

Turnaround: Fixing NYC's Buses

2017 Report Card



In July 2016, The Riders Alliance, Straphangers Campaign, Tri-State Transportation Campaign and TransitCenter, joined by 37 elected officials, launched the Bus Turnaround Campaign to spotlight the ongoing decline of bus service quality and precipitate loss of bus ridership in New York City, and to offer a menu of policies and planning applications that could make the city's vast bus system an attractive transportation once again.

One year later, we offer the following review of the performance of the bus system and the progress of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the NYC Dept. of Transportation regarding the Bus Turnaround agenda.

In the summer of 2017, the dismal state of NYC's subways captured the attention of both state and city leaders. This attention is overdue, and practical solutions like those outlined by MTA Chairman Lhota in his Subway Action Plan may be reason to hope that relief is on the way for subway riders. However, NYC's entire transit system, of which the subway is only one part, is in crisis. The NYC bus network has been melting down for far longer and more profoundly in terms of riders abandoning the system, but outside the glare of TV news coverage. For the many neighborhoods without subway stops and many New Yorkers for whom the subway isn't accessible, increasingly slow and unreliable transit persists due to a lack of leadership and the absence of a serious plan to fix NYC's bus system.

Despite the spring and summer of hell, NYC subway ridership in the first six months of 2017 was essentially flat compared to the first half of 2016. However, at a time when ongoing subway delays should push more riders to adopt surface-level transit options (and the city's population and employment growth continue), NYC bus usage actually fell by more than 2% in the same period, on top of several years of annual ridership decline.

BUS			% diff
	Average monthly ridership: first half 2017	74,409,545	-2.11%
	Average monthly ridership: first half 2016	76,013,698	

SUBWAY			% diff
	Average monthly ridership: first half 2017	224,111,770	-0.04%
	Average monthly ridership: first half 2016	224,202,449	

Both the MTA and NYCDOT have critical roles to play to turn the city's faltering bus system around. But clearly neither is doing enough today to stop the downward spiral of declining bus performance and ridership. While both agencies have at least in part acknowledged the problems identified in the Turnaround agenda, and are in agreement regarding some important strategies to improve performance, neither is taking sufficient action to actually stabilize New York's bus system.

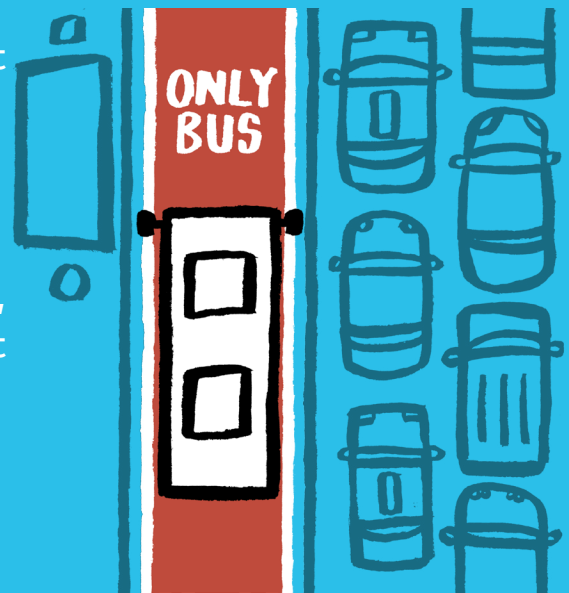
Following are our grades for the MTA and Mayor de Blasio's Department of Transportation, as appropriate, regarding the six recommended strategies of the Bus Turnaround Campaign:

DESIGNING STREETS TO PRIORITIZE BUSES

NYCDOT: D+

Although NYCDOT's 2016 strategic plan identified plunging bus ridership as an abiding problem for the city's overall transportation system, the de Blasio administration has not taken steps to improve street-level infrastructure during the past 12 months.

To date in 2017, the city has opened only two blocks worth of new bus lanes, on short stretches of the M79 cross-town Select Bus route. The city is working to implement bus lanes and other Select Bus improvements on the Bx6 route across the South Bronx and in Queens along Woodhaven Boulevard, though these are DOT pipeline projects that have been planned for a number of years. DOT's efforts need to expand beyond the Select Bus program in order to turn around the city's bus system. NYCDOT has talked of new non-Select Bus bus lanes on Fulton Street in Brooklyn, but has not set a time-frame for implementation.



In addition, the quality of the city's bus lanes remains low. Although bus lanes are frequently blocked by parked or moving car traffic, only .2% of moving violations issued by the NYPD so far in 2017 have been for driving in bus lanes. The City needs to make clearing bus lanes and bus stops a much stronger priority.

Similarly, despite the MTA's recent move to finally begin procuring the software that will allow city buses to interact with traffic lights, which can speed bus trips up to 30%, the deBlasio administration has revealed that it plans to implement only 15 additional signal priority projects per year between now and 2020.

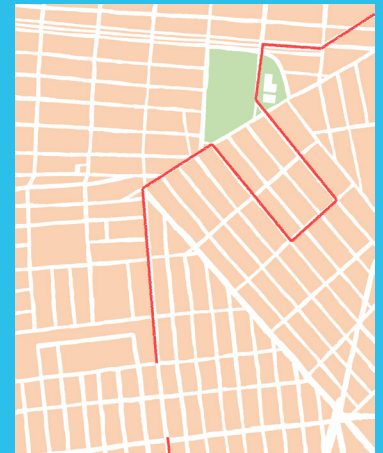
NYC government needs to be a full partner in turning NYC's bus system around. The level of action shown during the past year falls far short of this mark.

REDESIGNING THE BUS NETWORK AND ROUTES FOR MORE FREQUENT AND EFFICIENT SERVICE

MTA: B-

NYDCOT: INCOMPLETE

MTA: The launch of the MTA's long-awaited plans to redesign Staten Island's express bus routes and commitment to do so by summer 2018 is welcome news. But the effort for one of the most atypical, easy-to-fix parts of the city bus network took far too long to unfold. The main questions now are whether this planning effort will translate to serious action once Staten Islanders weigh in with pros and cons, and whether it will mark the start of a rolling effort to ensure that buses citywide meet the needs of NYC in 2017 and the future. The MTA need not wait until the Staten Island work is complete to apply these tools in other locations across the city.



For example, the division of the M5 route into two shorter routes was a positive step, but this relatively small endeavor took years to be implemented. We should be seeing a clear policy statement in this regard, and many other overly-long routes adapted more quickly to provide riders with more reliable trips.

Likewise, optimizing the space between bus stops, something that is included in the MTA's proposal for Staten Island express buses, is needed throughout the city. New York City's standard is 750 feet between stops on regular local service. Stopping this frequently slows buses down. In reality, bus stops in NYC are commonly even closer than our service guidelines dictate; there are places where buses stop twice on a single block! Bus stops in European cities are typically more than 1000 feet apart. A clear policy statement revising our standard stop spacing is needed, along with a rolling process of adjusting stops on routes throughout the city.

NYCDOT: It's possible that NYCDOT's ongoing citywide transit study may also take a look at the obsolescence or circuitous path of some bus routes, but the work has not yet been released.

TRANSFORMING HOW WE GET ON THE BUS

MTA: INCOMPLETE

The MTA has a major opportunity to improve bus service by speeding up boarding with the new post-MetroCard fare payment system it is in the process of designing and implementing, but we have yet to hear from agency leadership on key policy decisions regarding buses. NYC buses currently spend around 20% of their operating time at bus stops. All-door boarding on San Francisco's buses has reduced travel time and conflict between riders and bus drivers, and bus usage in San Francisco is stable, not declining.

The MTA reflexively raises the problem of fare evasion when all-door bus boarding is mentioned, but there is no evidence the MTA has made a real analysis of the issue, or has accurate information on fare evasion at all. The MTA recently decided to end fare evasion enforcement on local bus routes. In that case, it should focus on making fare payment for honest riders as easy and quick as possible, a focus we are starting to see around the world among the most advanced transit providers. Offering good bus service may indeed bring some former riders back, and help improve revenues.

The MTA should begin experimenting with all-door boarding approaches on buses as soon as possible, perhaps in the near term by adapting its commuter rail "eTix" smart phone application as a proof-of-payment ticket for riding NYC buses. All door boarding could also be applied immediately at key stops with high volumes of subway-transferring passengers, such as Jamaica terminal, Rockaway bus terminal, Flushing terminal, and at the ferry terminal in St. George.



ADOPTING BETTER METHODS OF KEEPING BUSES ON SCHEDULE

MTA: F

Technology allows us to know where every bus in the system is at any moment, yet this has not led to a revolution in dispatching to keep our buses on schedule or to proactively adjust buses on their routes when problems arise. Riders continue to frequently experience the frustration of waiting an unexpectedly long time for a bus, only to have two or three buses arrive at once. On NYC's least reliable bus routes, like the B6 in Brooklyn and the M1 in Manhattan, more than 1 in 6 buses is bunched. The MTA has not acknowledged or meaningfully addressed this or other service control issues (e.g. ensuring buses begin their runs on time) in the past year.



MAKING USING THE BUS EASY AND INTUITIVE

MTA: C

NYCDOT: C

MTA: The MTA is pilot testing new screens on SBS routes that deliver real time updates to riders on board. These are small steps in the right direction, making buses more welcoming and easier to use. Likewise, last September the MTA renamed the Q70 bus “LaGuardia Link” and concurrently implemented multi-door boarding, two common sense improvements to make this bus to the airport more attractive to riders.

NYCDOT: The City has recently started implementing real time information panels at local bus stops. These examples are far from scaling across the vast city bus system. The MTA and City should seek opportunities to apply tactics like these more widely across bus stops and routes throughout the system.



INCREASING TRANSPARENCY ABOUT BUS PERFORMANCE

MTA: INCOMPLETE

At a time when the agency should know more than ever before about the reliability and speed of its bus service, the performance analysis the MTA shares publicly features the flawed Wait Assessment metric and is confined to MTA board and transit committee meeting books. Bus performance analysis should include widely agreed-upon best practice metrics like Excess Journey Time, be easily available for all routes, and be available online. The upcoming MTA performance dashboard promised in July by Chairman Joe Lhota is an opportunity to realize this.

The bus is a vital element of New York's transit system and its accelerating decline is felt daily by millions of New Yorkers. Likewise, many people who might turn to the bus when subway service falters are finding that the city's slow, unreliable buses aren't a practical option. Fast and reliable transit on NYC's streets is possible and can be accomplished much more quickly and at a lower cost than what's required to fix the subway. What's needed is for elected officials and agency leadership to step up in support of the ambitious, widespread changes detailed here.

