

Bus Stop Balancing


A Campaign Guide
for Agency Staff



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Bus Stop Balancing:

**A Campaign Guide
for Agency Staff**

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Introduction



Bus stop balancing saves riders time, but it can be a tough sell.

Bus stop balancing is one of the most effective ways for transit agencies to speed up buses

America's bus stops are too close together. In many cities, it's not uncommon to see bus stops every other block — or even closer. Given that buses spend 20% of their time at stops, reducing the overall number of stops can dramatically speed trips for riders.

TransitCenter surveys consistently find that what transit riders value above all is getting from A to B as quickly as possible. One of the simplest and most cost-effective ways to improve trip time is by extending the average distance between bus stops — otherwise known as bus stop balancing, consolidation, or optimization.

In San Francisco, SFMTA increased bus speeds 4.4% – 14% on routes by shifting stop spacing from nearly 6 stops per mile to 2.5 stops per mile. In Portland, Oregon, travel times improved 5.7% when TriMet increased stop spacing by an average of 90 feet along one of its busiest routes, according to researchers at McGill University. Bus stop balancing was cited as the “most successful action taken” to improve bus speeds by agencies surveyed in TCRP Synthesis 110, Commonsense Approaches to Improving Transit Bus Speeds.¹

Riders sense that bad bus stop spacing slows them down. At a series of public workshops conducted by New York City Transit, **63% of Bronx bus riders** said they would prefer fewer stops.

But bus stop balancing isn't without friction. Transit riders often feel ownership over their bus stops. Asking people to walk farther to something that used to be at their doorstep can be a tough sell. Making transit faster for more people involves trade-offs, and agency officials need to be prepared for some objections.

To minimize and overcome pushback, transit agencies across the country have found success by approaching bus stop balancing with a comprehensive campaign strategy.

1. Boyle, Daniel K. “TCRP Report 110: Commonsense Approaches for Improving Transit Bus Speeds.” (Transportation Research Board, Washington, D.C., 2016), www.trb.org/Publications/Blurbs/170433.aspx

Why a Campaign?



A campaign is a purposeful, organized, multi-pronged initiative to create change within a fixed timeline. For transit agencies, adopting a campaign strategy for bus stop balancing entails coordinating across departments, securing sufficient resources to do the job well, crafting a winning message, and engaging directly with riders.

Using a campaign strategy, agencies like Cincinnati Metro and Gold Coast Transit in Ventura, California, successfully consolidated stops and sped up trips for thousands of riders with minimal complaints or opposition. Agency leadership committed the staff time and funding to position the bus stop balancing initiatives for success.

In contrast, when bus stop balancing is housed solely within a transit agency's planning division — as is often the case — the effort tends to fall short. Without the explicit backing of agency executives and political leadership, and lacking the capacity to communicate effectively to riders or to government partners, a self-contained process will fail.

A bus stop balancing initiative in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for example, did not engage elected leaders or the agency's communications team. Misinformation started swirling, and the effort was put on hold (see below).

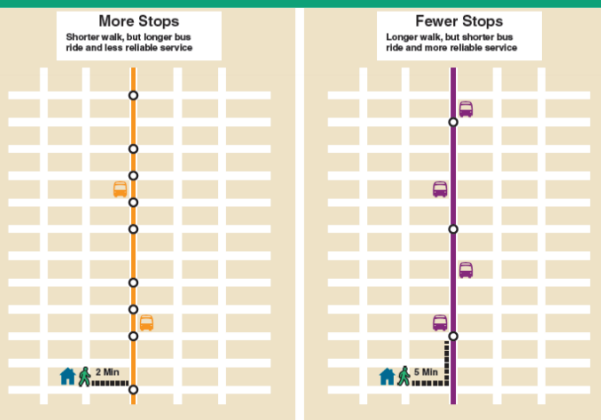
This brief shares examples of how a campaign approach to bus stop balancing can overcome the challenges inherent to the task. Through successful bus stop balancing campaigns, agencies can provide quicker, more reliable trips for riders, more amenities at stops, and more comfortable walks to transit.

What Happens Without a Campaign: Lessons From ABQ Ride

In 2009, Albuquerque's ABQ RIDE learned the hard way why communicating with elected officials and testing messages with bus riders is so important. In its roll-out of bus stop consolidation, ABQ RIDE posted signs at bus stops that confused and panicked riders. The language was not clear and led many riders to believe that *every* stop was slated for removal. The

signs also offered no opportunity for rider input and conveyed nothing about improvements in service or added amenities for the remaining stops. To complicate matters, the signs were posted in the heat of mayoral campaign season. Bus stop removal became one of the top election issues. In response, the mayor put the bus stop balancing effort on hold.

What Are the Ingredients of a Bus Stop Balancing Campaign?



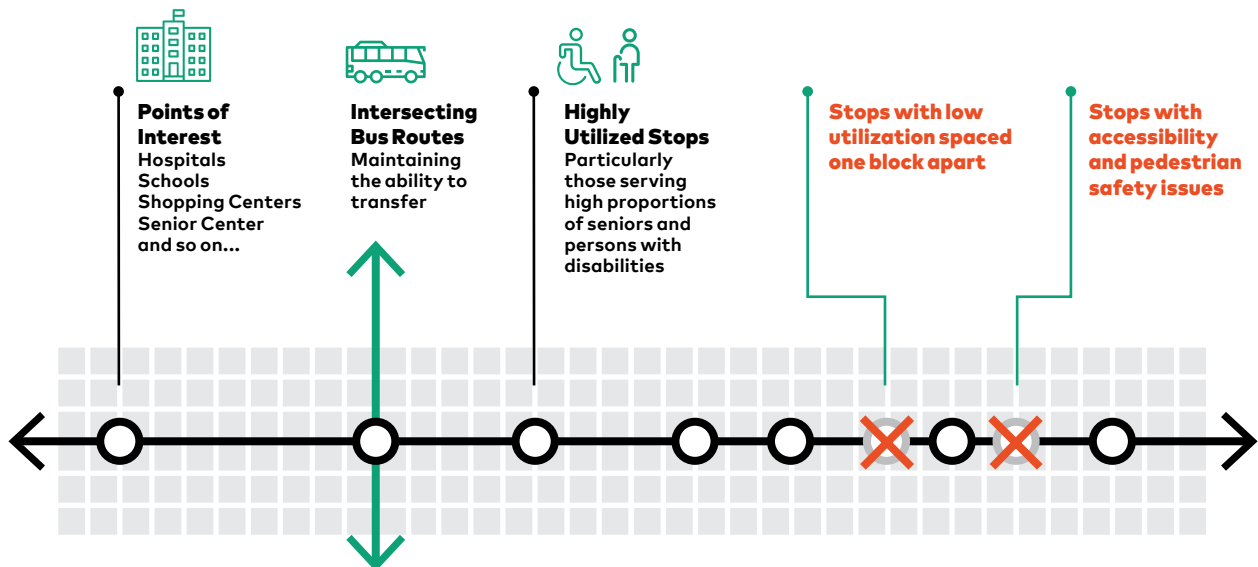
For its Bronx bus network redesign, the New York MTA showed riders a diagram of the tradeoffs involved in bus stop balancing. Nearly two-thirds preferred fewer stops.

Bus stop balancing flexes almost every muscle in a transit agency. Planners need to identify the stops to remove that will speed up buses the most, while ensuring that riders can safely and comfortably walk to access service. Agency leaders need to explain to riders why balancing bus stops will make trips faster. Communications staff must alert riders to revised bus stop locations. And after bus stops are changed, operators need to know the new pattern.

In a successful bus stop balancing campaign, all of these actors coordinate to deliver tangibly faster service to riders.

This brief goes into further detail on these campaign steps, divided into three sections: preparation, implementation and communication, and following up.

The Basics of Bus Stop Balancing



The campaign should follow a sequence along these lines:



Assign leadership to an individual responsible for the overall campaign.



Identify clear roles to everyone on the campaign team.



Dedicate sufficient staff hours and funding for outreach, communications, and physical improvements at bus stops.



Develop a timetable with specific milestones to which team members can be held accountable.



Compile data on ridership, wheelchair ramp usage, and amenities for each bus stop to inform the team's decision making.



Involve allies and partners like city Departments of Transportation early on in planning.



Identify target audiences, such as riders whose trips will be longer or shorter, and test out messages with them about how their trips will change.



Define a clear strategy to deal with opposition, including when and how to accommodate it.



Develop mechanisms to receive and respond to feedback.



Establish criteria for evaluating service after changes are implemented, including criteria for restoring stops, if absolutely necessary.

Action Steps for a Bus Stop Balancing Campaign



1. Prepare



Get commitments of staff time from multiple departments to enact your campaign

Bus stop removal campaigns draw on different functions within an agency, including planning, operations, and communications. Staff time and resources from these departments must be secured before the campaign begins.



Survey riders to build the case for bus stop balancing

Successful campaigns point to demands from riders to speed up bus service. Conduct on-board surveys or use existing surveys of riders to make the case for improving bus speeds and reliability.



Conduct an inventory of accessibility and amenities at bus stops

Identify which bus stops in the system are ADA accessible and which are not, and catalogue amenities like benches and shelters at each stop. Low-ridership stops that are not accessible and lack amenities should be prime candidates for removal.

Cincinnati Metro Did Its Homework on Bus Stops

Cincinnati Metro launched a five-route bus stop balancing pilot, called FASTops, that proposed removing 158 of the 698 stops (23%) along those routes.

To prepare for the bus stop balancing campaign, Cincinnati Metro evaluated all 4,000 of its stops. For each stop, Metro measured proximity to schools

and community centers and catalogued amenities, assessing accessibility for people with disabilities and the availability of seating, lighting, and a shelter. Stops that scored low on the evaluation were more likely to be removed. To preserve this information for future reference, Metro took photographs of every bus stop and stored them in a new database.



Get bus operators involved early

Bus operators know more about the stops on their routes than anyone else. They can help identify the stops to remove and the ones to preserve, because they know which stops are important for people with disabilities, or which serve major constituencies nearby. They are also absolutely integral to informing riders about bus stop balancing. Bus riders will likely find out about the removal of a stop from a bus operator.



Be ambitious about the number of stops to remove, assuming that electeds and board members will want to put back stops

Agencies should begin by thinking expansively about bus stop removal, knowing that political pressures will probably result in some degree of scaling back. When riders complain about bus stop elimination, elected officials and board members may want to put some bus stops back in response. For this reason, it's important not to "pre-compromise" with a weaker plan designed to appease people instead of speeding up service. Prepare to come out of the gate with a very ambitious plan.



Alert elected officials, board members, and advocates early on

There's no way around it: Riders are going to complain to elected officials and board members about bus stop removals. Agency staff need to inform public officials ahead of time, make them aware of the benefits of bus stop balancing, and prepare them for riders' reactions. Give advocates a heads up and tell them specifically how they can support the campaign.

Dallas Consulted Its In-House Experts: Bus Operators

In 2013, Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) re-launched its bus stop balancing program, focusing on three routes. The agency removed 89 of 560 stops (16%), which increased the average distance between stops from 718 feet to 869 feet.

DART recognized that bus operators had first-hand knowledge of which bus stops served riders who would have trouble with longer walks. So agency staff asked operators to weigh in on which

stops to keep and which to remove. Bus depot managers chose 15 operators to attend two workshops where they discussed major origins and destinations, pedestrian safety issues, important stops for mobility-impaired riders, and bus stop locations that created difficulties for operators maneuvering in traffic. The staffer leading the bus stop balancing initiative also rode bus routes with the operators to see the issues first-hand.



Commit to funding better amenities at bus stops that aren't removed

By combining bus stop balancing with investments in sidewalks, crosswalks, shelters, benches, and real-time arrival information, agencies can counter objections to the removal of some stops and give the campaign better odds of political success. Conversely, campaigns that don't improve remaining bus stops will have a difficult time winning public support.

Agencies will have better luck explaining stop removal decisions to the public if those decisions are based on clear criteria

Gold Coast Transit's Political Savvy

In early 2018, Gold Coast Transit District removed 7 of 28 bus stops along a route in Ventura, CA.

Prior to implementation, Gold Coast Transit presented the project to its board of directors and at a public workshop. One board member, a Ventura City Council member, was especially crucial to win over. The council member learned about the bus

stop consolidation at the board meeting and the public outreach event, and was swayed by Gold Coast Transit's explanation of the benefits for bus riders. The agency credits this targeted communication with an elected official for bringing the whole board of directors along on the bus stop balancing project.

2. Implement and Communicate



Identify stops to remove based on clear criteria

Riders and elected officials are going to ask why some bus stops will be removed while others will remain. Agencies can provide good answers if they base their decisions on clear criteria. Smart bus stop balancing typically preserves stops that are key transfer points, stops with high ridership, and stops close to senior centers and other major destinations for older residents. The pedestrian environment should also factor into the plan, with longer stop spacing in areas with better walking conditions than those with inadequate sidewalks and dangerous street crossings. Stop spacing may also vary by the type of service, with greater distances between stops on routes designed to provide faster service.





Test your communications with a focus group of riders

Agencies that struggled with bus stop balancing found that riders didn't understand the signs that staff posted on stops and were unsure if their stop would be removed. Testing communications beforehand with a sample of riders will reduce misunderstandings.



Create an online communications plan

Agencies should provide specific destinations online where riders can learn about the bus stop balancing plan and submit feedback. The online communications plan should at minimum include a website that makes the case for bus stop balancing, as well as an email address, hashtag, or phone number where riders can direct comments.

Cincinnati Metro To Riders: We Heard You, Here's Our Plan

Cincinnati Metro created a website to highlight the benefits of bus stop balancing, provide specific information about the agency's plan, and allow riders to be heard. The site illustrates bus stop balancing with graphics, videos, and an FAQ section. It also conveys the time and location of community

meetings, a map of which routes and stops may be affected, and a timeline for the project. The site emphasizes that the project is a pilot and that the agency will use feedback submitted by riders through an online survey.



Own what you're doing and communicate to riders honestly

Don't use planner-speak. Be upfront with the public and elected leaders about the bus stop balancing program. Communicate that removing stops will improve overall trips times, but don't disguise the fact that it will result in longer walks for some riders.





SFMTA Communicated With Riders In Person At Stops

After 61% of riders told the SFMTA in live surveys that they would be willing to walk longer distances if buses moved faster, the agency released a plan in 2010 to remove 20% of stops on high ridership routes. The bus stop balancing campaign was embedded in the larger Muni Forward initiative, which combines service additions, operational changes, and transit priority street projects to make buses faster and more reliable.

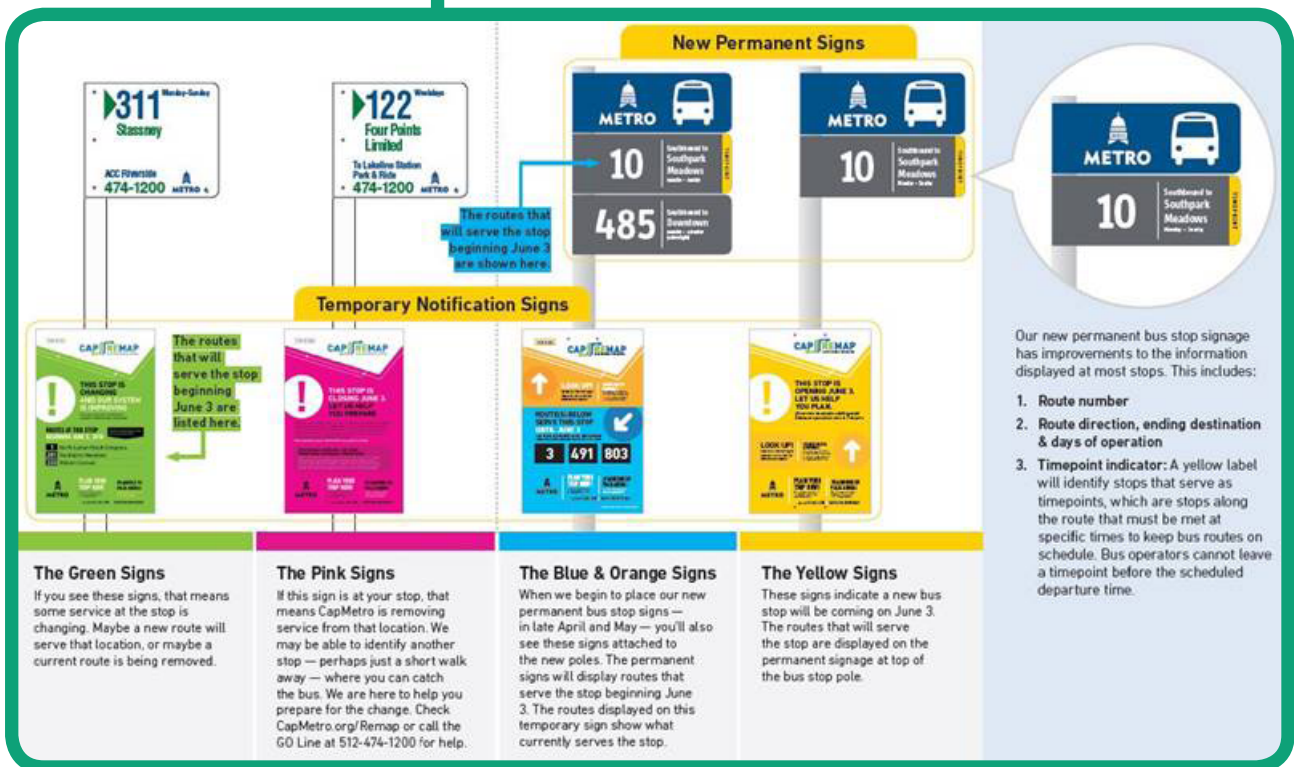
Confident from its earlier survey that most riders supported bus stop balancing in concept, SFMTA staffed ambassadors at stops slated for removal to keep riders informed about specific changes. This allowed for tailored responses to each rider's specific concern or comment. The approach helped SFMTA remove 71 stops on eight routes.



Alert riders who will benefit, not just those whose stops will be moved

Inform all riders along a route, including riders at stops that will be preserved. Alerting riders who will benefit from removing stops will help build a constituency for change.

Information about projected travel time changes should be posted at all stops along an affected route, as should instructions to submit comments to the agency. At stops that will be preserved, include information about benches, shelters, or other amenities that will be added as part of the bus stop balancing project. At those that will be removed, convey where the next closest bus stop is located.



For its redesign of the Austin bus network, Capital Metro posted notifications at every bus stop informing riders of upcoming changes.

King County Metro Customized Its Approach

Recently King County Metro began considering bus stop removals along a route through neighborhoods with hilly terrain and a large population whose native language isn't English. The hills made walking to stops more difficult, so the agency relaxed its bus stop spacing requirements on those portions of the route. King County Metro created a tailored community outreach plan that included hiring bilingual ambassadors to get the message to riders. These

ambassadors engaged with riders at stops, community centers, and worked with local organizations to inform their members of the expected changes. The agency recognized that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work in a city with such diverse population and topography, so the agency staff remain nimble and open to change by researching each route's characteristics and then acting appropriately for successful agency-rider communication.



Publicly commit to a timeline to do the whole bus network, even if you implement bus stop balancing route-by-route or district-by-district

If riders see that their bus stop is one of a small number being removed, they will feel singled out, and resistance will intensify. Commit to balancing the entire bus network over a specific time period. Not only will you make a bigger impact, but riders will see that the changes on their route are part of systemic improvements.

3. Follow Up



Tell board members, elected officials, riders, and the press about improvements to travel time and ridership attributable to bus stop balancing

Once the new-and-improved bus stop spacing is speeding up trips for riders, share those results. Publicizing improvements in bus performance attributable to bus stop balancing, as well as added amenities at remaining bus stops, will build support for future campaigns among riders and elected officials.



Make it a habit: Reevaluate stop spacing on a regular basis

Creating good bus stop spacing is not just a one-time achievement, it's something that must be maintained over time. Population and jobs are not static. Demographics shift, travel demand changes, and service patterns must keep up. Agencies may add bus stops to a network for good reason, but must take care to prevent cumulative changes from dragging down performance. By committing to evaluate bus stop spacing on a regular schedule — say every five years — agencies can keep their bus stops balanced across the whole network for the long run.

RIPTA Shows That Setbacks Can Be Temporary

RIPTA, Rhode Island's statewide transit agency, removed bus stops along a route without any signage or notice to riders, which led to a strong backlash that caused the agency to reinstate nearly every stop. The agency learned from its mistakes. After taking a step back and letting the dust settle, RIPTA took a

better approach to bus stop balancing on a different route, posting alerts at bus stops weeks ahead of time. Since correcting course, RIPTA has made impressive progress, reducing the number of bus stops in its network from 5,334 in 2010 to 3,546 in 2018, a 34% reduction with little to no pushback from riders.



Conclusion: Give Riders Service That's Too Good to Pass Up

Bus stop balancing will be better received if it is accompanied by upgrades like benches, shelters, and improved pedestrian access

To make transit useful and attractive to riders, agencies need to speed up bus service. Bus stop balancing is an effective way to achieve that outcome, and agencies have found success with a campaign approach. The foundation of a good bus stop balancing campaign is a commitment from agency leadership to prioritize the initiative and support staff during implementation.

Bus stop balancing always involves tradeoffs. Riders will get to their destinations faster, but some will have to go farther to reach a stop. Transit agencies need to accurately convey how removing bus stops will change travel for all riders affected. Changes must also be clearly communicated to bus operators, who'll be on the front lines helping riders navigate the new stop pattern.

While bus stop balancing is a powerful tool to improve performance on its own, the benefits will be more apparent to riders — and better received by them — if paired with other upgrades like off-board fare payment, bus lanes, or queue jumps. The trip to and from the bus stop also has to be safe and comfortable. Transit agencies should work with city street departments to create safer pedestrian access to bus stops and add benches and shelters. Done in concert, these improvements will result in transit service that's worth going a small distance farther to access. Riders will appreciate the changes and more people will choose the bus.

Further Reading

1. **Transit Streets Design Guide** (2015)
National Association of City Transportation Officials

Technical guidance for city and transit agency staff about how to improve bus stops after balancing.

2. **Better Boarding, Better Fares** (2017)
National Association of City Transportation Officials

Guidance for transit agencies about how fare collection can speed up bus boarding.

3. **From Sorry to Superb: Everything You Need to Know About Great Bus Stops** (2018) TransitCenter

Survey of best practices for bus stop management, including coordination between cities and transit agencies. Action items for agencies that want to develop bus stop improvement programs.

4. **Who's On Board: How to Win Back America's Transit Riders** (2019) TransitCenter

Opinion survey of transit riders and non-riders in six cities that reveals the impact of Uber, Lyft, and private car ownership on transit ridership, and what improvements riders value.

5. **Better On Street Bus Stops, TCRP Synthesis 117** (2015)
TCRP Report

A survey of transit agencies about managing bus stops, including case studies.



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