

SURVEY SAYS . . .

NJ TRANSIT BUS RIDERS WANT BETTER SERVICE

A 2019 Survey of NJ Transit Bus Riders

A New Ride for New Jersey

In September, Tri-State Transportation Campaign released “A New Ride for New Jersey,” a report detailing the shortcomings of New Jersey Transit’s bus service and a set of recommendations to improve service for the service’s 478,000 daily riders. In our report we highlighted six policy recommendations, including:

- **Making using the bus easy and intuitive:** A more welcoming and easy-to-use bus system will make NJ Transit the preferred mobility option for many more commuters.
- **Designing streets to prioritize buses:** Deployment of dedicated bus lanes and transit signal priority will make bus service faster and more reliable. NJ Transit should also work with municipalities to create and implement design, amenity, and safety standards for bus stops and shelters throughout the bus network.
- **Redesigning the bus network:** The agency should conduct a bus network redesign to serve the needs of riders today, provide more connections to intermodal hubs, expand bus rapid transit service, and rebalance bus stop spacing to increase bus speeds. They should also fully electrify NJ Transit’s bus fleet.
- **Modernizing fares:** NJ Transit should introduce a flat fare structure for intrastate bus service, consider make bus transfers free, streamline the mobile app payment process, and introduce more on-board payment options.
- **Better data collection and transparency:** NJ Transit does not currently collect sufficient data to develop accurate performance metrics, which is necessary for the agency to make valuable and targeted adjustments to bus service.
- **Increasing funding:** The biggest obstacle standing in the way of substantive improvements to NJ Transit’s service is a lack of dedicated funding sources. For over twenty years, the state has systematically underfunded NJ Transit; now, to fix bus and rail service, the state and agency must work together to establish dedicated funding streams.

It is noteworthy that while commuter rail receives the majority of attention from media and legislators, bus rides comprise the majority—58 percent—of all rides on the NJ Transit system. To get a better understanding of bus riders’ needs, Tri-State interviewed 250 bus riders about the quality of their bus service, their reasons for relying on the bus, and what improvements they would like to see. Riders surveyed were of all ages and demographics and had a variety of riding experience, income levels, and transit dependency.

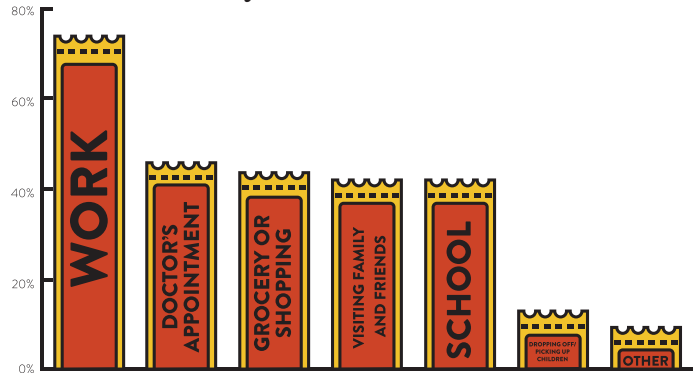
The Survey Results Are In: Riders Want Change

This is the first time Tri-State Transportation Campaign has surveyed actual bus riders about their commutes. Two hundred fifty riders were surveyed over several months at bus stops primarily in Newark and Elizabeth and asked a series of questions about their experience on NJ Transit buses.

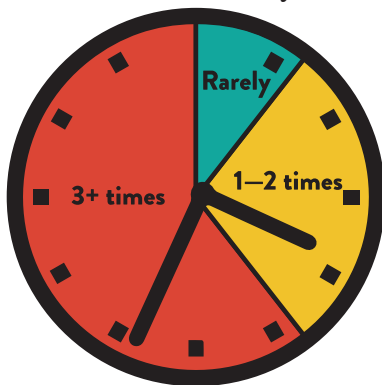
Our initial questions focused on the primary use cases for bus riders. Contemporary wisdom holds that the majority of bus users rely on the bus for their work commutes, and this is when service

frequency is prioritized. While results show that 73 percent of surveyed riders do use the bus for their work commute, a closer look at the data revealed that 40 percent of riders surveyed use the bus to commute to other destinations, including doctors' appointments, shopping locations, and school. The implicit finding here is that frequent service must extend well beyond standard peak hour usage: many trips occur during off-peak hours and involve commutes to medical and commercial centers as well as employment hubs.

What do you use the bus for?



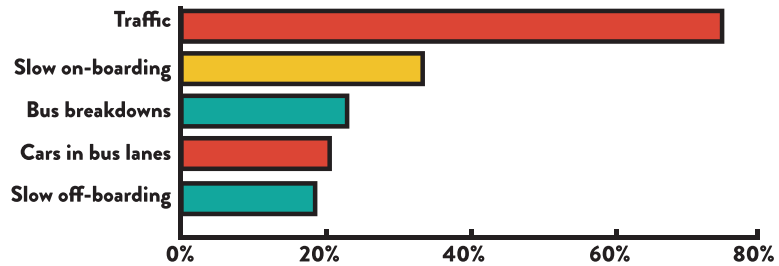
How often is your bus late on a weekly basis?



The next set of questions asked riders about service quality indicators, including bus arrival time, what factors they see that cause delays in bus service, and the frequency of bus stop features like shelters and benches. Survey results indicate that over 60 percent of bus riders reported that their bus arrived late to their stop an average of three or more times a week, meaning that three out of every five bus riders arrive late to their destination multiple times a week. This includes 21 percent—nearly one out of every five—who reported that their bus arrives late an average of 7 or more times per week. In follow-up interviews, many riders indicated that when using either pre-printed paper schedules or mobile-planning route apps, their buses arrive 15 minutes or later than the scheduled arrival time.

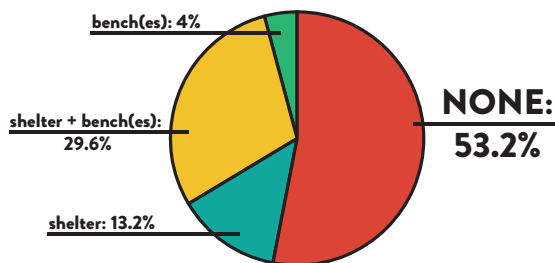
When asked about the causes of bus delays, riders listed several different reasons they believe led to delays. The most frequent report from riders was that their buses were stuck in traffic, with over 74 percent of bus riders surveyed listing traffic as the cause of their bus delay. In follow-up interviews, riders noted that buses not only get caught in gridlock on routes, but struggle to merge back into traffic after passengers alight at stops and have difficulty pulling over into bus stops due to cars parked illegally in front of the stops. Separating buses from regular traffic leads to significant speed improvements and time savings, but New Jersey only has eight miles of bus lanes statewide, in contrast to 120 miles of bus lanes in New York City alone.

What do you think causes your bus delay?



While measures to increase bus priority on streets are often in the purview of municipalities rather than NJ Transit, riders report challenges at bus stops that are within the agency's ability to rectify. Roughly 33 percent of bus riders believed that slow on-boarding caused their buses to arrive late. With many riders still relying on cash to pay bus fares and an insufficient number of bus riders using the NJ Transit app to purchase tickets, as well as the lack of all-door or multiple-door boarding options, onboarding takes much longer than necessary and disrupts service. Surveyed riders also observed that one of the root causes of slow onboarding is likely the zonal fare system's ability to confuse riders as to the ultimate cost of their ride.

What amenities are at bus stops?



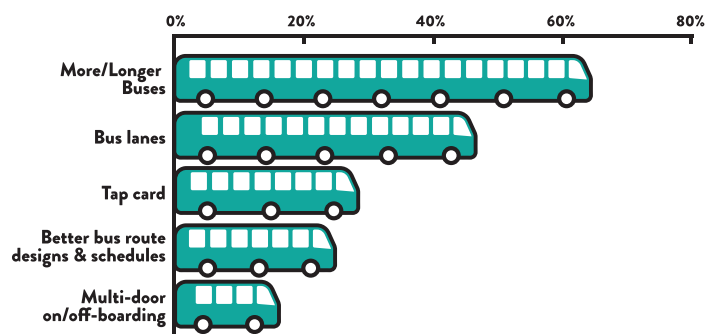
Bus stops themselves, like street priority, are frequently the purview of municipalities through which bus service runs, rather than the sole responsibility of NJ Transit. While that distinction matters with regard to who can solve the problem, riders simply notice—and are frustrated by—inadequate bus stop infrastructure. Many bus riders noted that their bus stop is nothing more than a simple sign stuck in the ground, and over 50% of bus riders reported that their bus stops do not have any shelters or benches. This means that one out of every two bus riders is waiting outside in inclement weather--be it rain or snow in winter or heat and humidity in summer--or, if

they are fortunate, sheltering under a nearby store awning while waiting for their bus. For elderly and disabled riders in particular, shelter architecture like benches are important; meanwhile, all riders deserve protection from the elements while awaiting their bus. In follow-up conversation, riders remarked that lack of shelters and benches makes the bus wait unpleasant and uncomfortable, which makes the wait for the bus feel longer than it already is.

In an effort to solicit riders' input on solutions to the problems they had identified, the survey's final question asked riders was what improvements they believed would speed up their commute. A whopping 64% of surveyed bus riders believe that more buses and articulated buses would improve service on their routes. Much of this comes from riders reporting that there aren't enough buses on their routes and that buses are frequently overcrowded. Moreover, riders expressed concerns that weekday bus service ends too early and weekend service was often limited or nonexistent.

Additionally, 46% of bus riders indicated that dedicated bus priority lanes would allow their buses to bypass traffic congestion, leading to quicker commutes and more reliable service. As mentioned earlier, riders felt that their buses are constantly fighting traffic to reach bus stops, but that bus lanes could go a long way to ameliorate this issue, especially with enforcement of bus lanes and stops.

How can NJ Transit do better?



Good News and Bad News For NJ Transit

Our survey findings indicate that riders are fairly clear-eyed about identifying sources of challenges to bus operations and have a strong sense of what must be done to fix them. The good news for NJ Transit is that some of the key challenges and core recommendations are well within their purview to fix: frequency of service, for instance, is mostly a question of increasing service hours, adding off-peak service, hiring additional bus operators, and more carefully managing schedules and headways. Similarly, implementation of all-door boarding, tap cards and the resulting reduction of cash use, and better wayfinding can streamline bus dwell time at stops. While all of these measures have costs associated with them, they are within the agency's sole purview to implement. NJ Transit should work to implement these changes in the near future and should seek funding from Trenton to ensure they have the resources to make the improvements riders have identified as necessary to fix bus service in New Jersey.

The bad news for the agency is that some concerns raised by riders require significant collaboration with municipalities and other entities to implement. These include on-street bus priority and bus stop infrastructure improvements, much of which falls on local governments to approve and procure. NJ Transit should scale up its partnerships with local leaders to ensure bus lanes, queue jumps, transit signal priority, and other on-street prioritization measures can be rolled out to reduce the impact of traffic on bus travel times. Similarly, state legislators, agency staff, and other stakeholders should encourage local municipalities to invest in low-cost infrastructure at bus stops, including shelters, benches, and digital and analog wayfinding, to improve the bus experience and make buses easier to use and understand. In places that have made serious efforts to improve bus priority, like Houston and Seattle, the effect forms a virtuous cycle: as bus service improves, more people choose to ride them, reducing over-reliance on personal automobiles and for-hire vehicles that clog our roads.

But the most important finding of all is that, for all the deserved attention commuter rail receives, buses serve an incredibly important role in interstate and intrastate transit, especially for communities that often lack access to cars and other reliable transportation. For hundreds of thousands of New Jerseyans, buses serve as their primary mode of transportation not just to and from work, but to get to shopping locations, doctors' appointments, visiting family, and attending school. In short, riders made clear that buses are a tool for opportunities--to earn a living, to learn and grow, to stay healthy, and to spend in their local economies. We ignore bus service at our peril, and it's incumbent on every stakeholder--from legislators in Trenton to NJ Transit staff to municipal stakeholders--to work together to improve service and simultaneously improve the fortunes of New Jersey's residents and the state itself.

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