elevation of Crissy Fanganello as the first head of the new Transportation and Mobility Division at the Department of Public Works. Fanganello had been the principal planner for Denver's Strategic Transportation Plan in 2008. Her experience in the city, existing relationships with RTD, and willingness to innovate combined with the creation of a new division to spark culture change within the agency.

In Chicago, all three of the city's planned or implemented bus priority projects occurred under Gabe Klein's tenure at the Chicago Department of Transportation. New York City Department of Transportation had similarly inspirational leadership in Janette Sadik-Khan when, working with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, transformed a meandering bus rapid transit study into implementation of Select Bus Service. Select Bus Service's ability to survive Sadik-Khan's departure and continue to add routes is the result of joint MTA/NYCDOT efforts made to move beyond individual projects and establish a coherent, ongoing program.

Leadership commitment to prioritizing transit is essential to getting a project started, and agency leaders need to continually stress that such projects require collaboration, so that message is understood at all levels of the agency. Traffic engineers can't be confused when transit agency staff are in the room on a street design project. Staff should know where bus/street-related requests or project ideas should enter the agency. Project managers need to know that if they are having trouble reaching agreement in a collaborative project, their supervisors will push for the project to continue and seek accommodation rather than abandon the effort.

2. From Idea to Project

- Once cities begin transit-priority projects, they need to dedicate staff to transit planning.
- Hiring staff from the transit agency can help to jumpstart relationship building, but agencies have also trained current staff on service planning and transit priority.

Once streets agencies and transit agencies agree in principle that they should work together to speed up surface transit, the next step is identifying a specific project or set of projects to work on. Across all the cities interviewed, nearly every collaboration began informally, with ad hoc communication between the transit agency and the streets department about congestion issues.

But working together on a specific transit project usually requires some level of formalization, such as executing joint contracts with consultants or the Federal Transit Administration; for example, the transit agency might use FTA grant funds to pay the city (which may not be eligible to receive grants from the FTA itself) to make street improvements. In three of the cities we spoke with, the shift from idea to concrete project began during the wave of streetcar projects in the early 2000s. In Chicago and New York, it came from a desire to try bus rapid transit later in the 2000s.

In Seattle, Denver, and Portland, city staff in particular noted that the wake-up call for bus priority in their cities came during planning for streetcars and light rail in the early 2000s. The discussions around the rail projects brought up the question of dedicated lanes for transit. Decisionmakers and the public could see the performance difference dedicated space made, even if it was just in computer model form. As Andrew Glass Hastings of Seattle DOT put it, “People were like, well, we are not going to build light rail everywhere—and we’ve got a lot of buses, and corridors with a huge amount of bus service on them—so let’s dedicate lanes to buses as well.”



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NACTO TRANSIT ACCELERATOR WORKSHOP, CAMBRIDGE, MA

While Seattle and Portland built their streetcars, Denver got a similar benefit from a streetcar project that was never completed. The 2010 Colfax Streetcar Feasibility Study showed that priority treatments were key to speed and reliability, and it marked the first time the City of Denver, rather than RTD, took the lead on a transit capital project. There was a steep learning curve, but it served to build staff capacity in transit. Both staff and city council members realized that the priority treatments being explored on Colfax could be applied to key bus routes throughout the city. The nearly completed Denver Moves Transit Plan arose from such insights, while the Colfax corridor secured \$55 million in general obligation bond revenue in November 2017 to begin implementation of bus priority measures, potentially including center-running bus lanes, on East Colfax. The project could open as early as 2020.

In Portland, the intergovernmental agreement developed for the streetcar (which is owned by the city but operated by TriMet) may form the basis for future agreements on other corridors, particularly in terms of funding responsibilities. Under the streetcar agreement, TriMet’s share of streetcar expenses increases based on “growth triggers” of ridership and development. If the city develops densely around the corridor and makes improvements to the street to attract riders, it reaps the reward of a lowered share of streetcar operating costs. As they begin work on the Enhanced Transit Corridors plan, PBOT and TriMet are exploring using a similar model, where reliability or ridership improvements caused by city actions could trigger increased service on the corridor.

Chicago’s first bus collaboration project was a part of Mayor Emanuel’s \$7 billion infrastructure plan in 2012. News media at the time linked it to BRT projects in Mexico City and elsewhere, though it was a far more incremental project. As in Everett, the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) and Chicago Transit Authority started their collaboration on bus priority on a high ridership route where bus riders made up the majority of road users at peak hour. The “Jeffery Jump” project (along Jeffery Boulevard) included peak-hour bus lanes taken from parking, a queue jump, and transit signal priority as an upgrade to an existing limited service.

Following the success of the Jump, each agency took the lead on a different bus priority project with the other serving as the primary stakeholder. CTA began work on BRT on Ashland Avenue while CDOT worked on LoopLink, a set of priority treatments for downtown that had also been mentioned in Mayor Emanuel’s infrastructure plan. The Ashland concept was ultimately withdrawn in the face of political opposition. CTA staff noted that bus riders weren’t as big a share of traffic along Ashland as they were on Jeffrey, which may have made the politics harder. LoopLink was successful and opened at the end of 2015.

Bus priority in Chicago is a clear example of the importance of leadership and the need to build a program rather than just a set of projects. All three major bus priority projects in Chicago—Jeffery Jump, LoopLink, and the Ashland BRT—were initiated while Gabe Klein led CDOT. Since his departure, the agencies are working on a more incremental approach to Ashland with the restoration of the Ashland express bus and a joint project identifying bus slow zones, but no new bus priority projects have been announced. In part, this is because the projects never became part of a full program, one in which the two agencies jointly identified a pipeline of projects and set priorities together.

Delivering these projects often requires dedicated staff. To support its growing involvement with transit, Seattle DOT has assembled a Transit and Mobility division, which includes 13 staff working in “transit corridors” and “transit service and strategy” units (the entire division, which also handles parking and other mobility policy, includes 51 staff). Some of the new hires had worked for King County Metro Transit, bringing transit expertise in-house. Seattle DOT’s transit team is building expertise in service planning, identifying transit spot improvements, and analyzing the performance of existing service. Building internal transit capacity in the street department allows it to test ideas and develop arguments for new service without having to rely on King County planners. Andrew Glass Hastings, Seattle DOT’s director of Transit and Mobility, notes that it is a difference of priority. Seattle DOT’s planners put the needs of the city first and so may see different opportunities than the planners who have to look at all of King County. Bus priority projects have become a priority for SDOT’s maintenance crews as well, allowing SDOT’s planners to utilize their own maintenance workers on their growing set of projects. The internal crew speeds implementation by reducing the need to engage contractors. On a smaller scale, Denver Public Works has also now been able to shift one planner to transit work full time and hire a new dedicated transit planner to manage the Denver Moves Transit plan.

When city streets agencies hire or develop internal transit expertise, they also create clear points of contact for their transit agency counterparts, which helps relationship-building. In addition to regular monthly meetings on service and spot improvements, planners in Seattle DOT’s transit division make a point of having monthly coffees or lunches with King County Metro service planners. Denver’s transit planners interact with RTD daily on multiple projects, building trust. PBOT’s most recent collaboration with TriMet, the Enhanced Transit Corridors Plan, developed when agency leadership observed Seattle’s close collaboration with King County Metro and wanted to emulate it. The Enhanced Transit Corridors Plan is an effort to identify sites for improvement and builds off work done on a single street project, the Division Street Transit Corridor. The Portland BOT and TriMet project managers for the Enhanced Transit Corridors Plan previously worked together on the Division Street project and Growing Transit Communities, a plan for improving pedestrian and bicycle access to 3 bus lines.

“PBOT’s most recent collaboration with TriMet, the Enhanced Transit Corridors Plan, developed when agency leadership observed Seattle’s close collaboration with King County Metro and wanted to emulate it.”



SW 5th &
Taylor
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Bus

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SW Taylor ST

19 VIA 28TH AVE

3051

TRIMET

3111

1019 Tri-KINK

SEATTLE:

2006: Voter approval of Bridging the Gap Levy in Seattle and Transit Now funding in King County. Included funding for "speed and reliability" improvements and first Rapid Ride frequent bus corridors.

2007: Formation of "transit program" within Office of Policy and Planning at Seattle DOT. Seattle Streetcar opens, owned by the city and operated by King County Metro.

2012: Seattle City Council adopts Transit Master Plan.

2014: Proposition 1 passes in Seattle in November, funding the Seattle Transportation Benefit District (STBD) and allowing the city to purchase bus service from Metro.

2015: Move Seattle levy passes, doubling the size of the spot improvement program. Seattle DOT's "transit program" expands to staff the STBD and becomes a division within SDOT.

2017: King County Metro publishes its long-range transportation plan, Metro CONNECTS. The plan includes Seattle's RapidRide network from the city transit plan.

Seattle DOT and King County Metro develop a streamlined master agreement for future Rapid Ride Routes.

Seattle DOT and King County begin a facilitated process to learn more about each others' business lines and facilitate collaboration.

PORTLAND:

2001: Portland Streetcar opens, owned by the city and operated by TriMet.

2014: Work began on the Division Transit Project, developing transit and street improvements for Division and Powell Streets.

2015-2017: Growing Transit Communities Plan developed and adopted by City Council, focused on improving access to transit on corridors being upgraded to frequent service.

2017: PBOT begins Enhanced Transit Corridors project, focused on improving speed and reliability on existing frequent transit networks through street improvements.

Timeline of C in Six Cities

EVERETT, MA:

2015: MassDOT's Everett Transit Action Plan begins.

2016: Pilot Broadway bus lane opens.

2016: Broadway bus lane made permanent with paint and signs.

DENVER:

2010: Streetcar Feasibility Study completed for Colfax Avenue.

2012-2017: Denver Public Works leads Alternatives Analysis for transit improvement on East Colfax Avenue resulting in BRT recommendation.

2015: RTD conducts study to identify locations with significant delay and high ridership.

2016: Denver Moves Transit planning process begins. NACTO and TransitCenter host a Transit Program Accelerator workshop focused on Broadway and Lincoln bus lanes.

2017: Broadway and Lincoln bus lanes shifted to 24/7 operation. RTD completes next steps for Potential Transit Priority treatments for five corridors.

NEW YORK:

2004: Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and NYC Dept of Transportation announce intent to work jointly on a New York application of bus rapid transit.

2006-2007: New leadership at MTA and NYCDOT gear the joint program to project delivery.

2008: First Select Bus Service (SBS) route opens on Fordham Road in the Bronx. Transit group established within NYC DOT traffic operations division.

2010: 16 Phase II Select Bus routes selected and publicized. Select Bus project spanning 125 city blocks launched on Manhattan's East Side.

2013: Five SBS routes operational; Select Bus is lauded by candidates seeking to replace Mayor Bloomberg, including eventual victor Bill de Blasio.

2016: Although headline enmity between Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo increases, the working relationship between the state-controlled Metropolitan Transportation Authority and NYC Dept of Transportation continues to deliver Select Bus projects.

2017: Bus Forward plan released, identifying a third phase of 21 new SBS routes to be implemented over 10 years, as well as spot and other improvements not on SBS corridors.

Collaboration

CHICAGO:

2012: "Jeffery Jump" unveiled, featuring a queue jump and peak hour bus lanes.

2013: CTA proposes bus rapid transit on Ashland Avenue while CDOT plans the Loop Link bus priority in downtown.

2015: LoopLink bus lanes and stops open.

2017: CTA-CDOT collaboration on bus slow zone report.

3. Turning Projects into Programs

- A funding stream and continued political will should be directed into an ongoing program of transit priority projects, with a project pipeline developed by the agencies together and implemented by the city.
- Planners from both the city and transit operator can identify problem areas and prioritize them together in a spot improvement program.
- Branded routes can also serve as an ongoing priority program, and spot improvements and branded routes are not mutually exclusive.

As cities and transit systems continue to collaborate on bus priority, some evolve from working on one-off projects to developing ongoing programs in which agencies jointly set priorities, develop shared metrics, and create a pipeline of projects. All of the agencies surveyed said they had begun work on spot improvement programs that identify and address bus slow zones. Agencies in Seattle and New York have also developed sets of branded bus corridor improvement projects.

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Spot improvement programs identify “slow zones” where bus performance could be improved through street interventions and develop and implement projects to address them. They are generally housed in city streets agencies but include transit agencies at every step of the process: Identifying and prioritizing spots, workshoping an intervention project, and monitoring and improving. Spot improvement programs can involve transit agency commitments to improve service with the time and/or money saved from the improvements, contingent on availability of funds, labor, and vehicles.

Transit Priority

DEDICATED LANES (ALL

QUEUE JUMP

- A short dedicated lane that allows buses to jump intersections

TRANSIT ONLY APERTURE

- Redirects/prohibits general traffic from a transit route that is an intersection

ISLAND STATIONS

- Places the transit station protected bike lane to reduce

CURB EXTENSIONS

- Provides more space for passengers and prevents the bus from having to stop.

ALL DOOR BOARDING

- Speeds dwell time

FAR SIDE BUS STOPS

- Minimize intersection of bus and passenger paths to cross behind bus, improving visibility for

BUS STOP CONSOLIDATION

- Reduces stop-related delays

TRANSIT SIGNAL PRIORITY

- Allows communication between transit signals to alter signal timing during exclusive phase.

Toolbox

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Typically, transit managers identify slow zones in a report or through an ongoing monitoring program. Prioritizing and addressing them, however, is a joint effort. Transit and streets agencies need to agree on a toolbox of priority treatments and metrics to determine which projects to prioritize and which treatments to apply to each location.

The agencies and departments we interviewed used a variety of different metrics to determine how to prioritize projects, including ridership, reliability (particularly the difference between peak and off-peak bus speeds), and demographic equity (i.e. race, income, no-vehicle households, and English-language proficiency in surrounding neighborhoods). Some prioritize spot improvements based on their frequent service networks, where “frequent” is usually defined as bus service every 15 minutes, or in accordance with their transit plans.

Cities reported nuanced views on the role of politics in bus priority. Projects with political support may move to the front of the implementation queue, and agencies are excited about the rising voices of bus advocates in some cities as a push to move more quickly on these projects. On the other hand, priority based on metrics, rather than politics, ensures that projects go to areas of highest need. Political pressures may also cause pressure to spread projects across a city or region, resulting in areas with pressing needs remaining underserved.

As part of its Enhanced Transit Corridors Plan, the Portland Bureau of Transportation has developed a transit toolbox (which includes the interventions in the sidebar) and identified three priority corridors for intervention. PBOT and TriMet are now developing a workshop process to determine which interventions make sense on the three corridors and to build support for those interventions across the agencies.

The workshops are modeled on those carried out for an earlier project known as the Division corridor. Traffic engineers and bike, pedestrian, and disability planners from the Portland Bureau of Transportation sat down with service planners and operations workers from TriMet, along with the likely project managers for implementation from each agency. They reviewed the street “roll plan” (a detailed map of the corridor), the set of toolbox measures, and a screen with the Google Street View of the segment. Over the course of four hours, they attempted to identify which toolbox improvements make sense for the corridor and develop a “5% design” for the project, or at least identify the data and analyses needed to get to that point. Once this process is carried out for each of the three corridors, they will be able to identify which projects have the highest potential return on investment. That information, combined with prioritization measures like ridership, equity, and geographic coverage, will be used to organize the pipeline of projects for which funding will be sought. The agencies hope this kind of joint agency workshop will serve as a regional model for how to develop spot improvement projects.

Ideally, an ongoing spot improvement program will include dedicated funding and in-house crews working each day to improve bus service. Seattle’s spot improvement program began after King County and Seattle successfully went to voters for transit funding. In 2006, King County approved its “Transit Now” funding measure, which included a “speed and reliability” partnership program in which King County Metro committed to add 5,000 transit service hours to each route that served a corridor if a city made changes that improved bus travel times at least 10% on that corridor. That same year, Seattle voters passed the “Bridging the Gap” levy to fund street improvement and repair. Some of these funds went toward spot improvements that would trigger King County’s “speed and reliability” program for nine routes in three corridors, gaining 45,000 transit service hours.

The collaboration on corridor improvements became the spot improvement program in 2008. The staff working on spot improvements at the Seattle DOT also became the “transit program” within the department’s Office of Policy and Planning.

Seattle DOT’s transit expertise continued to grow. In 2014, Seattle voters agreed to raise the city sales tax and increase vehicle license fees, providing \$50 million annually for the city to purchase increased service on King County Metro. The next year, city voters approved the “Levy to Move Seattle,” which doubled the budget of the Spot Improvement Program. These two voter-approved measures led to the creation of the Transit and Mobility division within Seattle DOT and a growth in in-house expertise.

In its current form, both Metro and Seattle DOT identify potential spot improvements. Spots are prioritized based on the city’s transit master plan and the Rapid Ride corridors. Rapid Ride is King County Metro’s branded corridor network discussed below. The spot improvement program provides a single point of entry for improvement requests. Unlike transit agencies in other cities, Metro does not have to apply or pay for permits. Instead Metro and city engineers sit down together and work through improvements, following a process that includes problem definition, data, and discussion of potential options. Some are Metro-funded, others are split 50-50 with the city, and city crews do the work.

Agencies can also collaborate on a branded set of corridor projects, like the King County Metro Rapid Ride or the MTA Select Bus Service. These types of BRT-lite projects provide an umbrella for bus improvements along specific corridors. Seattle’s Rapid Ride first appeared in the 2006 Transit Now ballot initiative, which led to early partnerships between the city and King County Metro. The six Rapid Rides operate both within and outside of Seattle, providing frequent transit routes connecting major hubs.





RAPID RIDE ANNOUNCEMENT, SEATTLE, WA

Select Bus Service (SBS) in New York arose from a joint New York City DOT/MTA study begun in 2004 with funding from New York State DOT exploring bus rapid transit in New York. Once Mayor Bloomberg had brought on an implementation-minded transportation commissioner (Janette Sadik-Khan) the program took a pragmatic turn and began to bear fruit. The city and MTA jointly identified five initial corridors which were implemented between 2008 and 2013. In a second phase, the collaboration identified an additional 16 corridors, and implementation of those began in 2013. As of early 2018, there were 15 SBS routes implemented, with another 21 now planned as part of NYC DOT's 2017 Bus Forward plan. The routes are treated with bus lanes, off-board fare payment, and transit signal priority as well as a distinctive branding, though only a few routes have all four treatments.

As these branded corridor projects become routinized and staff relationships are built up, these programs can often become points of entry for other agency collaborations. For example, the Bus Forward plan put out by NYC DOT in 2017 foresees bus priority improvements occurring off of Select Bus Service corridors. Similarly, Seattle and King County spent the summer of 2017 developing a partnership agreement for the RapidRide network outlining agency funding responsibilities for bus operations as well as different capital expenses. This process was necessary so that the agencies had a common starting point as they enter line by line negotiations for seven additional RapidRide lines to be delivered in Seattle by 2024.



86TH ST. SELECT BUS SERVICE, NEW YORK CITY

In 2017, SDOT and Metro also began an effort to improve collaboration and coordination at all levels of both organizations. The service planning team at Seattle DOT often receives requests from King County Metro that should go to other units. The two agencies hired a professional facilitator to assess their relationship and help create more structured coordination and decision-making processes.

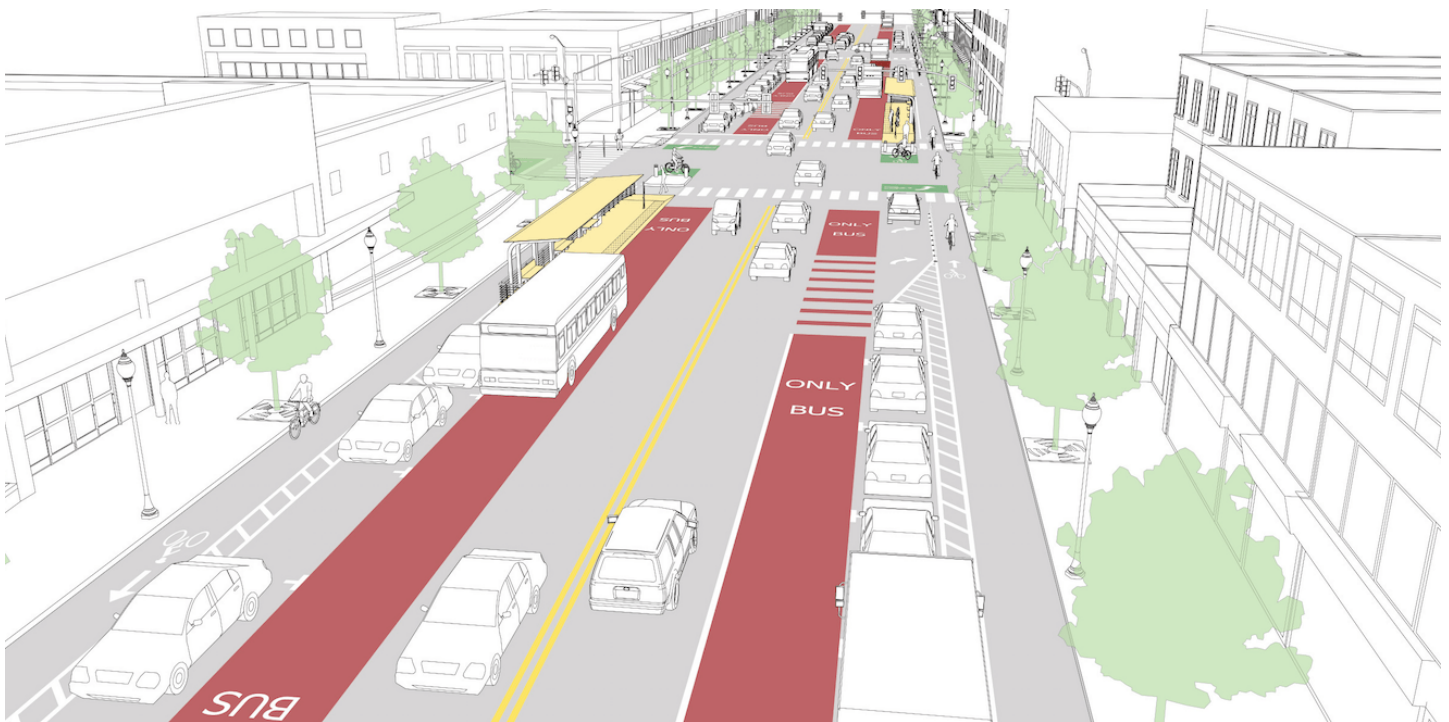
Not every agency has capacity to develop ongoing bus priority programs. Small cities may not need an ongoing program because there are a limited number of potential sites and corridors to address. For larger agencies, funding constraints and competing agency priorities may limit the shift. For example, Chicago's bus slow zones report is envisioned as a stand alone report rather than an ongoing program, in part because the city's main priority for scheduling work crews is street repaving and neither CDOT nor CTA have the staff capacity to create a separate queue of spot improvement projects for buses. Mayor Emanuel, who has jurisdiction over both CDOT and CTA, has not called for further bus priority projects. Transitioning from projects to ongoing programs is the sticking point for many agencies because it requires having the leadership, staff time and resources to change internal processes to adapt to the needs of another agency.

NACTO Provides Growing Support for Transit Partnerships

In the last two years, the National Association of City Transportation Officials has released several resources and created some programs to help cities understand how to prioritize transit.

- In 2016, the organization released the Transit Street Design Guide. NACTO also opened membership to transit agencies in 2016.
- In 2017, it organized three "Transit Accelerator" workshops in Oakland; Cambridge, Mass.; and Indianapolis that brought together city and transit staff in the same room to work together on a corridor that needed transit priority improvements.
- Also in 2017, NACTO released "Better Boarding, Better Buses" on better bus boarding practices that are useful in speeding up urban buses.
- In 2018, NACTO wrote "The Structure of Success", which highlights ways city transportation agencies have restructured themselves to prioritize transit.

NACTO is a useful resource, but there's no need for a third party to convene a workshop in your own city – you can just do it!



TRANSIT-PRIORITY STREET, NACTO DESIGN GUIDE



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4. Turning Programs into Partnerships

- As the partnership strengthens, the ongoing focus is on coordinating the various efforts and communicating the partnership effectively both in-house and to the public.
- The partners set regular meetings, develop long range plans in close collaboration, and should work to develop a joint communication strategy.

Spot improvement programs and increasing bus service quality and frequency are the two main ways cities and transit agencies work together to improve transit. Some agencies are working to build ongoing partnerships marked by joint planning, regular interagency meetings, and coordinated communications.

A city government transit plan has a far greater chance of being implemented if conducted in partnership with the transit agency. The Denver Moves Transit plan, for example, is a city-led project, but RTD not only provides data to inform the planning but also participates in process mapping sessions with the city to help define how the city might purchase additional transit service. As part of the discussions, RTD has raised important questions about the implications of service increases. For example, new service may require capital investments such as new buses and garages. Delineating who is responsible for these investments now will ease plan implementation later. RTD's liaison for the Denver Moves Transit plan, Lacy Bell, notes that while coordination takes a long time, "we're still able to accomplish more with the municipalities taking on a bigger role."

Many of the cities interviewed highlighted the importance of regular interagency coordination meetings. These are a place to monitor the status of ongoing projects as well as to raise issues that may have come into one agency desk because of an existing staff relationship but would be more appropriately handled elsewhere. Seattle holds monthly meetings between King County Metro and the Seattle DOT Transit and Mobility Division. The Seattle meetings actually comprise an "informal" meeting between the two agency heads and a more formal meeting with both staff and leadership present. Staff then also meet on their own to discuss specific issues in more detail.

Denver and RTD have regular staff level meetings where 15-20 planners, engineers, and project managers from both agencies meet for roughly 90 minutes. On the Denver Public Works side, there are transportation planners, project managers, traffic engineers, multimodal engineers, and staff focused on parking and right-of-way service. RTD brings service planners, project managers, long range planners, transit-oriented-development planners, and engineers. As Denver does not have a formal spot improvement program, the meetings serve as the place for agencies to raise issues and make requests of each other, which then may grow into projects.



5. Challenges

Communications and meeting regional equity goals have proven challenging for agencies who have embarked upon partnerships.

Neither city DOTs nor transit agencies have historically prioritized external communications, which can cause difficulty within city-transit partnerships. Agency staff said it could be confusing to publicize these partnerships both to transit boards and the public, and frustrating when the public sees lack of coordination between the agencies. One staffer said it could be difficult even to get both agencies' logos on a press release about new service. Another said they had not mentioned an on-street bus priority project (which included bus stop consolidation and on-street bus lanes) to the agency board of directors since none of the changes required board approval. Members of the public then began raising concerns about the stop consolidation. Not only was the board caught off guard by the backlash, but staff missed an opportunity to educate the board about their partnership with city staff. Agency employees noted that communications staff are not usually in the room for joint meetings. Adding them into the process sooner could help address some of these coordination needs, and perhaps develop a communication plan for projects from the beginning.

One difficulty as streets agencies begin to partner more closely with regional transit agencies is ensuring that involvement in one location does not hamper the transit agency's ability to make needed service improvements elsewhere, particularly in lower income jurisdictions that may not have the capacity to advocate, self-tax, or hire transit expertise. In interviews, transit agency staff warned that "quid-pro-quo" type agreements, where cities can secure more frequent service through streets improvements, could lead to inequities between cities. On the other hand, staff at streets agencies argued that street improvements are a critical way to have "skin in the game" with transit agencies when asking for more service. Negotiating this balance becomes more difficult the stronger individual partnerships become.

"One difficulty as streets agencies begin to partner more closely with regional transit agencies is ensuring that involvement in one location does not hamper the transit agency's ability to make needed service improvements elsewhere."

The MBTA and MassDOT have provided planning capacity to city neighborhoods and smaller municipalities, like Everett, with lower-income populations that could benefit from improved transit but may not have the resources to advocate for it on their own. The MassDOT planning study identified a bus lane as low-hanging fruit, but Everett's transportation planner also wanted additional frequency. The MBTA agreed to add frequency if the bus lane saved enough time to free up another trip, using the same amount of capital to provide more service. Other transit agencies have discussed dedicating staff to particular areas to proactively discuss improvements or target their planning efforts to communities most in need. In Seattle, King County Metro is aware that high housing prices in Seattle are driving low-income populations out of the city to cheaper cities in the south of the county. These cities are increasingly in need of greater transit service, but lack Seattle's ability to fund and staff a dedicated transit division. One possible solution might be to dedicate transit agency staff to focus on these cities. These staff could identify opportunities to incorporate transit priority into other city projects like repaving, essentially triggering a project that may be the first step in an ongoing partnership. The difficulty is finding the right mix of support such that the cities are engaged in the process rather than relying on the transit agency.

In Denver, many of the poorest pockets in the region are within the city's borders. One of the benefits of the growing staff capacity at Denver Public Works and the partnership with RTD is the ability to proactively advocate for these regions. In particular, Denver staff are considering doing analyses of RTD's quarterly service changes. In the past, advocacy groups have performed this service, with the group 9 to 5 successfully pushing to preserve a bus line slated for closure, but Denver Public Works staff see an opportunity to perform this task in-house and engage proactively with RTD about services.

About the Research

This research brief was authored by Rosalie Ray, with contributions from Steven Higashide. It is based on a review of academic literature and agency documents, and interviews with staff from the Seattle Department of Transportation, King County Metro, Portland Bureau of Transportation, TriMet, Denver Department of Public Works, Regional Transportation District, Chicago Department of Transportation, Chicago Transit Authority, New York City Department of Transportation, City of Everett (Massachusetts), and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation. (All interviewees also had the opportunity to review a draft of this brief and provide comments and corrections.)

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