

STATE OF TRANSIT 2021



WORLD CLASS TRANSIT FOR NEW ORLEANS

Modern Regional Transit V. 2.0

ABOUT OUR ORGANIZATION

Ride New Orleans is an independent nonprofit 501(c)3 organization. We envision a region in which taking transit enables full access to jobs, education, health care, and other needs that ensure the equitable, thriving community that all residents deserve. Our mission is to win world-class and equitable public transportation that works for all residents across the New Orleans region.

Visit rideneworleans.org for more information.

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Executive Summary

Modern Regional Transit (Version 2.0)

Most of Ride New Orleans' policy advocacy over the last decade has focused on effective local governance and better service. In those two areas, we can point to encouraging changes.

After a decade of “delegated management” – where a private company, Transdev, controlled all practical aspects of New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA) decision making and operations from 2009 to 2019, the RTA board broke definitively with that model in 2019. Over the course of an 18-month shift, RTA brought all planning and administrative functions in house and then, in late 2020, brought all operations staff (operators, mechanics, etc.) in house.

Things haven't gone perfectly – a driver shortage this last summer exposed some growing pains with the new management team, for instance. But in general, New Orleans residents now have a more transparent public agency moving toward clearly defined, publicly-supported goals with an accountable board of commissioners that is in clear strategic control. The uncertainties and murkiness around public priorities, private profit margins, and long-term strategy that marked many of the Transdev years are gone.

On the service side, we've also seen pronounced improvements. Bus vehicle revenue hours (VRH) increased 33 percent from 2014 to 2019, part of the continued recovery from Katrina and a belated but welcome shift away from prioritizing streetcars over the buses that the majority of local RTA riders rely on.

Orleans and Jefferson parishes worked together in 2018 to create a major new cross-parish transit line, with the extension of the RTA's #39 Tulane bus to the Ochsner Medical Center on Jefferson Highway.

And the New Links regional transit network redesign – a two-year community-driven process that concluded with a detailed recommendation to reorganize transit resources to provide more reliable and equitable service – was approved by the RTA board in March 2021. While Jefferson Transit has disappointedly chosen not to implement all recommendations, the parish at least appears to be moving forward with the most important recommendations.

These undeniable steps forward were part of a large shift in direction that we can – as shorthand – call Modern Regional Transit Version 1.0.

Elected and appointed leaders like New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell, Jefferson Parish President Cynthia Lee-Sheng, RTA Board Chairman Flozell Daniels, Jr., Regional Planning Commissioner Executive Director Jeff Roesel, RTA CEO Alex Wiggins, and others deserve recognition and credit for moving the region's transit narrative in this new and promising direction.

But, as our analysis of data shows later in the pages of this report, V 1.0 is still not good enough.

In the middle of the day, the average transit-reliant New Orleanian can only reach 37.4 percent of the region's job opportunities in an hour or less via transit. The average transit-reliant Jefferson Parish resident can only reach 16.3 percent of the region's jobs in an hour at midday. If those residents had a car, in an hour or less the Orleans Parish resident could reach 99.3 percent of the region's jobs and the Jefferson Parish resident could reach 99.1 percent of the region's jobs.

Worse, these disparities are more pronounced across racial lines. The average white transit rider in both Orleans and Jefferson parishes is able to reach more jobs in an hour via transit than the average Black transit rider, even as both can effectively reach the same number of jobs via a personal car. And in New Orleans, more than half of the Black workforce is in the worst category of access to jobs via transit, compared to only 31 percent of the white workforce.

New Links will make a noticeable difference – both Orleans and Jefferson Parish transit riders will see, on average, a seven percent increase in job opportunities reachable in an hour or less via transit.

But while those are real improvements that will benefit real people, collectively they are still not good enough.

But what is good enough? What does the region need to do next to build upon the progress of V 1.0? RIDE believes the answer is in a comprehensive set of improvements that we can loosely categorize as V 2.0.

What is Modern Regional Transit Version 2.0?

V 2.0 means recognizing the good work that has been done – especially in the last few years – but understanding that the work is nowhere near finished.

V 2.0 means New Links is fully implemented but knowing that it will need tweaks and continued adjustments, a consistent adherence to a formal set of service standards, and a steady all-agency focus on improving important rider priorities like on-time performance and better bus stop amenities.

V 2.0 recognizes that New Links success means not only route changes, but priority for transit on the region’s streets and bread and butter investments on the capital side, including more buses and funding for not only a downtown transfer center, but neighborhood hubs like the one called for in New Orleans East.

V 2.0 prioritizes deeper regional transit collaboration with more economies of scale and farebox integration.

Most importantly, V 2.0 recognizes that no one entity – not the RTA, not JeT, not the City of New Orleans, not Jefferson Parish – can do this alone. If the day-to-day challenges of working with underfunded agencies had not already made that clear, the unwelcome surprises of the last two years like the COVID-19 pandemic and Hurricane Ida certainly have. Forging a world-class and equitable transit system in the face of these and other challenges requires a region-wide collaborative effort. And that collaboration can’t only be local government. Outside stakeholders like transit riders themselves, organized community groups, transit employees, business leaders, and others have to play a central role as well.

This broad coalition is critical because V 2.0 also means acknowledging that additional financial resources will be required. Our region and our riders need more buses and streetcars on the streets on a daily basis. And that means more operating revenue.

While there are a number of potential sources for this revenue, RIDE believes that a new or redirected millage is the fairest and most logical direction to move forward – at least for RTA funding in Orleans Parish.

Whatever the ultimate decision is, two things are very clear to us about Modern Regional Transit V 2.0:

1. Moving forward is not possible without additional revenue, and
2. Securing that additional revenue requires a diverse coalition of supporters to successfully make that case to the region.

RIDE is eager to partner with the RTA, Jefferson Transit, and other stakeholders to make that case. We hope you will be too.

OUR REGION AND OUR RIDERS NEED MORE BUSES

AND STREETCARS ON THE STREETS ON A DAILY BASIS.

AND THAT MEANS MORE OPERATING REVENUE.

THE YEAR IN NOLA TRANSIT

OCTOBER 2020

New Links draft proposal released for community review and comment

NOVEMBER 2020

Ground broken on new Canal Street ferry terminal

DECEMBER 2020

RTA transitions to fully public agency

FEBRUARY 2021

New Links formal proposal released



MARCH 2021

Third round of federal COVID stimulus funding provides an additional \$59.5 million in operations funding for RTA and \$8.2 million for Jefferson Transit.

MARCH 2021

RTA board approves New Links framework

JUNE 2021

RTA intends to return to full pre-COVID service levels, but cannot due to a driver shortage

JULY 2021

RTA implements temporary overhaul of fare structure

SEPTEMBER 2021

New Links final round of public hearings

What's Working

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-  New Links approved pg. 7
 -  RTA launches strategy to improve reliability pg. 12
 -  Annual budget for bus stop shelters approved pg. 14
 -  Fairer fares pg. 14



NEW LINKS APPROVED

The most important event over the last year was the finalization of the New Links regional transit network redesign proposal. The New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA) approved the proposal in March 2021. Jefferson Parish decided to only implement part of the proposal, a disappointing and puzzling move, but one that at least sets a base for further improvements in a parish that underfunds its transit service.

Ride New Orleans and other community advocates have long pushed for a network redesign. With limited resources in the short-term for major improvements, a lack of regional transit connections, and an overextended and underfunded system still trying to cover much of the pre-Katrina network - despite significant changes to population and commute patterns since Katrina - it was impossible to make the status quo work for riders.

A network redesign is an important step toward improving that status quo. It is a way to work with existing resources to better accomplish community priorities - in this case frequency, reliability, and more equitable access to economic opportunity.

The process

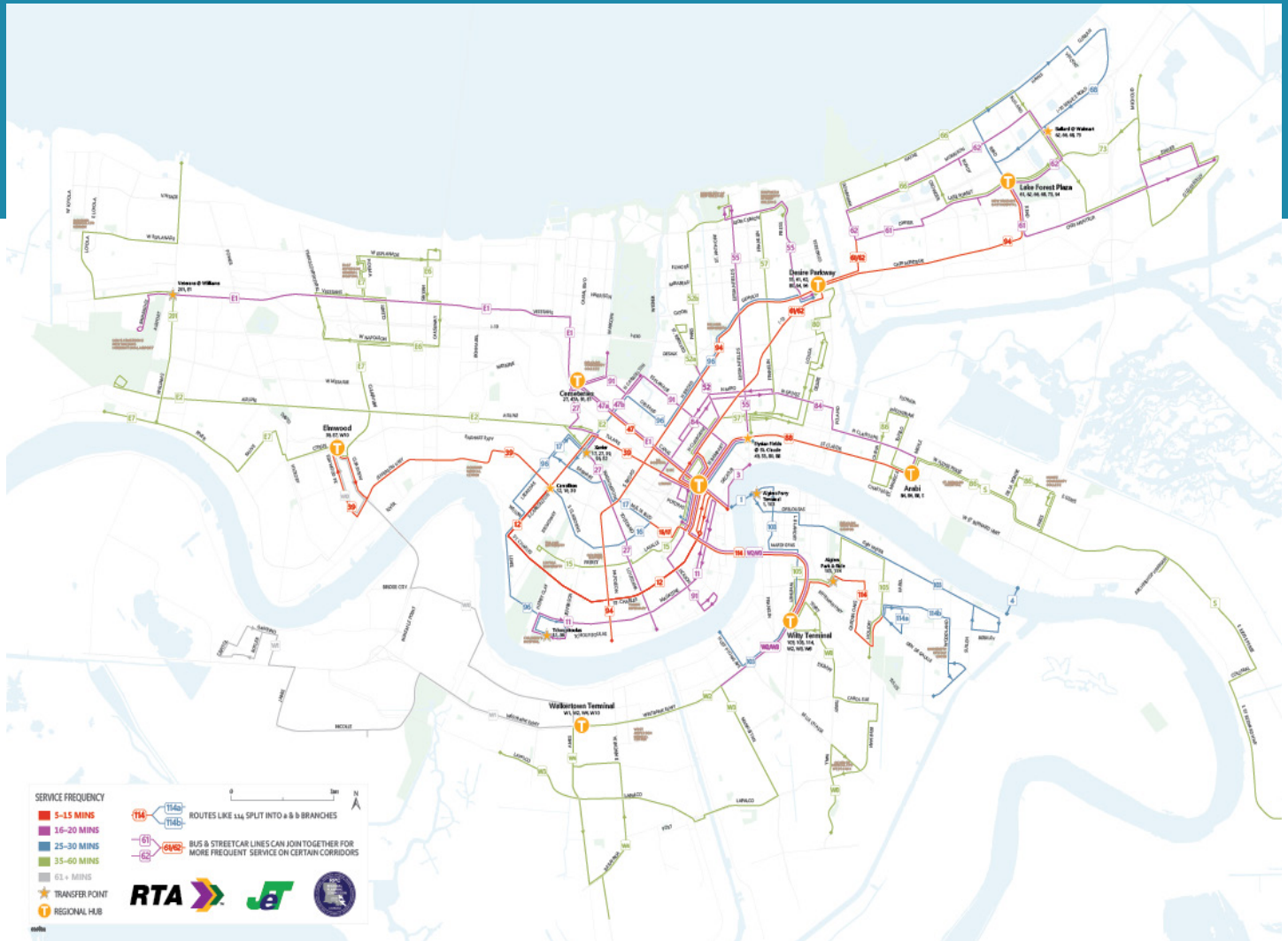
The New Links process was a joint project of the New Orleans Regional Planning Commission (RPC), the RTA, Jefferson Transit (JeT), and the St. Bernard Urban Rapid Transit (SBURT). The process started in 2019 and included three rounds of community engagement and extensive behind the scenes data gathering and analysis. The first round of community engagement, in the spring and summer of 2019, asked the community to identify strategic priorities. The second round, in the winter and spring of 2020, asked the community to consider three different scenarios of a redesigned transit network based on those strategic priorities. The final round, in the fall of 2020 and winter of 2021, presented a draft proposal based on community reaction to each scenario. After a final internal-facing phase in the winter of 2021, the New Links planners released a final proposal.

What is a network redesign?

The idea of a network redesign is simple - reallocate existing resources to better serve important community priorities. You can shift resources to certain lines to create more frequency, provide greater coverage in different neighborhoods, or provide better access to targeted destinations.

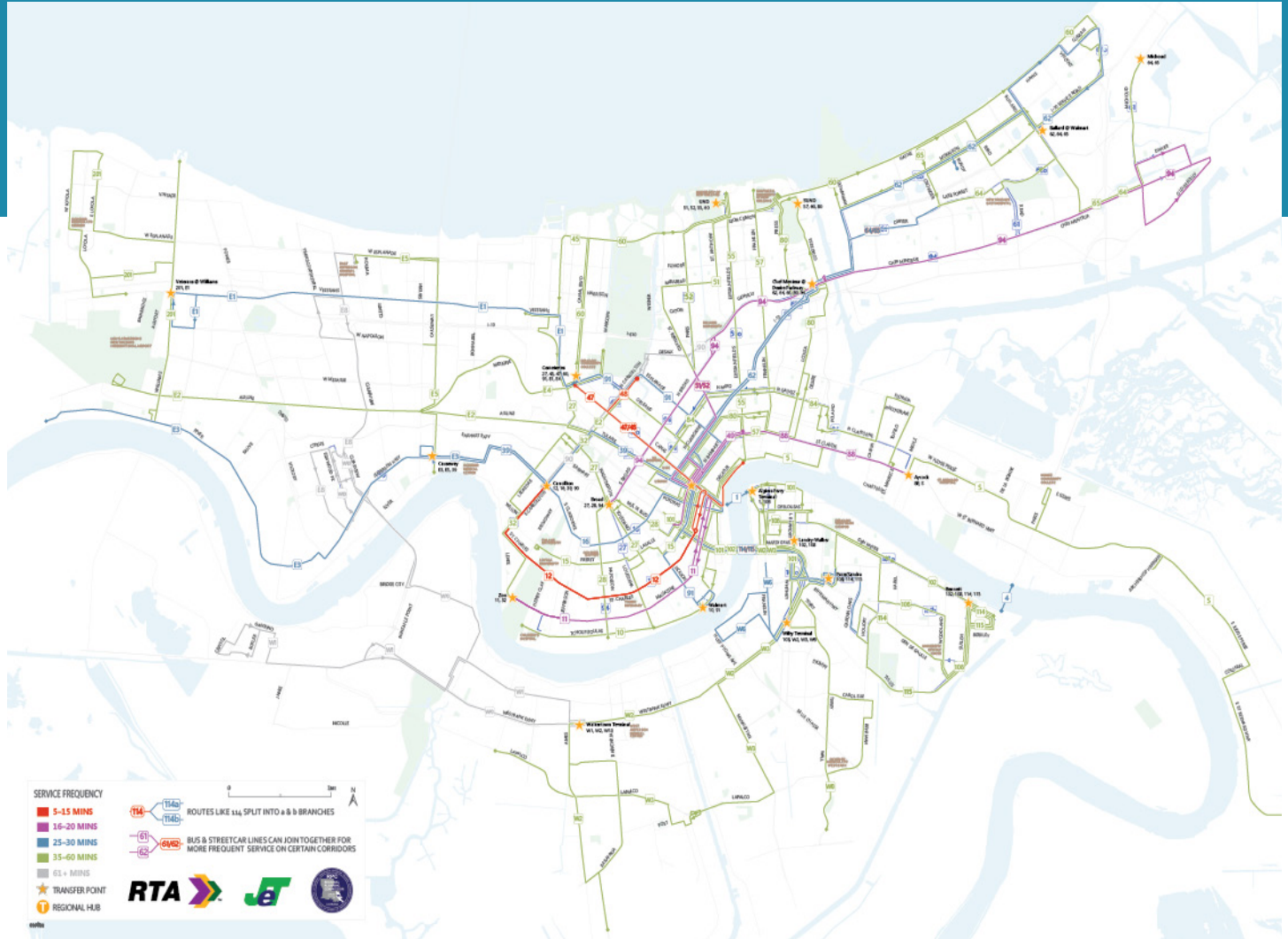
But network redesign requires tradeoffs due to a fixed budget. More buses on busy lines might mean fewer buses on neighborhood-serving lines, meaning some riders might have to walk further. More buses for neighborhoods might mean fewer buses on the busiest lines meaning less frequency and longer travel times for most riders. A network redesign process helps communities determine their priorities and adjust the network accordingly.

Figure 1: New Links proposed regional transit network



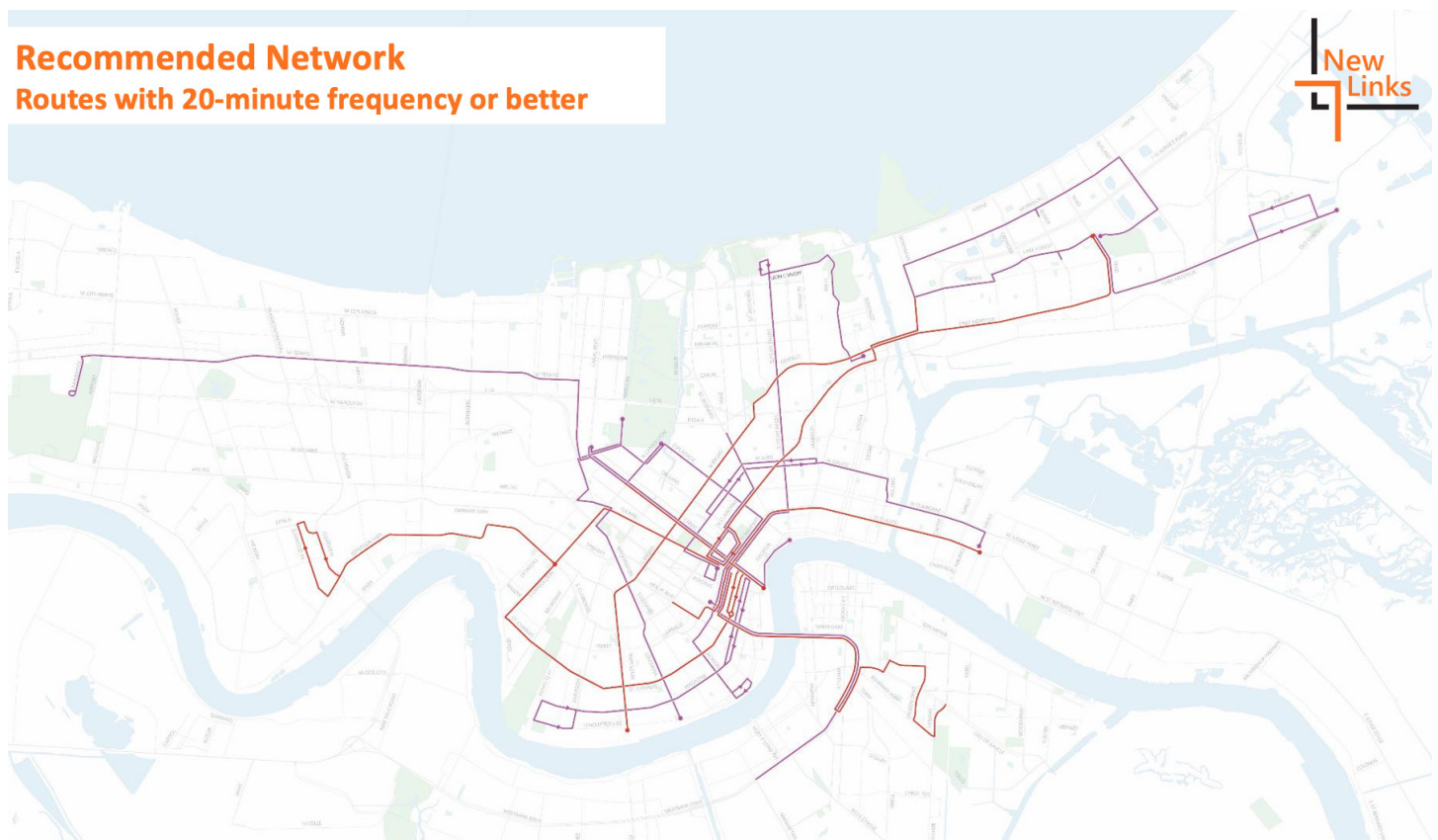
Source: New Orleans Regional Planning Commission

Figure 2: Existing regional transit network



Source: New Orleans Regional Planning Commission

Figure 3: New Links High Frequency Network



Source: New Orleans Regional Planning Commission

New Links will be a game-changer for New Orleans transit. While overall, there will be noticeably more frequent and reliable transit, three particular areas – regional connectivity, frequency, and equity – should be especially highlighted.

Regional transit

New Links will formally establish two important regional connections on the East Bank. The RTA's #39 Tulane bus, which originates in the New Orleans CBD, will be extended from Ochsner Medical Center to Elmwood, creating a direct connection between the first and third largest jobs center in the region. The JeT #E1 route from the airport to the New Orleans CBD via Veterans and Canal will be formalized, creating a permanent connection between the first and second largest jobs center in the region.

On the West Bank, both RTA and JeT systems will be redesigned to redirect buses through Wilty Terminal in Gretna – currently the JeT hub on the West Bank. That will mean much easier West Bank connections between the parishes, and a much more reliable connection to the East Bank for riders of both systems.

Frequency

One of the consequences of trying to cover most of the pre-Katrina network with fewer resources is that there isn't enough funding to support frequent buses on most lines. Pre-Katrina, 19 lines - or 24 percent - came every 15 minutes or less. In 2020, only three lines - or 6 percent - came every 15 minutes or less. During the community engagement process, transit riders were clear – more frequency is needed. New Links planners took that as a mandate – going from a system where 2/3 of the buses came every 30 minutes or more, to one where 2/3 of the buses will come every 30 minutes or less.

More importantly, the New Links plan will create a core set of 17 lines that will come every 20 minutes or less – most 7 days a week – and will connect every major part of the south shore New Orleans region together. This will mean a vastly more useful transit system for many more people throughout the region.

Equity

New Links was specifically designed to advance equity in the New Orleans region. New Links decisions were guided by the New Links transit propensity index, which prioritized disadvantaged communities for transit service. Neighborhoods with higher numbers of carless households, households of color, and lower income households got the biggest priority for service.

The final New Links analysis shows the results of this prioritization, significant jumps in access for vulnerable populations.

- 46 percent of residents of color will be within a ½ mile (10-minute walk) of transit that comes every 20 minutes or less (compared to only 27 percent today)
- 50 percent of low-income residents will be within a ½ mile (10-minute walk) of transit that comes every 20 minutes or less (compared to only 30 percent today)
- 47 percent of carless households will be within a ½ mile (10-minute walk) of transit that comes every 15 minutes or less (compared to only 30 percent today). Over 2/3 of carless households will be within a ½ mile (10-minute walk) of transit that comes every 20 minutes or less.

RIDE's post New Links analysis of access to jobs, also indicates there will be significant benefits for underserved neighborhoods. Lower 9th Ward residents will see a 14 percent increase in available jobs in 60 minutes or less via transit during the middle of the day, New Orleans East residents a 13 percent increase, and Algiers residents a 6 percent increase.

Tradeoffs

Tradeoffs are a key part of a network redesign and these tradeoffs can sometimes be controversial. RIDE believes the tradeoffs are an essential part of the New Links process and that it's important for decision makers to know why they're important. The three most important areas of tradeoffs that RIDE identified are:

Expanding transit to new roads

One of the most important moves for Uptown transit riders is to directly connect the frequent #11 Magazine and redesigned #90 (that connects Uptown with Mid City and Gentilly) with Children's Hospital and Louisiana Lighthouse for the Blind. This is accomplished by running buses down short segments of Henry Clay and Jefferson, two roads that are intended for more traffic and wide enough to handle the load, but where buses did not previously go. This addition is a critically important move for advancing equity and improving workforce access to jobs, but the proposal has spurred complaints from wealthy homeowners along Henry Clay.

More transfers

Both Algiers and New Orleans East riders will see much greater frequency and increased reliability for major core lines. That will be accomplished by shortening several of the winding routes that provide direct downtown access and turning them instead into local feeder and circulator routes. Those routes will then connect to more frequent core routes that go downtown. More riders will have to transfer, but they will see either reduced overall travel time, more reliable service, or both. Long, winding routes that serve multiple destinations can seem attractive because they offer a one-seat ride to a major destination like downtown. But they are prone to unpredictability and must be infrequent, since it takes a larger number of vehicles to service longer routes. A smaller number of vehicles can serve shorter routes and provide greater reliability and frequency, and the additional vehicles can be put on the major express routes downtown to make those routes more frequent.

Figure 4: The New Links Transit Propensity Index

Demographic group	Transit index factor
Race and Ethnicity	
White (Not Hispanic or Latino)	0.29
Black or African American (Not Hispanic or Latino)	2.31
Hispanic or Latino	1.33
Asian (Not Hispanic or Latino)	0.57
Multiracial or other (Not Hispanic or Latino)	1.38
Vehicle ownership	
No car	9.95
One or more cars	0.55
Disability	
With a disability	1.27
Without a disability	0.98
Annual income	
Less than \$10,000	2.37
\$10,000 - \$15,000	1.69
\$15,000 - \$25,000	1.59
\$25,000 - \$35,000	0.78
\$35,000 - \$50,000	0.55
\$50,000 or higher	0.3

Jobs	Transit index factor
< \$1,250 per month	3.87
\$1,250 - \$3,333 per month	2.00
> \$3,333 per month	0.72

Figure 5: Percentage increase in average amount of jobs reachable in selected neighborhoods after New Links implementation

	Percent increase in # of jobs reachable in 60 min or less
Orleans Parish overall	7.2%
New Orleans East	5.6%
Algiers	6.1%
Lower 9th Ward	14.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2021. LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) Data (2018). Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program, accessed October 2021 at <https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/#lodes>. LODES 7.5 release (2018 Data, Version 6.8). Ride New Orleans analysis.

New Links implementation schedule

January 2022

Most West Bank routes changes implemented

May 2022

Most East Bank route changes implemented

September 2022

Remainder of routes changes implemented

“On time” in the RTA’s case means between one minute early and five minutes late. This is a standard definition in the transit world

Figure 6: 2021 on time performance for RTA regular bus routes and streetcars

On time performance	
RTA buses	66.5%
RTA streetcars	74.8%

Source: New Orleans RTA. Data is through August 2021 except Canal Street streetcars which are only through June 2021.

Route eliminations

There will also be some eliminations of routes. Within the RTA system, the #5 Marigny Bywater, the #10 Tchoupitoulas, and #45 Lakeview are all slated for elimination, with the buses serving those routes to be redeployed to provide more frequent service on core routes. These routes all have low ridership and low frequency, and in most of those cases, there is another, more frequent transit line within a 10-minute walk. New Links planners estimate that 96.24 percent of RTA riders will still be able to access the system at their current stop and that 99.7 percent of riders will still be able to access the system within a 1/2 mile (10-minute walk). But the eliminations while necessary, will be controversial. No one wants to see their bus line disappear, even if they don’t use it very often or if there is another option nearby. RIDE recognizes the potential for controversy, but believes that the tradeoff here is necessary to benefit the system as a whole.

Implementation

There was a small preview of New Links in June 2021, with the implementation of recommended changes on the RTA’s #88 St. Claude and #91 Jackson-Esplanade routes, but most of the changes have yet to be implemented. The RTA has released a tentative schedule of New Links implementation, with most West Bank changes scheduled to take place in the winter and most East Bank changes scheduled to occur in the spring. This extended timeline is not a problem, as major shifts like network redesigns typically take many months to prepare. But transit riders and supporters should carefully watch these dates. If implementation starts to slip without a clear explanation and revised timetable, it could be a sign of problems.

ON TIME PERFORMANCE

Nothing is more frustrating for riders than a late bus or a bus that’s too early. Inconsistent transit service means missed shifts, long waits, and a functional reduction of access to important amenities.

Frequent riders who participated in the first round of the New Links process chose more reliable buses as the top priority. It’s clear why - in the months leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, the monthly median on time performance (OTP) for RTA buses was 72 percent and only 65 percent for streetcars. OTP hasn’t looked better in 2021. Through August, system wide OTP for regular fixed route buses was only 66.5 percent and 74.8 percent for streetcar trips.

One bright spot of 2021 though, was the beginning of a more comprehensive approach to improve OTP. For the first time in recent memory, the RTA began regular cross-departmental meetings to examine the OTP issue both comprehensively and line-by-line. These meetings included representatives from operations, maintenance, scheduling, transit planning, data, and dispatch and have continued throughout the year. It’s still too early to tell whether the improvements will lead to lasting improvements, as changing schedules due to COVID and an RTA driver shortage midyear have made any immediate measurements suspect. But the strategies appear promising for the future.

The RTA’s OTP task force settled on four key strategies:

1. Fix the schedule

The task force judged that many schedules were outdated or proceeding on incorrect assumptions. In June, RTA staff told RIDE that one of the most noticeable problems is a lack of sufficient layover time at the beginning and end of some routes. If a particular trip runs into unexpected traffic or more passengers than normal, built-in layover time helps the driver recover any lost time and start the next trip on time.

But for many buses, the layover time is not sufficient – or not sufficient at certain times of day. For instance, some drivers refer to the #57 Franklin as the “race horse” because they say it’s often running behind and drivers basically speed through each trip trying to catch up to the schedule. For the scheduled June 2021 schedule change, the RTA adjusted a number of routes to give better layover time where needed.

2. Streamlining “time points”

OTP is measured by whether a transit vehicle leaves designated time points along a route on time or too early or too late. But problems can arise if there are too many, too few, or poorly placed time points. In those cases, performance on a line can be thrown off by operators trying too hard to make certain time points on time, making the rest of the line chronically early. Or drivers might often arrive early at a poorly placed time point and then be forced to wait – opening up the trip to more traffic unpredictability later in the route.

After a detailed look at all timepoints this spring, RTA staff eliminated unneeded timepoints and dispersed the remaining ones to make issues like this much less likely. While this might not lead to instant improvements on a particular line, it likely will mean smoother operation over the long term – and improved ability for the RTA to identify true trouble points along a route.

3. Better training for operators

As the task force looked at individual performance, it became clear that some drivers – regardless of time of day, consistently arrive on time while other drivers struggle. The task force developed three strategies to deal with this:

- Better education about time points
- Better training on how to pace the bus – for instance, if a bus is running early, the driver might be instructed to slow down for a stop, even if no riders are waiting for the bus there.
- Development of an internal dashboard to better gauge individual driver performance so supervisors can help underperforming drivers improve performance.

4. New buses

60 percent of the RTA bus fleet is older than 10 years. To give that number context, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) recommends that transit agencies don’t operate buses that are more than 10 years old or have more than 500,000 miles. When over half the buses in a fleet are more than 10 years old, breakdowns will be more common, leading to more OTP problems.

While limited funds mean that this problem cannot be solved overnight, new RTA policies are moving the agency in the right direction. New RTA policy is to replace 10-15 percent of the bus fleet every year. 22 new buses came into service in May 2021 – a 23 percent increase of the publicly reported number of available buses for maximum service in 2019.





Figure 7: Comparison of fares before and after RTA's temporary 2021 fare adjustment

Type	Pre-July 2021 fare	Post-July 2021 fare adjustment
Base fare	\$1.25	\$1.25
Base senior/disabled fare	\$0.40	\$0.40
Base youth fare (under 18)	\$1.25	\$0.50
Transfer	\$0.25	Free
Transfer to ferry	\$2 (full ferry price)	Free
New Orleans East Express surcharge	\$0.25	Free
Day pass	\$3	\$3
Senior/disabled day pass	\$3	\$0.80
Youth day pass (under 18)	\$3	\$1
Monthly pass	\$55	\$45
Senior/disabled monthly pass	\$55	\$14
Youth monthly pass (under 18)	\$55	\$18

Source: New Orleans RTA

BUS STOP SHELTER BUDGET COMMITMENT

Another top rider complaint is the relative sparsity of shelters at bus stops in the RTA system. And, it's not wonder. Of approximately 2,400 transit stops in the RTA system, only 349 of them have shelters - less than 15 percent.

But there have been continued signs of progress over the last year. While the on the ground benefits are only likely to be felt gradually over the next few years, there are at least some specific strategies in place.

In the case of bus stop shelters, the most important piece was an RTA commitment to include at least \$500,000 annually for the purchase and installation of new bus stop shelters in the budget moving forward. Until now, the status quo had been to prioritize new shelters only when outside grant funding can be identified. There was not a plan to consistently add shelters each year.

The \$500,000 annually won't buy many bus stop shelters. Depending on costs of installation (which vary by location based on the cost of additional work to meet Americans with Disability Act (ADA) standards), it could be as few as 16 shelters annually. But it's at least a foundation that the RTA infrastructure team can build around and supplement with grants or other one-time sources of revenue. This is an important step toward accomplishing the RTA's Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) goal that 90 percent of stops with 15 boardings or more will have a shelter or a bench by 2027.

NEW FARE SYSTEM

While RTA fares have consistently been among the cheapest among peer agencies, the overall fare structure has still been problematic. It has been difficult for new riders to understand, has penalized riders in certain geographic areas, and has disincentivized transfers and the use of monthly passes.

In Summer 2021, though, the RTA rolled out a temporarily revamped fare structure that offers an important opportunity to test new ideas. Billed as a way to get ridership to return after the COVID slump, the fare changes are only guaranteed to last until the end of the year, at which point the RTA will consider making them permanent.

Four important ideas are especially worth highlighting in the revamped fare structure:

Elimination of the transfer and NO East penalty

There has long been a \$0.25 additional charge to transfer to another RTA bus or streetcar. While that may not seem onerous to some, it disincentivizes transfers for a primarily lower income ridership – something that would cause problems for New Links, which relies on shorter routes and more transfers to increase reliability and decrease overall travel time. Riders in New Orleans East have also had to pay an additional \$0.25 charge for “express” buses headed downtown, even though those buses primarily act as local buses for most of their routes. The new fare structure eliminates those add-ons for New Orleans East residents and allows free transfers within two hours of boarding for all riders.



Ferry fare parity

Since the RTA took over responsibility for the ferry from the state, there hasn't been a major effort to integrate the ferry system with the bus network. With the new fare structure, bus riders for the first time can now transfer from bus or streetcar on to the ferry for no charge, instead of paying the full ferry fare of \$2. When combined with the New Links proposal to increase the frequency of West Bank local bus routes servicing the Algiers Point ferry terminal, this is a major step toward integrating the ferry back into the rest of the transit network.

Incentivizing monthly passes

Monthly passes can encourage more ridership, smooth the boarding process, and reward loyal transit customers. But at \$55 a month, the pricing of the RTA's monthly pass in comparison to the \$1.25 base fare didn't make much financial sense for most riders. But with the new fare structure, the price of the monthly pass drops to \$45, giving a much more compelling reason to buy a monthly pass.

Advance equity

Many peer agencies throughout the country have started to develop reduced fare programs for lower income residents. To this point, RTA hasn't followed suit, but the temporary fare structure moves in that direction, creating a reduced fare day pass for seniors and youth under the age of 18. These are great precedents that can serve as a foundation for a further focus on a more equitable fare structure in the future.

Ultimately, fare policy is a complicated area. With transit serving as stopgap transportation for lower income families without other options, there's a strong moral and societal argument to reduce or eliminate fares. But transit agencies have evolved domestically with an assumption that fare revenue will pay for a part of the operating budget. For example, pre COVID almost 20 percent of the RTA's annual operating budget came from farebox revenue. The RTA's base fare of a \$1.25 has not been raised since 1999 and is thus significantly cheaper than most RTA peers. For an individual rider that can be a good thing, but it also means that the RTA is taking in much less revenue from fares than they were comparatively when the fares were last raised in 1999. If the RTA fare had kept up with inflation, the fare today would be \$2.08, which likely would have been an increase of well over \$10 million in operating revenues in 2019.

These issues won't be solved overnight, but in creating a clearer fare policy and setting further precedent for discounting fares for the riders most in need, the RTA may have established important precedent for the future that could lead to increased fares in some areas but reductions in cost for lower income riders. The RTA is expected to complete a larger fare study and analysis of the effects of the temporary fare structure in late 2021 that should provide additional data to help craft a permanent policy for the future.

What's Not Working



Inequitable access to economic opportunity via transit

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Continued rider experience problems

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Communication and collaboration

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Funding and regional integration in Jefferson Parish

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INEQUITABLE ACCESS TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY VIA TRANSIT

As we all are sadly aware, New Orleans has a major equity problem. The City's poverty rate is 10 points higher than the national average and 39 percent of children live in poverty – ninth worst for cities of our size.

Worse, this poverty has a strong racial tinge, with 32 percent of Black households in poverty, but only 10 percent of white households, according to the Data Center.

These inequities bring many challenges to our region and one of the most important is affordable transportation. 18.6 percent of New Orleans households don't have access to a vehicle and 46 percent of New Orleans households only have one vehicle. This means reliable, effective transit is a must for many residents to live dignified lives and access economic and educational opportunity. But how should we measure whether transit service is effective?

RIDE believe that the best way to do that is to look at how useful that transit service is to potential riders. Basically, how many potential destinations can a rider get to in a reasonable amount of time based on the scheduled service?

This takes evaluation of transit out of the realm of simply asking, is there a bus stop that a potential rider can access? In looking at how useful transit is for a particular rider or neighborhood, we instead focus on:

- How many places can a rider expect to reach in a reasonable amount of time?
- Can the rider reach all of those places throughout the day or only at the heart of rush hour?
- What about late at night or on the weekends?
- Is not being able to afford a car only a mild impediment or is it a serious disadvantage in accessing destinations?

In determining what destinations to measure access to, there are a wide variety of choices. Following the lead of the University of Minnesota Access Across America study, we typically focus on jobs. We do that for several reasons.

First, for the majority of potential riders, access to economic opportunity is the biggest motivation for taking transit. Second, potential jobs are typically widely spread throughout a region, with higher concentrations in popular destinations.

That means measuring access to jobs can also serve as a stand in for measuring access to many other destinations. If an individual has good access to jobs via transit, the chances are they also have good access to most other important destinations via transit.

For these reasons, RIDE has annually evaluated the effectiveness of transit by looking at access to jobs via transit.

METHODOLOGY NOTES

The methodology used for this study reflects the cumulative opportunity metric that is utilized in the "Access Across America" report produced by the University of Minnesota's Accessibility Observatory. Data is obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau's Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program 2018. The calculations are based on the travel times observed between every US Census Block Group (CBG) in Jefferson Parish, Orleans Parish, and St. Bernard parishes. To calculate the trip origin and destination for a particular CBG, the population- and job-weighted centroid was used. Travel times are calculated in ArcGIS Pro using the Network Analyst toolset using road network data obtained from OpenStreetMap and General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) schedule data published by the RTA and JeT. Driving times assume that the vehicles do not encounter any congestion and travel at the speed limit. The transit travel times operate on an assumption of perfect schedule adherence. The observed travel times further make the assumption that portions of a trip that are not on-board a transit vehicle take place by walking at a speed of 3 miles per hour along designated pedestrian facilities such as sidewalks, trails, etc. To reflect the influence of transit service frequency on accessibility, travel times are calculated repeatedly for each origin-destination pair every eleven minutes between 7:00 AM and 8:59 AM as the departure time (for "peak" service), and between 11:00 AM and 12:59 PM (for "midday" service). Accessibility is averaged across the three parishes, with the number of jobs accessible from each CBG weighted by the percentage of workers residing in that CBG. The result is a single metric that represents the accessibility value experienced by an average worker in each of the three parishes.

The following formula describes how the weighted average is calculated:

$$\text{Weighted Average} = (w1/a)j1 + (w2/a)j2 \dots wn/ajn$$

w = workers residing in CBG

a = all workers residing in Orleans Parish

j = jobs accessible from CBG

n = Each CBG in Orleans Parish(h)

Figure 8: Percentage of jobs reachable in 30 minutes using public transit and walking, by Census Block Group

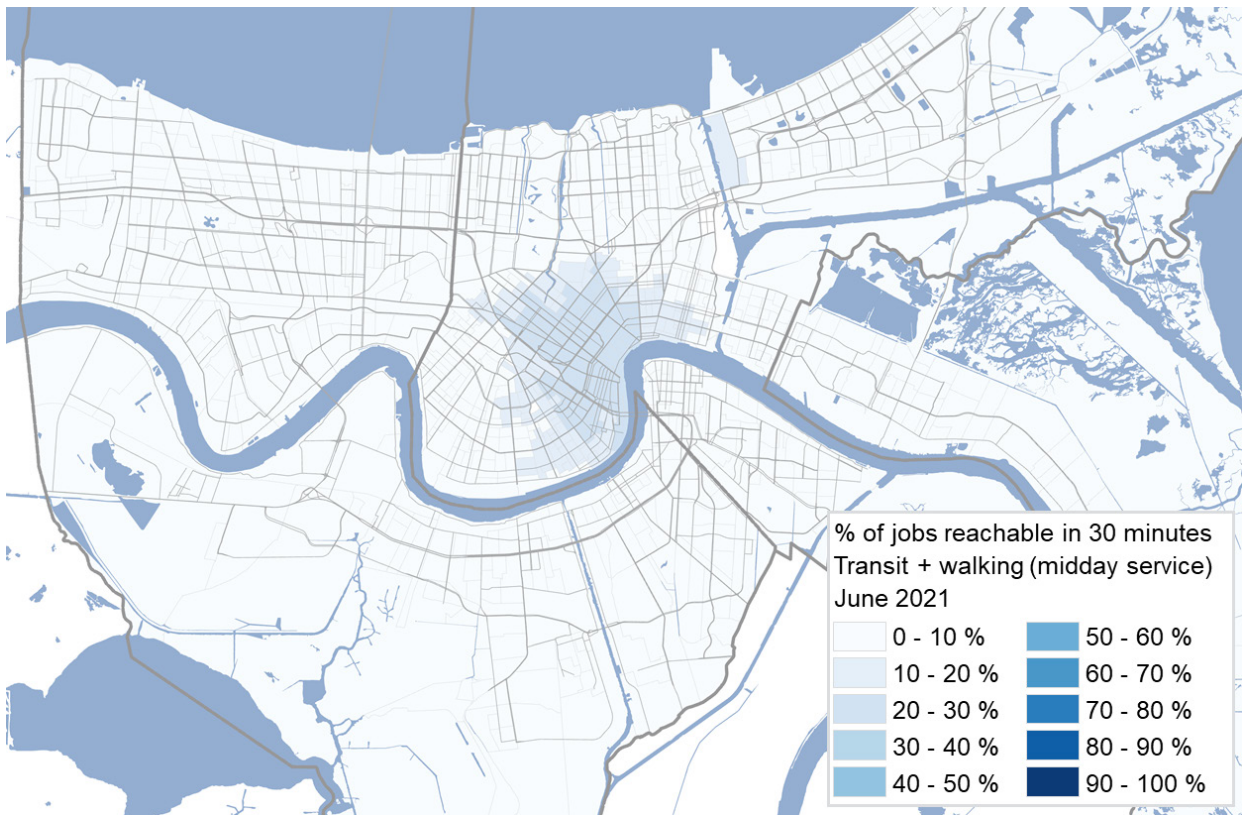
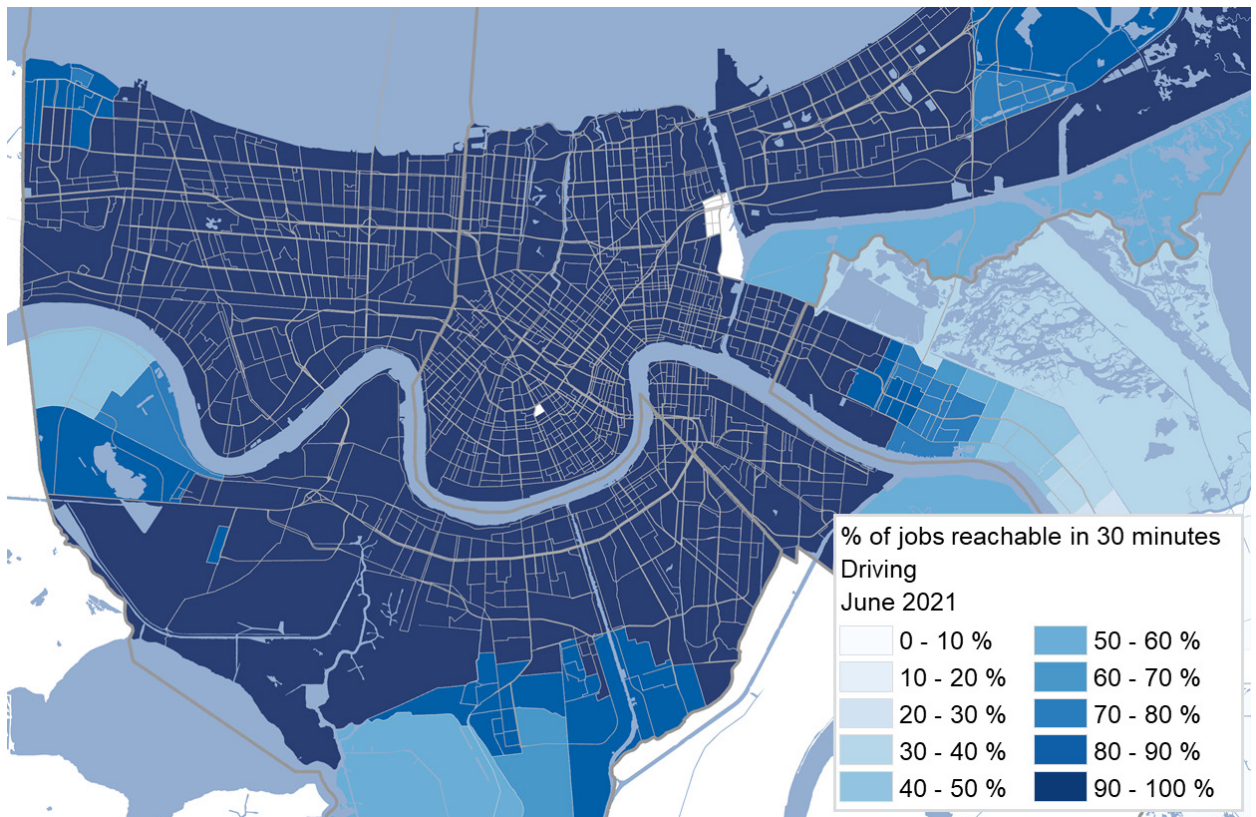


Figure 9: Percentage of jobs reachable in 30 minutes driving, by Census Block Group



Source: RTA, Jefferson Transit, U.S. Census Bureau, 2021. LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) Data (2018). Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program, accessed October 2021 at <https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/#lodes>. LODES 7.5 release (2018 Data, Version 6.8). Ride New Orleans analysis.

Figure 10: Percentage of jobs reachable in 60 minutes using public transit and walking, by Census Block Group

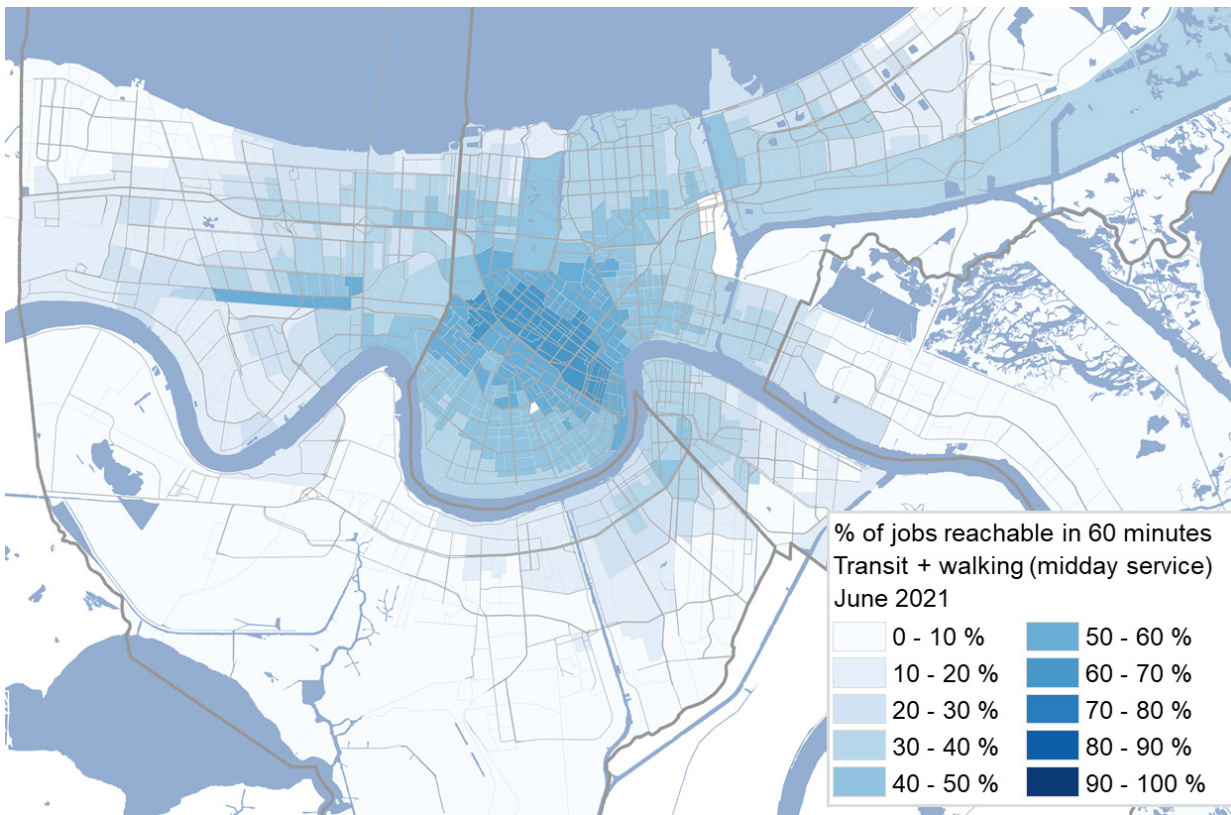
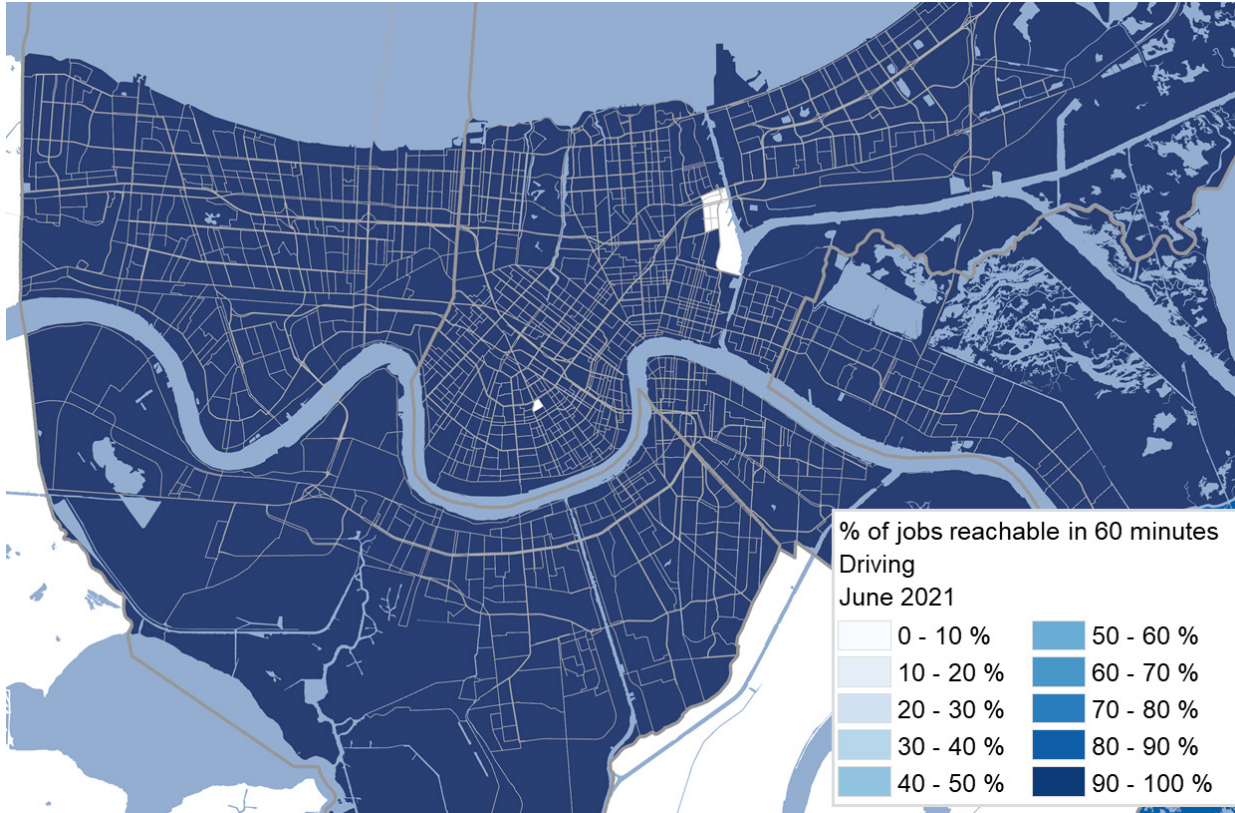


Figure 11: Percentage of jobs reachable in 60 minutes driving, by Census Block Group



Source: RTA, Jefferson Transit, U.S. Census Bureau, 2021. LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) Data (2018), Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program, accessed October 2021 at <https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/#lodes>. LODES 7.5 release (2018 Data, Version 6.8). Ride New Orleans analysis.

Figure 12: Average percent of jobs accessible at midday by mode, by parish

		30-minute commute	60-minute commute
Orleans Parish	via transit	7%	37%
	via driving	89%	99%
Jefferson Parish	via transit	2%	16%
	via driving	78%	99%
St. Bernard Parish	via transit	1%	4%
	via driving	23%	96%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2020. LODES Data. Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program. <https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/lodes/>; Ride New Orleans analysis

From peak time to midday

In addition to the technical methodology change described on the previous page, RIDE also switched the main time period we analyze. In past years, we've focused on the traditional morning peak period, a time when workers with 9-5 jobs are likely going to work. We changed that this year for two reasons. First, lower income transit riders making up a majority of the regional transit ridership. These riders are more likely to need transit at different hours than just a traditional commute window – especially considering the region's hospitality heavy job base. Second, only or primarily evaluating a transit system by its peak period means missing a greater understanding of the flexibility and overall utility of that transit system. A personal car is not only available from 7-9 am and then again from 5 to 7 pm – understanding how transit performs outside those windows is critical to evaluating the usefulness of that transit. The New Links planners recognized these two important items and shifted more service to all day from peak time only. Moving forward, that will be the priority standard for RIDE as well.

Transit riders at a disadvantage

Unfortunately, what we found this year is consistent with what we've found in past State of Transit reports – transit riders are at a significant disadvantage compared to residents with the ability and means to drive.

The average New Orleanian on transit can only reach 37.4 percent of the region's jobs in one hour or less via transit in the middle of the day. But if that same New Orleanian has access to a car, they can reach virtually all of the region's job opportunities in that same hour period.

In Jefferson and St Bernard parishes, the access levels are worse. Average transit riders in those parishes can only reach 16.3 percent and 3.6 percent, respectively, of the region's jobs in one hour or less via transit in the middle of the day.

At shorter commute thresholds, as expected, it's even worse. The average New Orleans transit reliant rider can only reach 7.4 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes or less. In Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes the number is 2.1 and 0.6 percent, respectively.

One might question the validity of comparing transit to a personal car. Isn't that just common sense that the car would result in a quicker trip? It's true that there will always be a certain advantage for car trips – especially absent investments in transit prioritization that allow transit to eschew congestion and delay. But such a stark disadvantage for transit riders is indicative of a problem. AAA says that the average annual cost of owning a vehicle is \$9,561. That's 36 percent of the annual income for a family of four at the federally designated poverty level of \$26,500. If we want to make a real dent in the inequities of our region, we have to provide better access to jobs via transit.

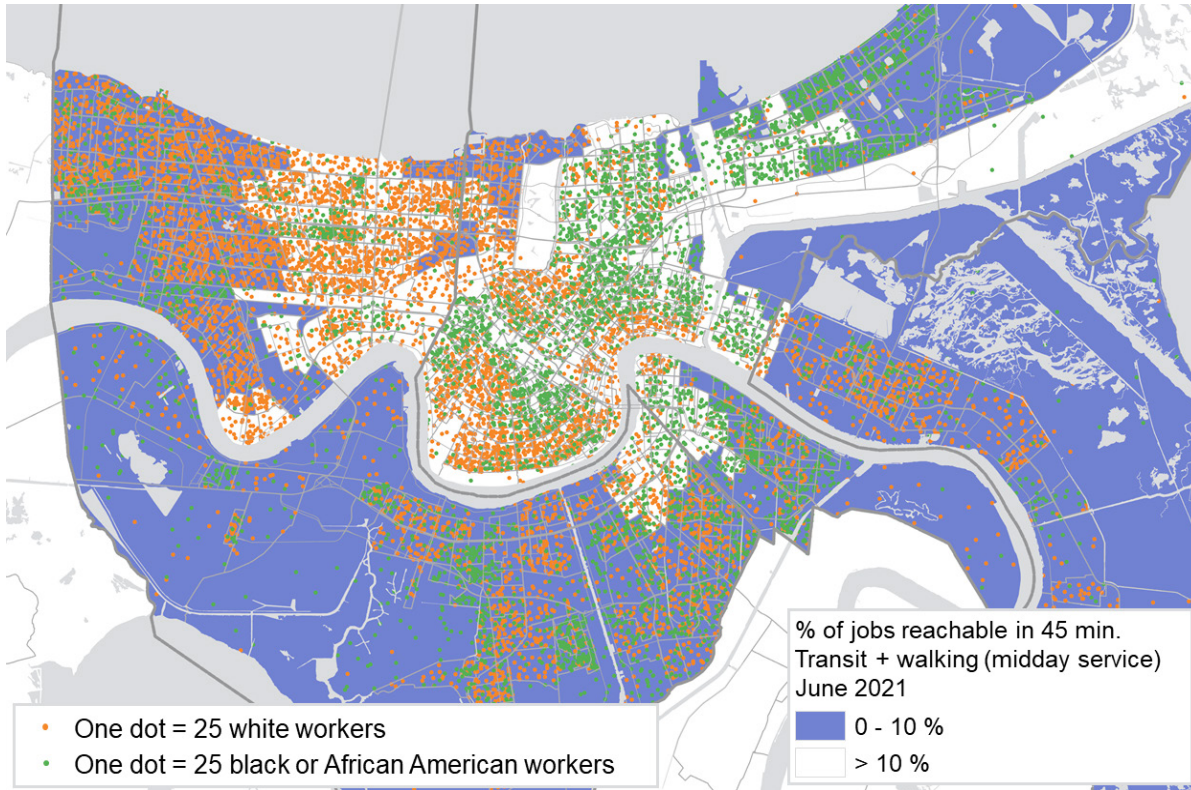
Racial equity gaps

There is also a pronounced gap between white and Black households.

While the average white household in New Orleans can reach 41 percent of the region's jobs in 60 minutes or less via transit during the middle of the day, the average Black household can only reach 34.8 percent of the region's jobs via transit during the same hour time period. In Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes the gaps are slightly smaller, but still pronounced, at 17.8/13.4 and 3.8/2.9 respectively.

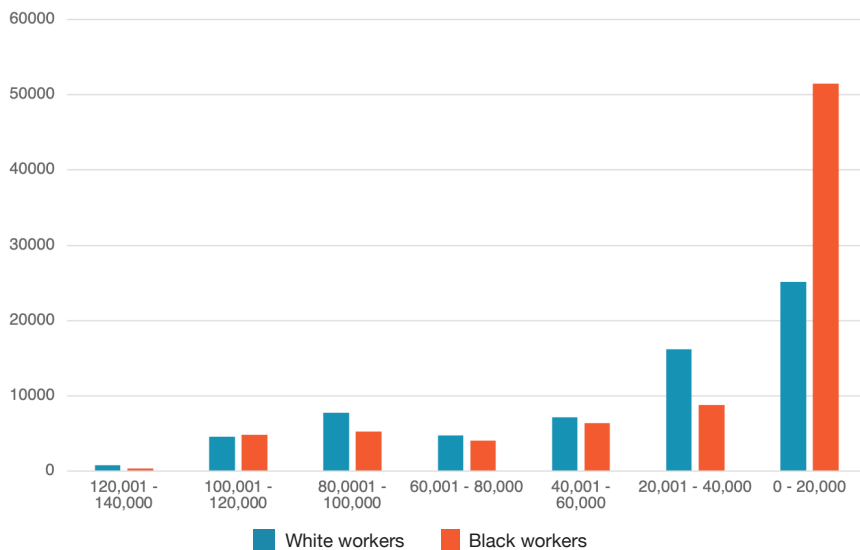
More troubling is that a majority of Black workers are in the worst category of access - only able to reach 2.5 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes or less, while only 31 percent of white workers are in the same category of minimal access.

Figure 13: Access threshold to jobs via transit by race



Source: RTA. Jefferson Transit. U.S. Census Bureau. 2021. LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) Data (2018). Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program, accessed October 2021 at <https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/#lodes>. LODES 7.5 release (2018 Data, Version 6.8). Ride New Orleans analysis.

Figure 14: Jobs accessible via transit for Black and white workers, Orleans Parish



Source: RTA. U.S. Census Bureau. 2021. LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) Data (2018). Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program, accessed October 2021 at <https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/#lodes>. LODES 7.5 release (2018 Data, Version 6.8). Ride New Orleans analysis.

Neighborhood access

Inequities persist when you examine transit access at the neighborhood level. Despite growing need, neighborhoods like New Orleans East, Algiers, and the Lower 9th Ward continue to have subpar transit access when compared to the rest of the region

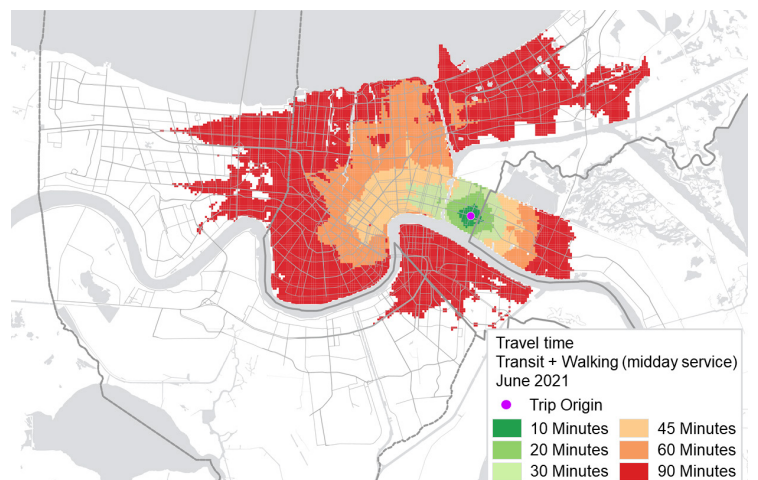
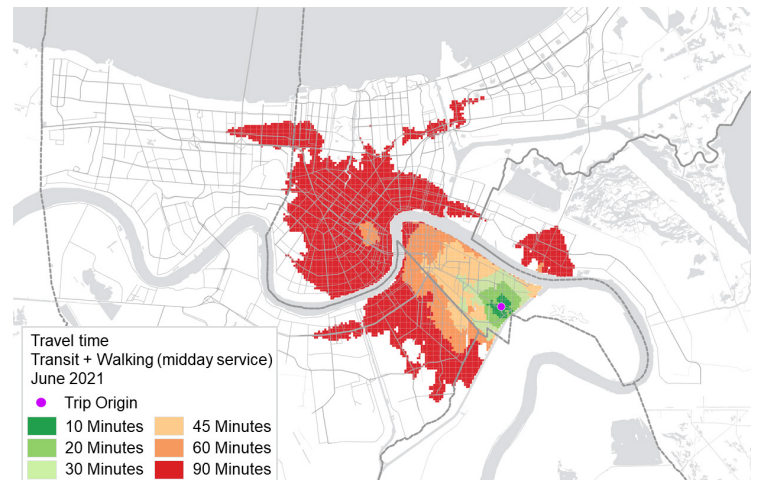
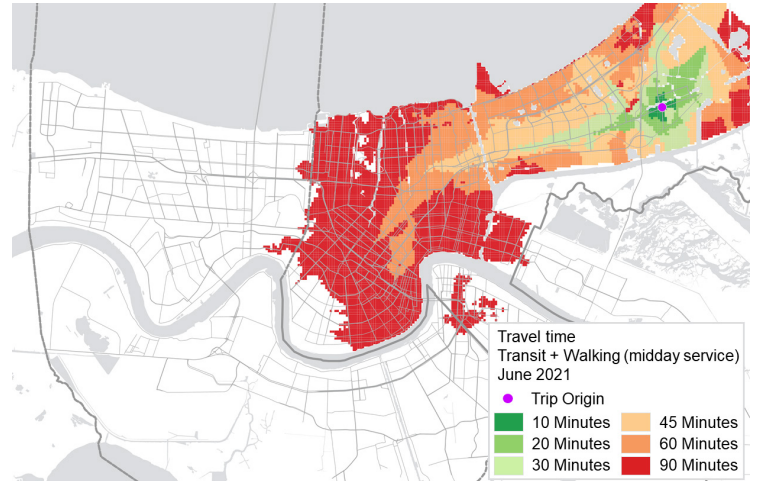
Figure 15: Average percent of jobs accessible at midday via transit, by parish and selected neighborhoods

	30-minute commute	60-minute commute
Orleans Parish	7%	37%
New Orleans East	2%	21%
Algiers	1%	19%
Lower 9th Ward	2%	30%

Source: RTA. U.S. Census Bureau. 2021. LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) Data (2018). Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program, accessed October 2021 at <https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/#lodes>. LODES 7.5 release (2018 Data, Version 6.8). Ride New Orleans analysis.

Source for maps: RTA. Jefferson Transit. U.S. Census Bureau. 2021. LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) Data (2018). Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program, accessed October 2021 at <https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/#lodes>. LODES 7.5 release (2018 Data, Version 6.8). Ride New Orleans analysis.

Figures 16-18: Travel time via transit during the middle of the day from specific points in New Orleans East, Algiers, and the Lower 9th Ward.



RIDER AMENITY PROBLEMS

While there were important structural steps forward for bus stop shelters (as noted in the previous section), the on the ground rider experience seemed stuck in place in many ways over the last year.

This is not to say there wasn't progress, but that riders still haven't seen the direct benefits. For instance, the RTA started the procurement process for 16 new bus stop shelters approved in 2020 early this year, but as of October 2021 that process is ongoing and there still aren't any new bus stop shelters in the ground.

This is not to reflexively blame current RTA staff for this lengthy process. They appear to have inherited a system that only prioritized putting up bus stop shelters in areas where advertising signs on shelters are permitted – something generally only allowed in commercial corridors. The RTA infrastructure team has said the processes they are putting in place now – with on call engineering teams that can better evaluate sites and begin the permitting process with the city, followed by RFPs for installation of the shelters – will lead to more efficient and rapid bus stop shelter additions in the future.

But riders can be forgiven for not instantly understanding the long game and/or the internal planning, design and compliance process/workflows issues when they are standing in the hot sun or pouring rain waiting for a bus that has at least a 1 in 3 chance of not being on time.

Temporary downtown transfer center

The RTA's slow process for determining a "permanent" location for the temporary downtown transfer center was also a problem for riders.

At issue is where riders will disembark and wait for transfers at the region's busiest transit hub while funding is secured, and construction started and completed at the new downtown transfer center (see sidebar). The downtown transfer hub had been at the intersection of Elk Place/S. Rampart and Canal Street, allowing easy access for riders to transfer to/from the Canal Street streetcar lines to go further downtown or out to Mid-City and points beyond.

However, the collapse of the Hard Rock hotel in October 2019 and subsequent closing of the area necessitated a change in locations. After a delay of two months, the RTA settled on the area in front of Duncan Plaza on Loyola for most East Bank buses and across the street for most West Bank buses.

Duncan Plaza has some advantages. On that side of Loyola there is natural shade from the trees and areas to put up temporary shelters for riders to stand. Crime reports at the transfer center also went down – even as they went up city wide – potentially indicating an environment where riders felt safer.

But the location is less than ideal in many ways. It is harder for buses to turn around, especially in rush hour. It is also challenging to transfer to the Canal Street streetcar there – the closest outbound stops are on the other side of Poydras or the other side of Tulane. Despite multiple rider complaints, buses coming from the East still do not stop at Canal Street as they cross it, even though the danger from the Hard Rock hotel site has been gone for many months.



Permanent Downtown Transfer Center

After a seven-year stop and start site selection process, the RTA formally selected the intersection of Basin and Canal for a permanent downtown transfer center earlier this year. Once complete, a modern, upgraded downtown transfer center will make a huge difference for the rider experience. Greatly improved amenities will mean a more pleasant experience and a layout designed for easier transfers and smoother operations will mean predictable and reliable buses. Funding remains a question, though. The RTA applied for federal support funding in 2020 but did not receive it. The agency is expected to apply again in November 2021 via the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) Bus and Bus Facilities program for up to \$19 million (with a 20 percent local match). If successful, it would still likely be at least three to five years before the new downtown transfer center would be open for business.

Figure 19: Temporary transfer center

Proposed Site Overview

A.N.O East busses (62, 63, 64, 65, E1)

Existing benches
Install new canopies or shelter “awnings”

B. West Bank busses

(84, 101, 102, 103, 106, 114, 115, W1, W2)
Replace existing 12’ shelter;
Replace sidewalk for ADA compliance

C. Gentilly, Mid-City, Uptown

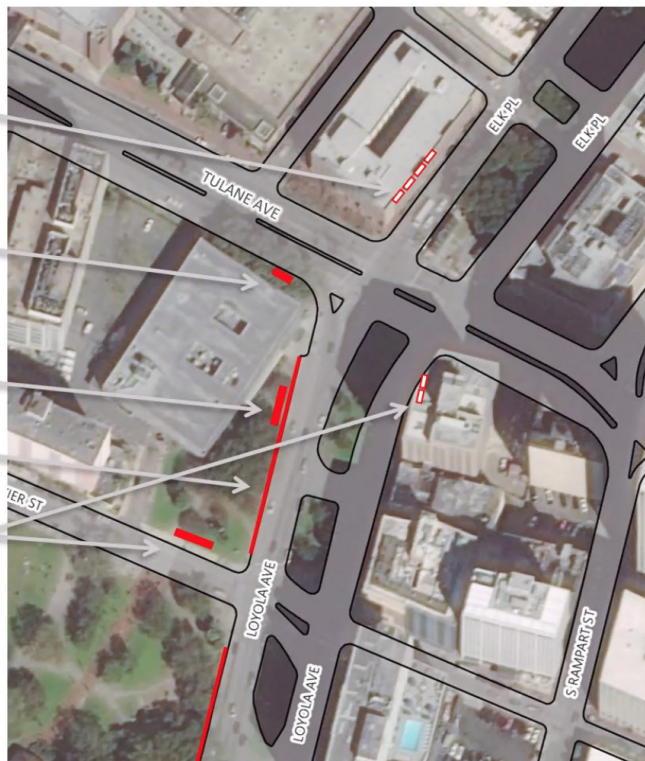
(15, 32, 51, 52, 57, 80, 88, 91in)
Requires new 24’ shelter + pad and sidewalk fill to curb
Optional site enhancements and programming

D. Turnaround (39)

Install new shelter + pad
Sidewalk needs replacement
Requires detail Ops/Safety review

E. Through routes + JeT

(91out)
Install new shelter canopies (awnings) + benches
NOTE: sidewalk is not ADA



Source: New Orleans RTA



Riders waiting at the temporary RTA hub for Algiers buses

Most importantly, West Bank riders board and disembark on the opposite side of Duncan Plaza. That means they sit in the hot sun without shelter waiting for West Bank-bound buses in the parking lot at Perdido and Loyola. And they have to cross six lanes of traffic on Loyola with subpar pedestrian infrastructure just to get to their transfers. Using the Duncan Plaza temporary transfer center has been a particularly poor rider experience for West Banks riders.

Because of this, riders and advocates continued to push for a better interim downtown transfer center during the three-to-five year wait (minimum) for the permanent site to come online. For many months, RTA staff said they were working on a plan and in June 2021 they finally presented three options – the status quo, a return to Elk Place/Canal, or a move to the area by the public library at Tulane and Loyola. In September, the RTA board approved the move to the area by the public library.

The plan is a good one from a rider perspective. It will include ample shelters, take advantage of the library to provide additional shelter, ensure most bus routes are within an easy walk of each other for transfers, and the location will be easier for buses to get in and out of, making for more reliable trips.

But assuming the new area opens on time, it will have been over two years since the Hard Rock necessitated the move to Duncan Plaza. That’s simply too much time and is indicative that rider amenities do not always take precedence in RTA decision making – something that needs to change moving forward.



COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

The temporary transfer center is also a good example of recurring issues that the RTA seems to have with communication and collaboration with outside entities. In 2020 and the first months of 2021, RTA staff would acknowledge the problems with the transfer center when pushed by members of the public in public meetings. But there was little proactive communication on what was being done to fix the issue or apparent efforts to engage the public and outside stakeholders on forging a solution.

Ultimately in the summer of 2021 as noted above, the RTA released and effectively communicated a plan. But that was only after many months of an increasingly grating situation for riders.

This fits the broader pattern of the RTA's communication with the public and willingness to collaborate with outside partners – including the agency's own workforce. Some additional examples are detailed below.

Canal Street ferry communication

Without much warning in July, the RTA said the Canal Street/Algiers Point ferry might be shut down for approximately 40 days to start important work on the new Canal Street ferry terminal that could only be done when the Mississippi River is at a low level – much more typical in late summer and fall.

While the RTA had consistently said that there wouldn't need to be any shutdowns, plans do change and sometimes it's necessary to shut service down to expedite infrastructure upgrades. That might have been accepted by the community if it had been introduced in a collaborative and open manner ahead of time. Instead, the RTA team first announced this as a possibility at the July 27 RTA board meeting – without giving the community a heads up – and said it could happen as soon as mid-August (though they pledged to try to locate an alternate site). To make matters worse, RTA staff said that replacement bus service – usually a given in any situation

where regular service is being suspended – might not be offered since the ridership had been lower than hoped for the last time bus service was substituted for ferry service.

The August 4 Riders' Advisory Committee – heavily attended by ferry riders – didn't help. The default setting on the digital meeting was to not allow anyone but RTA staff to speak. Instead, participants were told they could only type comments into the chat window which would then be read aloud. After numerous complaints, the RTA staff opened up the mic for public dialogue, but most attendees already had the impression that the RTA was not interested in hearing their comments.

Eventually, the RTA secured a temporary docking area at Mardi Gras World and did not have to shut down ferry service. But that temporary docking area didn't allow for people using wheelchairs or taking their bikes on board. This further angered ferry riders, many already on edge because of the closed, one-way manner that the RTA delivered information on this issue.

In RIDE's analysis, the lesson is not that the RTA should never shut down service temporarily. Sometimes decisions like that have to be made in order to finish important projects that will improve transit service in the future.

But the RTA communicated in a very closed, one-way manner rather than attempting to further develop a productive relationship with the very organized constituency of ferry riders. At best, this caused a lot of unneeded pain for RTA staff who had to deal with the fallout. At worst, this was a missed opportunity to develop a respectful and collaborative relationship with an organized part of the RTA's customer base that could have paid many dividends down the road.

Getting Around

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Maps & Schedules

Accessibility

Business Center

About

My Account



A screenshot of the RTA's updated announcement of the return to (almost) full service

Return to full service – or not?

Throughout the spring of 2021, RTA staff repeatedly said at public meetings that the agency would be returning to full scheduled service in June. This was after more than a year of COVID mandated service reductions that led to most lines being on a Saturday schedule instead of the normal weekday schedule because of reduced demand and reduced revenue.

However, as the June date approached for a return to full service, it became clear internally that the RTA couldn't return to full service because they no longer had enough drivers to operate the regularly scheduled peak weekday service levels. Instead, RTA leadership determined they would return to full service during the weekday peak periods but maintain Saturday headways during the rest of the week. Staffing shortages in the wake of the COVID pandemic have been unfortunately common in both public and private entities, as was made clear by the city's difficulty with trash collection, among other examples. The RTA is not alone in this challenge.

But instead of clearly explaining the rationale about this change in plans, the RTA instead just switched to a different message. As the June service change approached, the message suddenly shifted to a return to "almost full service", without noting the previous plan.

When isolated and compared to other issues like New Links or transit funding, this is a relatively minor problem. But as part of a pattern of one-way, indifferent communication, it is more problematic. It was confusing for riders and activists who pay attention to RTA communication and was troubling that the RTA felt they could say one thing for many months and then say something completely different without acknowledging the change. Shifts like that can make it harder to keep and maintain trust with the transit-riding public.

Firing Valerie Jefferson

Amid an increasingly strained relationship, RTA CEO Alex Wiggins fired Valerie Jefferson, the head of the RTA operators' union ATU Local 1560, in September 2021 from her job as a bus driver. According to media reports, Wiggins said it was because Jefferson directed inappropriate and disrespectful language toward him. Jefferson – who it should be noted joined the Ride New Orleans board in July 2021 (but had no editorial control over this report) – said that Wiggins was going back on an agreement for hazard pay for RTA operators during Hurricane Ida (which Wiggins denies) and that she vociferously objected to that.



RIDE is not interested in relitigating any of the back and forth cited in the media accounts and does not usually get involved in labor-management issues. But in the context of this section, RIDE believes that firing the duly elected representative of the majority of the RTA's workforce is a harmful and unwarranted action which makes it less likely to secure operator cooperation on key initiatives moving forward. It needlessly poisons the well of RTA labor relations at a time when management and rank and file need to work together.

Simply put, the RTA needs a collaborative, respectful relationship with its workforce and firing Ms. Jefferson was very harmful to that goal.

How big a priority is public engagement?

Anecdotally, the RTA also has seemed less willing to participate in public meetings which they do not directly control recently. Even in the Transdev years, the RTA had always been willing to send a representative to talk directly to transit riders at RIDE-organized events. But for the first time in a number of years, the RTA turned down three opportunities to speak to riders and stakeholders in recent months at RIDE sponsored events - at a July forum on dedicated transit lanes, an August transit rider meet up on the temporary downtown transfer center, and an October transit rider meet up intended to discuss, among other topics, the RTA's new mental health crisis coordinator.*

Communications and collaboration

Individually, each of these examples could be dismissed as one-offs. But taken as a whole, they are cause for concern.

A big part of the reason for a shift to a publicly controlled model was to increase transparency and community engagement with the planning process. The RTA board of commissioners would certainly maintain that this has been done. But if members of the public find less access and fewer opportunities to engage, that is troubling. If the RTA is less interested in forging cooperative relationships with outside partners and more interested in one-

way communications with the public and command-and-control management with its workforce, that is troubling as well.

The RTA needs a wide range of community partners to work in coalition to advance key priorities. The RTA may control the buses, but it doesn't control city streets, run Jefferson Parish transit service, and can't unilaterally establish a new tax to raise revenue. The RTA can't control every behavioral aspect of its frontline ambassadors – the transit operators. These are all critical areas for moving transit forward – and areas where the RTA will need to work collaboratively, not in top-down, command and control style, to make progress.

Moving forward, RIDE hopes to see more of a focus on prioritizing respectful, cross-departmental/institutional collaboration, cultivating meaningful engagement with the community and staff, and working respectfully with transit riders to give them the tools and knowledge they need to be able to dialogue with RTA staff and decisionmakers on equal terms.



*The hiring of the Crisis Coordinator - intended to help address potential issues with persons experiencing a mental health crisis within the RTA system without resorting to police intervention - is a laudable and forward-thinking move by the RTA.



Figure 20: Jefferson Transit expenses and revenue before fund transfers, 2015-2019

Year	Expenses	Revenue (before fund transfers)	Gap
2019	12,703,961	10,699,000	-2,004,961
2018	12,914,471	10,601,005	-2,313,466
2017	12,053,061	10,222,538	-1,830,523
2016	11,873,672	10,382,877	-1,490,795
2015	11,657,557	10,426,423	-1,231,134

Source: Jefferson Parish Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports 2015-2019:

FUNDING AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN JEFFERSON PARISH

RIDE often focuses more on the RTA in our analysis of regional transit. The RTA is responsible for vastly more ridership – 89 percent of 2019 transit boardings in the region compared to 11 percent for Jefferson Transit. In the short-term, RTA deficiencies – and improvements – affect many more people.

But regional transit is a huge issue and improving regional transit will continue to be an area of growing importance in the coming years. Two of the three largest jobs centers in the region are in Jefferson Parish – the Metairie CBD and Elmwood. And even taking the regional focus out of the equation, there is a growing need for transit in Jefferson Parish. While the total Jefferson Parish population is lower than it was in 2000, there are a higher number of residents in poverty.

So, it is important for us to also look critically at transit in Jefferson Parish as well. There are two important areas where improvements are needed –the Parish’s financial support for transit and JeT’s integration into the larger regional network as envisioned by New Links.

Financial support

Despite being a larger jurisdiction, with a higher median income, JeT only had an operations budget of \$16 million in 2019 compared to the RTA’s budget of \$125 million. Based on the National Transit Database definition of service area population that meant the RTA outspent JeT 9 to 1 per capita in their respective service areas. On bus operations in 2019, the RTA outspent JeT by more than 6 to 1.

While one can argue that there is a greater need in Orleans Parish than Jefferson Parish, there is still a significant underinvestment in comparison. The US Census estimates that 5.1 percent of the Orleans Parish workforce currently commutes to work via transit and 1.3 percent of the Jefferson Parish workforce current commutes to work via transit. Factoring those commuter numbers in, the RTA still outspent JeT by more than 2 to 1 per estimated transit commuter.

Worse, Jefferson Parish has underinvested in transit to the degree that JeT has been spending through reserves in recent years. In 2019, Jefferson Parish had a deficit of \$2,004,961 before transfers from other funding sources, continuing a pattern of previous years. Before the pandemic, observers expected Jefferson Transit to burn through its reserve fund in the mid 2020s, forcing a decision between finding additional revenue and cutting already insufficient service for its residents. That fiscal cliff has been temporarily pushed back by the addition of \$27.7 million in federal emergency funding for transit operations during the COVID crisis. But that cliff still likely looms later in the decade.



An economy of scale

With this funding problem, Jefferson Parish should be especially focused on the parts of New Links that increase the transit economy of scale and make transit more efficient by integrating RTA and JeT routes.

But while Jefferson Parish has been supportive of the major components of New Links that will bring the biggest benefits like the regional routes and service integration at Willy Terminal, the Parish announced right before this report went to press that they would not implement some of the other changes. This was a disappointing move and one that will most hurt future transit riders and businesses that rely on efficient transit for their workforce. The two areas affected are:

1. The New Links planners proposed to eliminate the W-6 Gretna Local, which currently connects Old Gretna with the Willy Terminal and the RTA's Algiers Point ferry terminal. They proposed to replace it with an RTA- run route that would cover much of the same ground as well as the General Meyers corridor, including Delgado's Algiers campus. In addition to expanded access to destinations, this move would provide vastly improved reliability and frequency to riders in Old Gretna. Instead of coming only once every hour, the service would have come every 30 minutes. And unlike the current JeT W-6 which only operates on weekdays, the new RTA line would have operated all weekend.

2. The New Links planners proposed to shorten the E-2 Airline Highway and E-3 Jefferson Highway buses that currently cover ground already served by other transit lines. Shortening the routes would mean that they would come more frequently and reliably, and riders would have had a similar overall travel time into New Orleans – just with an additional transfer. It also would have allowed Jefferson Transit to shift a bus or two to higher need areas without reducing frequency for the E-2 or E-3, something that would have made the system stronger as a whole.

In both cases the vast majority of affected riders would have benefited from the proposed changes and Jefferson Transit would have been overall better set to build ridership on core lines, control costs in the short term, and quickly build a persuasive case for additional funding.

The decisions likely will not negatively affect the New Links network as a whole in the short-term since the major regional route shifts are still moving forward as of press time. But the decision is puzzling at best since the financial constraints of Jefferson Transit are clear and the proposal would have helped the JeT to run a more cost-effective and reliable service. At worst this decision will make it significantly harder for Jefferson Transit to provide effective service in the coming years as the financial issues described on the opposite page grow. As noted above, the announcement was made right before this report was finalized so a deeper analysis will have to wait. There will likely be more context in the coming months and hopefully a reconsideration of the decision in the next few years.

REGIONAL TRANSIT BY THE NUMBERS

RTA 2021 budget

The RTA's 2021 budget is the first agency budget after the scope and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic became clear. COVID-19 brought serious financial impacts to the RTA. In 2020, general use sales tax revenue collection was 31 percent lower than budgeted – a drop equivalent to 16 percent of the total 2020 budgeted local revenues. The hotel/motel sales tax and motor vehicles sales tax collections, though less of the total anticipated revenue, also dropped sharply from budgeted figures in 2020, at 44 and 75 percent, respectively. COVID caused steep ridership reductions, and thus steep reductions in fare revenue, with a 165 percent reduction from 2020 budgeted to 2020 actuals – a drop equivalent to 10 percent of the total 2020 budgeted local revenues. The RTA would have been facing sharp cuts were it not for the federal emergency funding for transit operations. That assistance totaled \$129.6 million over three rounds of funding and provides the RTA with a potential cushion through 2029, with \$36.8 million of the \$70.1 million in CARES Act funding rolling over into 2021, and the \$59.5 million from the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act still untouched.

RIDE's analysis of RTA budgeted operations expenses this year includes legacy pension costs from Transportation Management Southeast Louisiana (TMSEL), the private local company that was responsible for operating RTA service before Transdev (2009 and before). Those figures total approximately \$2 million in 2021. RIDE does not include ferry operations, as the RTA keeps those separate from other operations costs and they are nominally supposed to be covered by state subsidy (though that state subsidy often does not cover the full cost). We also do not include debt service, though that typically comes out of general operating revenue. This year, the RTA budgeted for approximately \$8 million in debt service. There is also an additional \$9.5 million budgeted for the local share of capital expenses (and \$24.4 million in federal funding).

Figure 21: 2021 RTA revenue budget for approved operations expenses (including legacy costs and excluding ferry expenses)

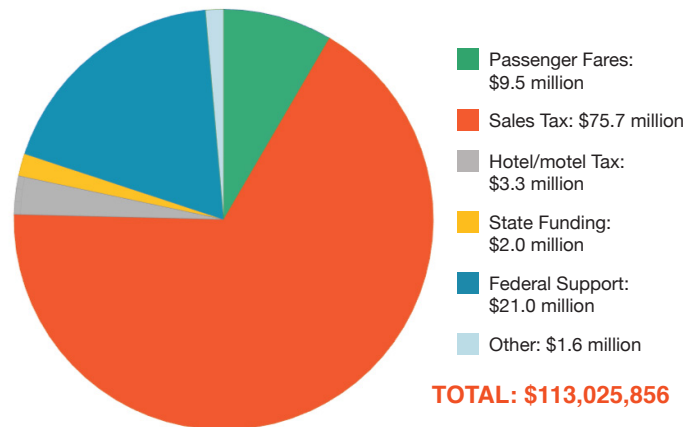
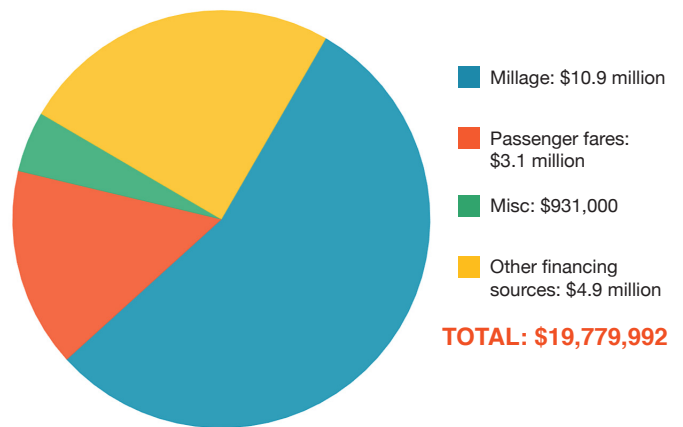


Figure 22: Jefferson Transit fixed route and paratransit 2021 revenue budget



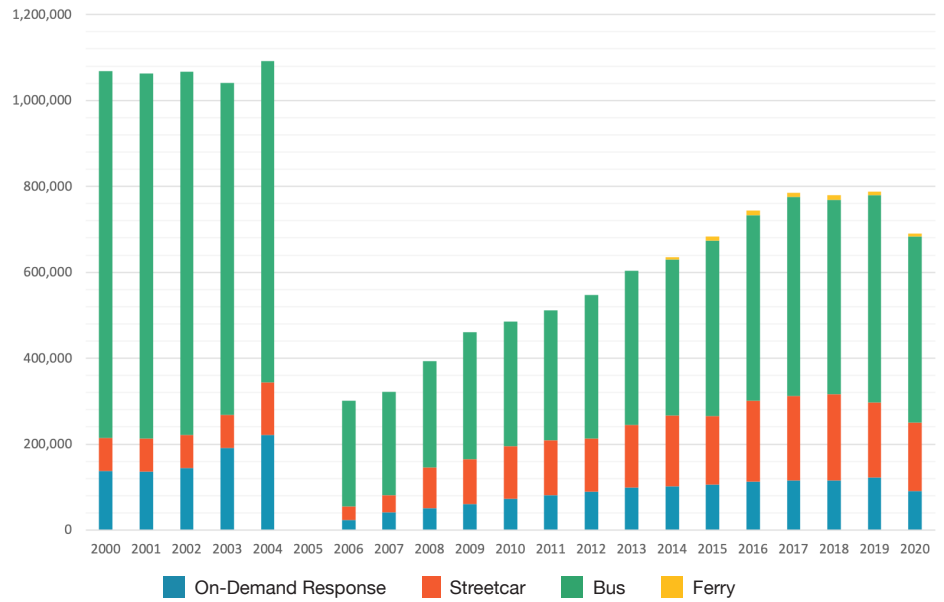
Jefferson Transit 2021 budget

Instead of a sales tax, JeT relies on two millages – one for fixed routes operations and one for paratransit service – as the primary sources of local dedicated funds. That means JeT is more insulated from short-term economic issues, though as noted on Page 28, JeT also has been spending more than it generates for several years, gradually depleting a reserve fund to make up the difference. However, JeT received \$27.7 million in COVID relief funding – almost twice its annual budget for fixed route service. That likely puts JeT in a more secure financial position for the next several years, though existing transit service in the parish is still not sufficient for the need – and underfunded even at existing levels over the long term.

RTA annual vehicle revenue hours (VRH)

Vehicle Revenue Hours (VRH) are hours a transit vehicle actively serves customers. It's a standard way to measure total service and whether it's increasing or decreasing. Pre-pandemic annual RTA VRH were generally increasing slowly, though still far below the pre-Katrina totals. With the arrival of the pandemic, the RTA cut service to Saturday levels – at first for safety and budget uncertainty, then because the agency felt reduced demand justified continued service reductions. Uncertainty about long-term revenues, even after the federal emergency funding, also played a role. With those service cuts, 2020 annual VRH dropped as well, going down to roughly 2015 levels.

Figure 23: RTA annual vehicle revenue hours (VRH) by mode



RTA ridership update

RTA ridership sharply dropped in 2019, the year before the pandemic. The 2020 ridership figures show a much sharper drop, but most of that drop is almost certainly due to the pandemic and is matched at transit agencies throughout the country. One of the biggest questions facing transit agencies nationwide is how ridership rebounds as the country and region move to a post-COVID normal. Since that question cannot be answered yet, the 2020 numbers should not necessarily be viewed as part of a long-term trend.

Figure 24: Jefferson Transit unlinked annual trips by bus

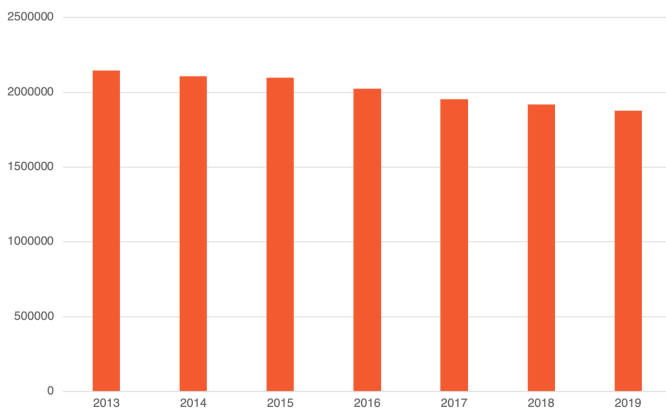
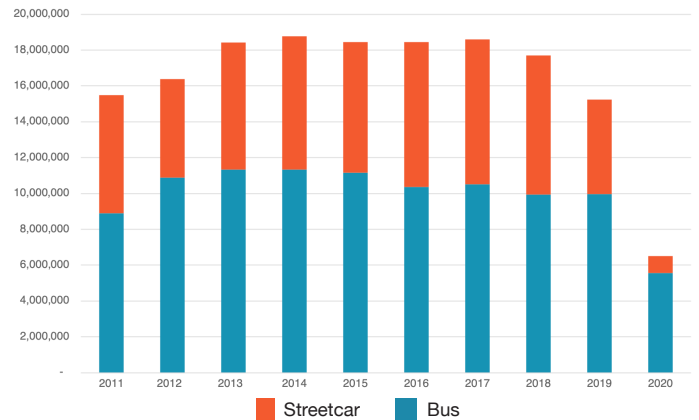


Figure 25: RTA unlinked passenger trips by mode 2011-2020



Jefferson Transit ridership update

Text: JeT ridership continued its slow decline over the last decade, with a two percent drop in 2019. JeT leadership did not respond in time to a request for 2020 updated ridership figures before this report had to go to press.

SOURCES PAGES 30-31

Figure 21: New Orleans RTA; figure 22: Jefferson Parish 2021 Annual Budget; figure 23: New Orleans RTA, National Transit Database; figure 24: Jefferson Transit; figure 25: New Orleans RTA

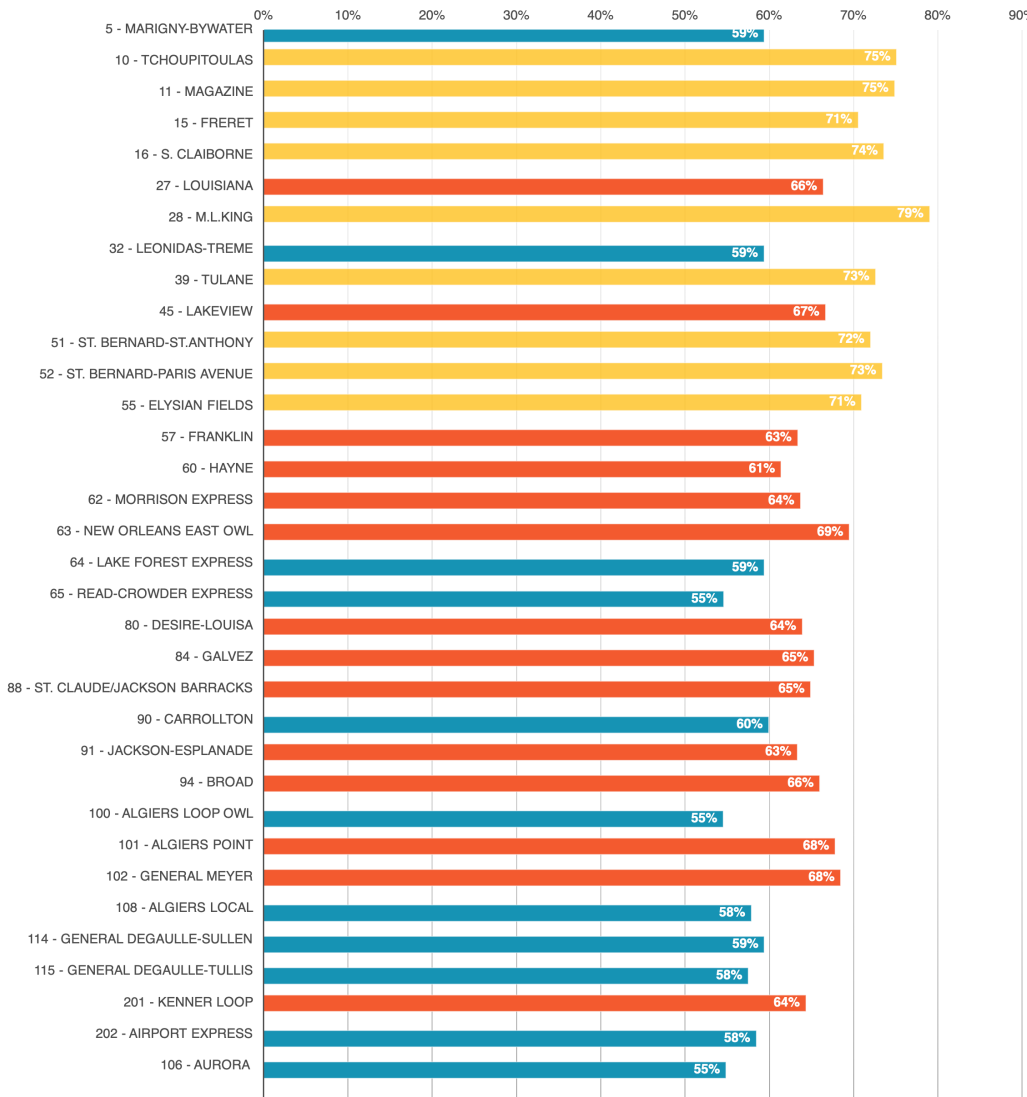


Figure 26: RTA bus on time performance (OTP) 1/2021 to 8/2021

- OTP > 70%
- OTP 60-69.9%
- OTP < 60%

Source: New Orleans RTA

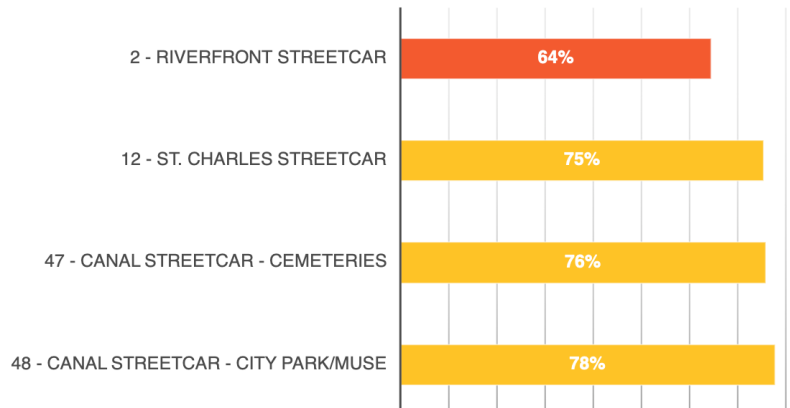
RTA On Time Performance (OTP)

The 2017 RTA Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) sets a goal of 85 percent OTP by 2022, but recent actual performance has lagged behind that goal. Here, RIDE includes the percent of on time runs for each bus and streetcar line from January through August 2021 (with the exception of the Canal streetcar lines which are only included through June, due to a shift to a headway-based schedule starting in July 2021). Only nine bus lines were above 70 percent, and no line achieved the 85 percent OTP goal. The #28 Martin Luther King was closest, at 79 percent.

Figure 27: RTA streetcar on time performance (OTP) 1/2021 to 8/2021

- OTP > 70%
- OTP < 70%

Source: New Orleans RTA



Peer agency comparison

To evaluate cost effectiveness, RIDE annually compares RTA cost per vehicle revenue hour (VRH) to cost per VRH for a group of equivalent agencies in other regions (based on modeling at the Florida Transit Information System). Lower operating costs mean more service for riders. After a decline of several years, the RTA saw a slight rise in costs per VRH in 2019, going from \$136 per overall VRH and \$128 per bus VRH in 2018 to \$158 and \$146, respectively, in 2019. Both are on the high end of the group of peer agencies.

This year, RIDE has added several features to this analysis. Jefferson Transit is now tracked, as is a combined RTA/JeT figure, in order to understand what costs might look like with a truly regional agency. RIDE also presents a breakdown of spending per capita of each agency, based on the service area population and total 2019 operating expenses. Here, RTA and JeT are polar opposites, with RTA spending the most per capita among its peers and JeT spending the least and a hypothetical combined agency above the median but not at the top. There are many variables that could affect these numbers, so definitive conclusions should not be drawn. The authors theorize that the RTA figures show both good and bad – a willingness to invest in transit but inefficiencies in the RTA’s service delivery model. But more analysis is needed and it is important to note that the RTA has the smallest National Transit Database-defined service area population of all the compared agencies, which likely accounts for some of the gap between the RTA and other agencies.

Figure 28: Total operating expenses per VRH, 2019 - local and peer agencies

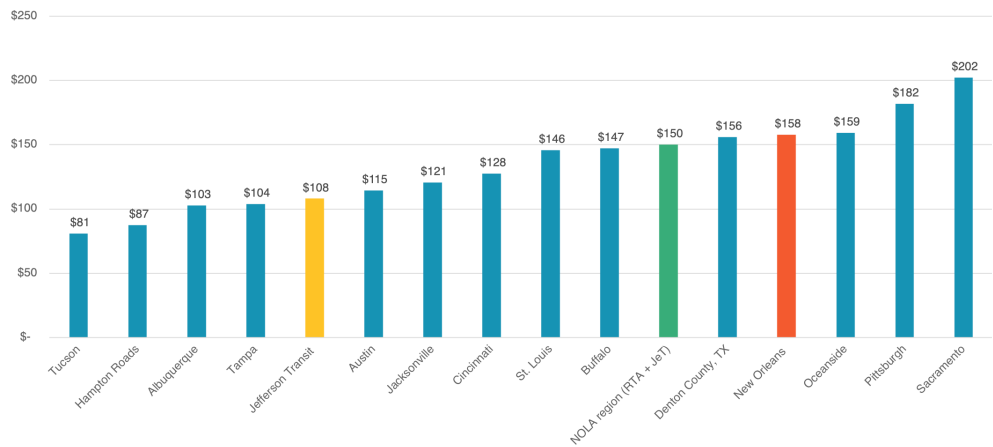
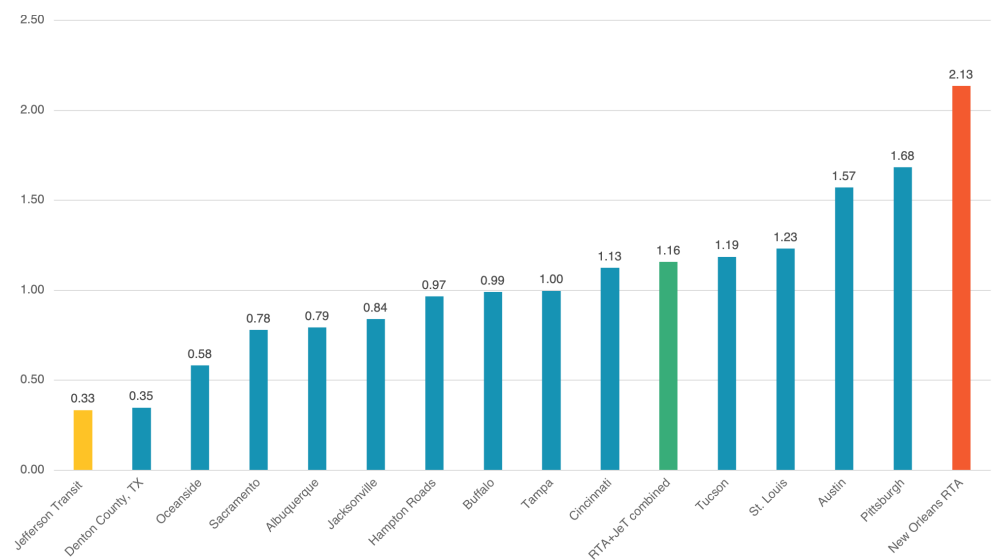


Figure 29: Bus operating expenses per VRH, 2019 - local and peer agencies



Figure 30: 2019 VRH per capita for service area population - local and peer agencies



Source for figures 28-30: National Transit Database

Access to health care via transit

The RTA's 2017 Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) added improved access to health care services via transit as an RTA goal. Per the recommendation of health advocates, the RTA established a goal of 65 percent of transit riders within 30 minutes of a hospital via transit and 80 percent of transit riders within 30 minutes of a community health clinic via transit.

Figure 31: Access to Clinics for Households - June 2021 (midday service)

	30 minutes	%	45 minutes	%	60 minutes	%
Jefferson	61,669	36.40%	113,056	66.70%	148,167	87.40%
Orleans	119,176	77.50%	145,185	94.40%	152,784	99.40%
Total	180,845	56.00%	258,241	79.90%	300,951	93.10%

Figure 32: Access to Hospitals for Households - June 2021 (midday service)

	30 minutes	%	45 minutes	%	60 minutes	%
Jefferson	40,034	23.60%	89,171	52.60%	138,160	81.50%
Orleans	77,037	50.10%	120,735	78.50%	145,656	94.70%
Total	117,071	36.20%	209,906	64.90%	283,816	87.80%

Figure 33: Transit travel time to nearest clinic

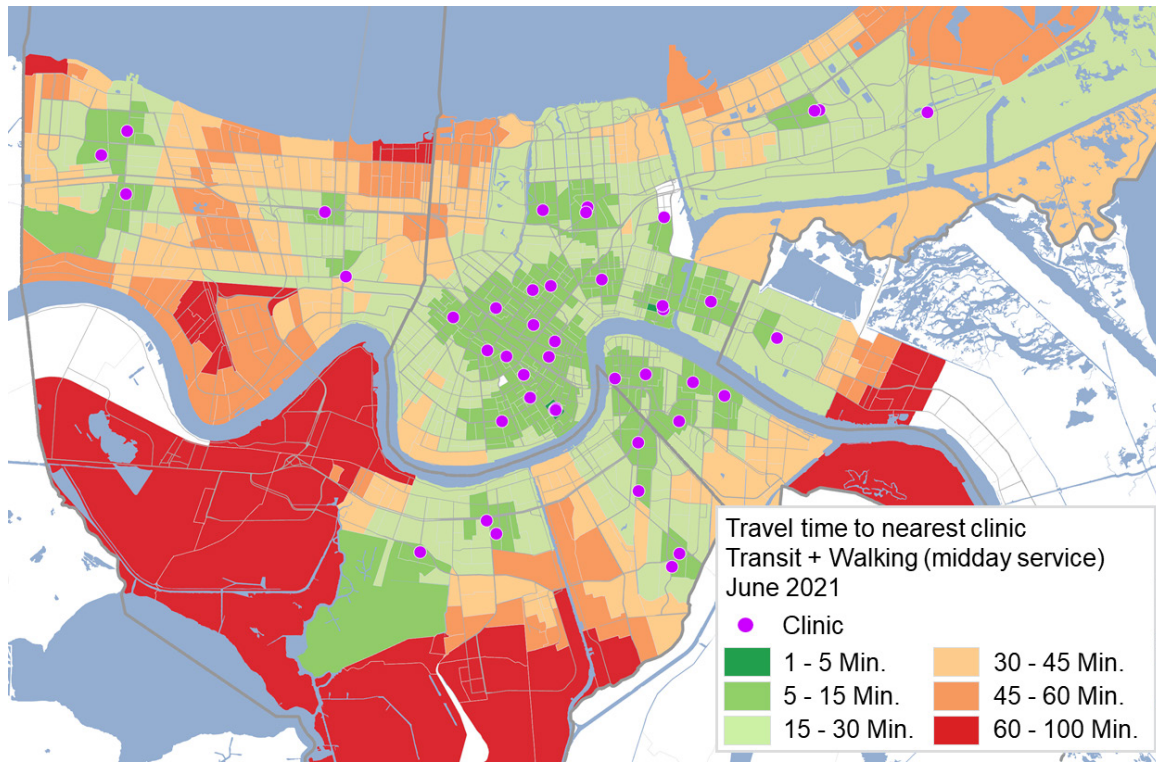
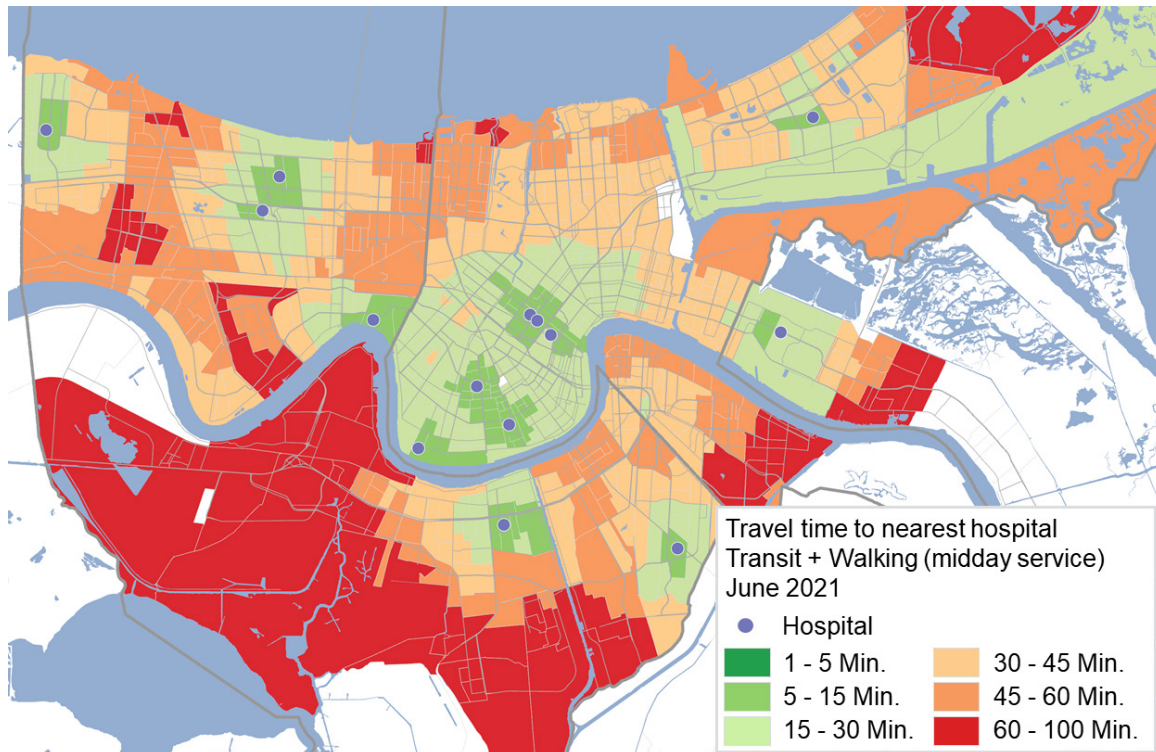


Figure 34: Transit travel time to nearest hospital



Source: RTA. Jefferson Transit. U.S. Census Bureau. 2021. LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) Data (2018). Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program, accessed October 2021 at <https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/#lodes>. LODES 7.5 release (2018 Data, Version 6.8). Ride New Orleans analysis. Community health clinic list compiled by Louisiana Public Health Institute.

What Are the Next Steps?

New Links implementation remains the most important short-term recommendation. But Modern Regional Transit V 2.0 means going beyond New Links and taking big steps forward on the next wave of priorities



Identify additional local funding

pg. 37

- The case for an Orleans Parish millage
- Raising fares?
- The hotel/motel tax
- More funding for JeT

Additional goals

pg. 44

- Give transit vehicles priority on city streets
- Regional fare integration
- Smarter and more sustainable land use

IDENTIFY ADDITIONAL LOCAL FUNDING

Even with New Links fully implemented, riders in neighborhoods with more pronounced transit needs like the Lower 9th Ward, New Orleans East, and Algiers will still only be able to reach approximately 1/3 - or much less - of the available jobs in the region in 60 minutes or less via transit. While improved, we will still see pronounced racial gaps, with white households enjoying greater access to jobs via transit than Black households despite Black riders making up a majority of the RTA's ridership. And, even with important frequency upgrades, there will still only be four bus lines that arrive every 15 minutes or less on a regular basis – meaning delayed buses can still wreak havoc on a rider's schedule.

This is not to minimize what an important change New Links will be. But it is to make clear that the job of providing world-class and equitable public transit for the residents of the New Orleans region is not finished after a successful New Links implementation.

Modern Regional Transit V 2.0 requires more operations funding.

New Links 125 percent scenario

To win a campaign for funding, it's not enough to just identify a need. Successful transit funding campaigns must detail a clear vision and plan for what the funding will do. Until recently this vision didn't exist for RTA. The closest post-Katrina equivalents were the streetcar blueprint from mid 2010s and the 2017 Strategic Mobility Plan. The first was never taken seriously as a real service expansion plan and the second, while an important document, does not have the level of detail and analysis needed to sell an expansion of service.

But thanks to the New Links planning process, we now have a blueprint for what a significant, but feasible service increase would look like the – the New Links 125 percent scenario.

That plan calls for a 25 percent increase in the annual operating budget (roughly \$25 million more annually, based on recent RTA budgets) and invests that in additional service. Those service investments would primarily be to increase frequency on the core high frequency routes that New Links establishes. But instead of every 15-20 minutes, those lines would now be every 10-15 minutes or, in some cases, even more frequent.

While RIDE did not have the resources to do a detailed access to jobs and destinations analysis on the 125 percent scenario, frequency is the ultimate arbiter of how useful a transit system is going to be. Doubling down on the new high frequency core would without a doubt pay significant dividends for riders. It would mean an equitable transit system that truly approaches the world-class level that riders need.

Why not federal funding for operations?

While the Federal Transit Administration currently distributes more than \$13 billion annually to support transit nationwide, that funding can typically only go toward transit agency capital expenses like purchasing vehicles or paying for large one-time projects like a new transfer center or streetcar line. That means most transit agencies must identify additional local sources of funding when they want to expand operations.

Federal emergency COVID relief funding for transit through the CARES Act (2020) and American Rescue Plan Act (2021) was different and specifically allowed to be used for operations. With this precedent established, many transit advocates have started to push for more flexibility in how federal support for local transit can be used. But as of this report, local or state generated funds are still the only source for the vast majority of operations funding.

Figure 35: New Links 100% budget scenario

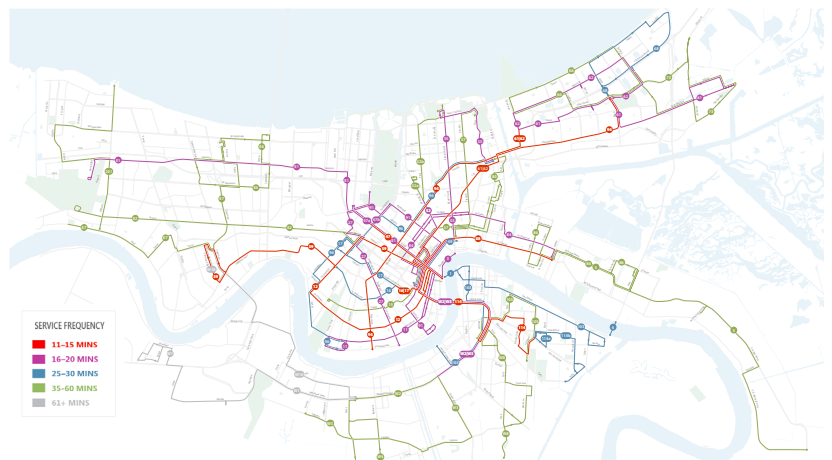
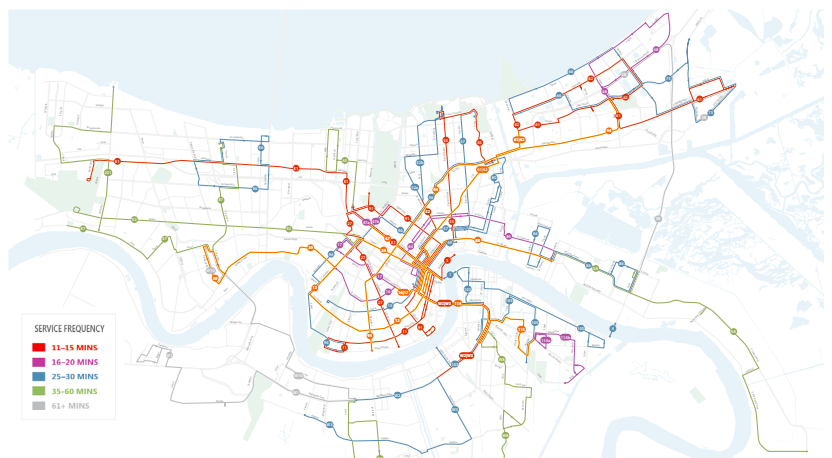


Figure 36: New Links 125% budget scenario



Source: New Orleans Regional Planning Commission

Figure 37: Recommended frequency at 100% of pre-COVID service budget

	Weekday Peak	Weekday Base	Weekend	Overnight	
1	Algiers Point Ferry	30	30	30	
3	Loyola-Riverfront Streetcar	20	20	30	60
12	St. Charles Streetcar	12	15	15	30
47	Canal Streetcar	10	10	15	20
47 A	Canal - Cemeteries	20	20	30	---
47 B	Canal - City Park	20	20	30	---
47 O	Canal - Owl Shuttle	---	---	---	20
49	Rampart	30	30	30	---
11	Magazine	20	20	30	60
15	Freret	40	40	40	---
16/17	Martin Luther King Jr	15	15	30	60
16	MLK - Claiborne	30	30	60	60
17	MLK - Hollygrove	30	30	60	---
27	Louisiana	20	20	30	60
39	Tulane	15	15	15	30
45	Lakeview	---	---	---	---
52	St Bernard	20	20	20	60
52 A	St. Bernard-Senate	40	40	40	---
52 B	St. Bernard-Paris	40	40	40	60
55	Elysian Fields	20	20	30	40
57	Franklin	40	40	40	---
61/62	New Orleans East Express	10	10	15	30
61	Lake Forest	20	20	30	60
62	Morrison	20	20	30	---
62 O	Morrison Owl	---	---	---	60
66	Hayne Loop	60	60	60	---
68	Little Woods	30	30	60	---
73	Michoud Loop	40	40	90	---
80	Desire-Louisa	60	60	60	---
84	Galvez	20	20	30	60
86	Barracks-Chalmette	60	60	60	---
88	St Claude	15	15	15	30
91	Jackson-Esplanade	20	20	30	40
94	Broad	15	15	15	30
96	Carrollton-Gentilly	30	30	60	---
103	Algiers-Gretna	30	30	30	---
103 O	Algiers Owl	---	---	---	40
105	Algiers Local	60	60	60	---
114	Garden Oaks	15	15	20	40
114 A	Garden Oaks-Kabel	30	30	40	---
114 B	Garden Oaks-Tullis	30	30	40	40
201	Kenner-Williams	40	40	80	---
E1	Veterans-Canal	20	20	40	---
E2	Airline	30	40	90	---
E6	Metairie Local	60	60	---	---
E7	Elmwood Local	30	60	120	---
W1	Avondale/Churchill	90	90	90	---
W10	Huey P Long-Walkertown	90	90	90	---
W2/W3	Westbank Exwy (Combined)	15	20	60	---
W2	Westbank Expressway	30	40	120	---
W3	Lapalco	30	40	120	---
W4	Marrero	60	60	---	---
W8	Terrytown	30	60	60	---
S	Arabi-St Bernard	60	60	---	---

	Weekday Peak	Weekday Base	Weekend	Overnight	
1	Algiers Point Ferry	30	30	30	
3	Loyola-Riverfront Streetcar	15	15	60	
12	St. Charles Streetcar	10	10	30	
47	Canal Streetcar	10	10	20	
47 A	Canal - Cemeteries	20	20	---	
47 B	Canal - City Park	20	20	---	
47 O	Canal - Owl Shuttle	---	---	20	
49	Rampart	30	30	---	
11	Magazine	15	15	30	
15	Freret	30	30	---	
16/17	Martin Luther King Jr	10	10	15	60
16	MLK - Claiborne	20	20	30	60
17	MLK - Hollygrove	20	20	30	---
27	Louisiana	15	15	30	60
39	Tulane	10	10	15	30
45	Lakeview	60	60	60	---
52	St Bernard	15	15	20	60
52 A	St. Bernard-St. Anthony	30	30	40	---
52 B	St. Bernard-Paris	30	30	40	60
55	Elysian Fields	15	15	30	60
57	Franklin	30	30	30	---
61/62	New Orleans East Express	7.5	7.5	15	15
61	Lake Forest	15	15	30	30
62	Morrison	15	15	30	---
62 O	Morrison Owl	---	---	---	30
66	Hayne Loop	30	30	30	---
68	Little Woods	20	20	30	---
73	Michoud Loop	30	30	30	---
80	Desire-Louisa	30	30	30	---
84	Galvez	20	20	30	60
86	Barracks-Chalmette	30	30	30	---
88	St Claude	10	10	15	30
91	Jackson-Esplanade	15	15	30	30
94	Broad	10	10	15	30
96	Carrollton-Gentilly	30	30	30	---
103	Algiers-Gretna	30	30	30	---
103 O	Algiers Owl	---	---	---	30
105	Algiers Local	30	30	30	---
114	Garden Oaks	10	10	15	30
114 A	Garden Oaks-Kabel	20	20	30	---
114 B	Garden Oaks-Tullis	20	20	30	30
201	Kenner-Williams	40	40	80	---
E1	Veterans-Canal	15	15	30	120
E2	Airline	30	60	90	---
E6	Metairie Local	30	30	60	---
E7	Elmwood Local	40	60	120	---
W1	Avondale/Churchill	90	90	90	---
W10	Huey P Long-Walkertown	90	90	90	---
W2/W3	Westbank Exwy (Combined)	15	15	30	---
W2	Westbank Expressway	30	30	60	---
W3	Lapalco	30	30	60	---
W4	Marrero	30	60	60	---
W8	Terrytown	30	60	60	---
SA	Arabi-St Bernard	60	60	---	---
SB	Chalmette-N.O. East	90	90	---	---

Figure 38: Recommended frequency at 125% of pre-COVID service budget

BRT as a centerpiece?

In September 2021, the RTA launched a 10-month study of a potential Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor connecting New Orleans East with the New Orleans CBD and possibly the West Bank. BRT, described by some as “light rail with rubber tires,” typically features buses traveling on dedicated and limited access bus lanes with more widely spaced stops and a clear branding that distinguishes the service as premium rapid transit. Done right, BRT is as reliable and fast as light rail, but available at significantly less cost.

Other cities have used the launch of a BRT line as a centerpiece for funding campaigns. With the study just kicking off and the RTA not sharing anything with the public beyond press releases, it’s too early to tell where this effort will go. But it will be important to watch and could be a key part of an RTA case for enhanced funding in the future.

A millage for transit

While the RTA should do a detailed analysis of all potential options for funding, RIDE believes that any successful package will have to be centered around an Orleans Parish millage.

Typically, the other option for local funding is a sales tax – how the RTA currently pays for the bulk of service. There are several reasons RIDE believes that a millage is more appropriate than an additional sales tax:

A sales tax is regressive:

Currently, 80 percent of the RTA operating budget is based on a local sales tax. But sales taxes affect a higher percentage of lower income residents’ budgets than higher income residents. Using additional sales tax to add service to help lower income residents would be a double-edged sword. In contrast, more of the cost of a millage would fall on wealthier households.

Our sales tax rate is tapped out:

Beyond the equity argument, there is an economic argument as well. With a sales tax rate of 9.5 percent in Orleans Parish (when you combine state and local sales taxes), one can argue that any additional sales tax burden would be counterproductive for the local economy.

Sales tax collections are unpredictable:

The COVID pandemic would have created a financial crisis for the RTA if the federal government had not stepped in with emergency funding for transit operations in three waves over the last year. Thanks to the drop in tourism locally, the RTA’s sales tax revenue plummeted by 24 percent, from \$85.7 million to \$65.1 million from 2019 to 2020. In contrast, a millage is more stable from year to year, even in an economic downturn. It’s notable that Jefferson Transit – dependent on a millage - didn’t see significant operating revenue loss during the pandemic.

How to get there

Obviously, there remain significant political hurdles to passing another tax to fund transit. The road is not easy, but it starts with a simple step – determining what is needed.

As noted above, the RTA would need approximately \$25 million in additional annual operating revenue to be able to implement the New Links 125 percent scenario.

Based on the 2021 New Orleans Assessor’s calculation of taxable, assessed property, that would be approximately 7 mills.

The median home in New Orleans is assessed at \$184,100. That means the average homeowner with a homestead exemption would pay an additional \$76.37 annually, or \$6.36 a month in their monthly mortgage, or, breaking it down further, \$0.21 a day.

Can the median New Orleanian afford an additional 21 cents a day to ensure equitable, world-class transit for the New Orleanians who need it most now and many New Orleanians to come? RIDE thinks there is a strong case to be made.

Figure 39: Current and hypothetical Orleans Parish property rates for home with median assessed value of \$184,100

Millage Rate	Annual property taxes for home with median assessed value and homestead exemption	Millage Rate with hypothetical seven mills transit millage added	Annual property taxes for median home with homestead exemption and hypothetical seven mills for transit operations	
Orleans Parish East Bank	143.95	\$1,570.49	150.95	\$1,646.86
Orleans Parish West Bank	145.03	\$1,582.28	152.03	\$1,658.65

Source: Orleans Parish Assessor’s Office. Ride New Orleans analysis.



Expiring millages

Instead of raising the overall millage rate, the City could also look to replace an expiring millage in the next several years with one dedicated to RTA operations. That would keep the overall millage rate at its existing level, which would be an easier sell politically.

But it's worth noting that rededicating an existing millage is politically fraught. In 2020, the Cantrell Administration proposed to rededicate a millage dedicated to the public library toward economic development and early childhood education programs. That effort was solidly defeated in a contentious election. Many opponents of the push said they opposed the effort because they didn't trust the revenues would be used appropriately by the administration. But many opposed it because they supported the public library and felt it was important to keep funding it at existing levels.

That's an important lesson to remember – there is a constituency supporting every dedicated millage. Even a well-reasoned case to switch a particular millage to transit will run into some level of organized opposition.

Raising fares?

As noted on Page 15, RTA fares have not been raised since 1999. What would have happened if the base fare rate had kept pace with inflation since then? With a \$2.08 base fare, assuming a consistent ratio between base fare and actual average fare collected per trip*, farebox revenue would be \$11.6 million higher with 2019 ridership levels. A more modest increase of \$0.25 (to a base fare of \$1.50) would mean \$3.6 million in additional revenue annual, assuming 2019 ridership levels.

That could make up almost half of the amount needed for the enhanced New Links scenario – a tempting move on paper. But while a case can be made for a fare increase, an equally strong transportation equity case can be made against it.

There is deep inequity in our city and region. Our poverty rate is 12 percentage points higher than the national average and 39 percent of children are in poverty. Centuries of structural racism mean that our city has a pronounced Black/white wealth and income gap. According to Prosperity Now, not only does the median white New Orleans household make significantly more than the median Black household – at \$64,377 to \$25,806. But the median white New Orleans household income is \$5,377 higher than the national average for white households, while the median Black New Orleans household is \$10,194 lower than the national average for Black households.

Considering transit's outsized role transporting a demographic that is more likely to be poor and Black, raising fares to increase service levels is troubling from an equity perspective. This is not an insurmountable problem. Peer transit agencies have shown how an equitable fare increase could work. But there are at least three important steps that must be taken before any fare increase should be considered:

Improved discounted fare policies:

Coming into 2021 the RTA offered discounted single rider fares for senior and disabled riders. As noted on Page 15, the RTA's temporary fare structure adds discounted day passes for seniors and disabled riders and free transit for riders under 18. The RTA should make these changes permanent and add an additional discounted fare aimed at riders below a certain income level as well as young people older than 18. King County Metro in Seattle, for instance, offers discounted fares for riders making below 200 percent of the federal poverty level and partners with King County Community Health Access program – an existing program that helps lower income residents access services – to determine eligibility and distribute passes.

Add a fare capping policy:

The reduced price for a monthly pass is a big step forward for the RTA, but even at \$45, many lower income riders may not be able to afford it – at least all at once. Other transit agencies have started to address this problem with a policy called fare capping, where riders only pay up to the point where they've purchased the equivalent of a daily or monthly pass. For instance, the Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) board just passed a policy that no customer will pay more than \$4.50 a day (the cost of a COTA day pass) or \$62 a month (the cost of a COTA monthly pass). Once the individual customer reaches that point, all rides are free for the remainder of the day or month.

*The average fare collected per trip will always be lower than the base fare due to discounts for some riders and day/month pass purchases

Maintain free transfers:

The RTA's revised fare structure includes the temporary elimination of the \$0.25 transfer fee. This is an important move for making New Links work as many of the travel time and reliability gains in the redesign are a result of shorter, more direct routes that necessitate more transfers. The RTA should follow the increasing trend in peer agencies nationwide and make this change permanent, so lower income riders aren't penalized for longer trips or multiple transfers.

It's important to note that for the first two recommendations, the RTA will likely either need to ensure much more widespread adoption of its Go Mobile app on smart phones or introduce a new fare payment system that centers on the use of tap cards that can more easily store the information needed to implement and manage a complex multi-tiered, variable fare structure.

Give the full share of the hotel/motel tax to the RTA

When it was first established in the 1980s, the RTA's local sales tax was not applied to hotel/motel occupancy, due to then-state law. However, when that law was changed in the early 1990s, the RTA argued that the intent of the original sales tax initiative was that all purchases in Orleans Parish should be subject to the tax. The tourism and hospitality industry disagreed. Unable to get anywhere with advocacy, the RTA filed suit to force the City of New Orleans to collect and turn over the one percent tax on hotel rooms.

Mayor Marc Morial brought RTA and representatives of the tourism industry to the table and hammered out a settlement in 2000. The settlement said that the one percent sales tax on hotel room purchases would now be collected, but that the revenues would be split, with the RTA receiving half and the Convention Center and the New Orleans Tourism and Marketing Corporation (a semi-independent city agency charged with tourism promotion that was merged into the industry group New Orleans & Company in 2019) receiving the other half.

RTA leaders were never completely satisfied with that arrangement, but the compromise held for 20 years. But in 2018, with a new RTA board taking control, Chair Flozell Daniels determined that the time was right to renew the issue. By that point, the total revenue for the hotel/motel portion of the sales tax had grown to around \$14 million annually, meaning the ½ the RTA had to turn over was now \$7 million – or a potential 7 percent increase in the RTA's annual operating budget.

Because the City collects and then passes the sales tax proceeds to the RTA which then passes the tourism industry share down the line, it made it relatively simple for Chair Daniels and the RTA board to simply stop the remittance of the other half of the hotel/motel tax. And that's where we are today. The RTA has not touched the disputed portion of the sales tax – it's secure in a separate account until an agreement is reached. Earlier in 2021, the Convention Center sued the RTA for the disputed portion of the tax.

From RIDE's perspective, it's well past time to resolve this standoff and restore the full value of the tax to the RTA. The clear original intent of the voters was that the 1 percent sales tax would go to the RTA – and when the sales tax began to be collected on hotel/motel occupancy, all of it should have gone to the RTA.

As noted above, the full 2019 amount would have provided an additional \$7 million to the RTA – almost 30 percent of what would be needed to fully implement the New Links 125 percent scenario. Mayor Cantrell and the next City Council should prioritize this issue.



Fully fund JeT

As noted on Page 28, the RTA outspends Jefferson Parish per current transit commuter by a more than 2 to 1 ratio and by much larger ratios when comparing overall population within the agencies' respective service areas. Over the long-term, even this subpar status quo looks unsustainable, as Jefferson Transit has consistently had to dip into reserve funds in recent years, though the three rounds of COVID-19 federal emergency funding have temporarily pushed back a looming fiscal cliff.

This situation is deeply disadvantageous for current riders who must rely on JeT service and is uncondusive to creating the kind of efficient regional transit service that is needed to advance equity and advance shared regional economic prosperity.

Fortunately, important stakeholders in the region and within Jefferson Parish increasingly recognize that more transit investment is needed. The Jefferson Parish Economic Development Commission (JEDCO) recently updated their EDGE strategic plan for economic development in Jefferson Parish and called for a study to identify the revenue needed for continued transit operations in Jefferson Parish.

Jefferson Parish voters as well have recently shown support for funding transit. In 2019, parish voters approved the continuation of the current millage for both fixed route and paratransit services.

Jefferson Parish and regional stakeholders should take advantage of this momentum as well as the clear steps forward on efficiency that New Links will bring and forge an agreement for increased support that allows Jefferson Transit to play an increasingly important role in Modern Regional Transit V 2.0.



JEDCO's EDGE 2025 plan references the need for enhanced revenue for Jefferson Parish transit service

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Prioritize transit on roadways

There is both a need and momentum for dedicated lanes for transit vehicles in New Orleans.

New Links planners strongly recommended dedicated lanes for downtown. Unpredictable traffic patterns downtown mean that much of the New Links-delivered frequency increases for the West Bank rider might be at risk without a dedicated right of way for transit vehicles along O’Keefe, S Rampart, or Loyola.

Conversations have happened between the City and RTA officials about the need for dedicated lanes downtown. As noted on Page 40, the RTA has also launched a study of the possibility and desirability of Bus Rapid Transit, or BRT, to connect New Orleans East with downtown, with the possibility of an additional connection between Algiers and downtown New Orleans. Presumably this study will also examine the case for dedicated lanes.

These steps forward are encouraging and very much needed. Prioritizing transit vehicles on public roads is a strategy that has paid big dividends in other areas:

- In Arlington, Mass. commute times were reduced by up to 10 minutes after implementation of a dedicated bus lane
- Crosstown routes in Manhattan are as much as 9.7 minutes faster after implementation of the 14th Street busway.
- Baltimore riders benefited from a 79 percent improvement in travel times during the peak period after implementation of a network of dedicated bus lanes through downtown Baltimore

But while the RTA may control the buses and streetcars in New Orleans, they don’t control the streets – the City does. This is an area where cross-agency collaboration and communication will be critical for progress.

Regional fare integration

The RTA’s experiment with a new fare structure is an important step forward. But there is one thing missing from the current trial run – regional fare integration.

Currently there is almost no regional farebox integration. The only exception is a \$6 regional day pass. The pass was an important precedent for regional coordination when it was launched several years ago. But it ultimately doesn’t help most riders. With a base RTA fare of \$1.25 (and currently no transfer fee) and base JeT fare of \$1.50, most riders transferring between the systems are going to be paying \$5.50 per daily round trip. The regional day pass doesn’t make financial sense for most riders.

This situation is especially unfortunate in the context of the New Links regional transit network redesign which was specifically designed to better integrate RTA and JeT services in order to provide more choices for transit riders.

For example, JeT’s E1 Veterans bus now runs down Canal as an express bus every 20 minutes, stopping only at major intersections. For RTA riders on Canal going downtown or to Delgado this would be a much faster alternative than the Canal Street streetcars, which generally stop every two to three blocks and are prone to delays and long travel times. But if they have to pay full price, many lower income riders are not likely to take advantage of it.

New Links also calls for both RTA and JeT West Bank buses to be routed through JeT’s Willy Terminal in Gretna. With both agencies now stopping there, riders transferring from West Bank local buses who want to go across the river could see a bus coming as frequently as every five to 10 minutes or less. But if the next downtown bound bus is from a different system than the original bus the rider took many lower income riders are not likely to take advantage of it.

THE RTA AND JEFFERSON TRANSIT SHOULD FORGE

AN AGREEMENT FOR FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE

TRANSFERS BETWEEN THE TWO SYSTEMS.

The RTA and Jefferson Transit should forge an agreement for free or reduced-price transfers between the two systems. This is an increasingly common practice in many peer regions. For example, the City of Detroit and SMART – the largest provider of fixed route transit in the Detroit suburbs – recently established a universal fare with no transfer fee on either system for four areas after the fare purchase (SOURCE).

Regional fare integration will be an important way to more closely tie the two transit systems together, making further economies of scale like the New Links recommendations more likely, and better serving transit riders on both sides of the Orleans/Jefferson parish line.

It’s important to note that such an arrangement would likely lead to a small reduction in farebox revenue for both systems. Farebox revenue remains a part of the operations funding for each transit system (farebox revenue funded approximately 19 percent of 2019 operations for both) and no one should responsibly advocate for completely fare free transit without an understanding of how fare revenue fits into each agency’s budget and a proposal for how to replace that funding. But that doesn’t mean that changes to fare policy shouldn’t move forward simply because of a small decrease in fare revenue – especially if those changes are going to improve the ability of riders to use transit.

Land use

Finally, it's important to note that local and regional land use decisions ultimately have a big effect on transit.

Transit is only at its best when serving neighborhoods that are compact and walkable – the way New Orleans neighborhoods have historically been. But as many transit-reliant riders are increasingly unable to afford to live in the inner core of our region, the RTA and JeT have to put more service in harder to serve, more spread-out areas, with corresponding declines in service efficiency.

Unfortunately, in recent years, local officials and decision makers have made some decisions that exacerbate rather than ameliorate this problem.

For instance, Delgado's River City campus, which opened in 2018, is billed as a great opportunity to enhance the skill set of the regional workforce by preparing students for high paying jobs in advanced manufacturing. But the campus, on the Churchill Technology and Business Park in Avondale, is two miles away from the nearest existing transit stop, creating a real hardship for prospective students without a car. The New Links redesign will shift JeT's W1 bus to provide service for the campus. That's a necessary move, but it still means deploying a bus to a hard-to-serve area instead of using that bus to better serve existing riders in another part of the parish. If transit access and sustainable land use were higher priorities in the site selection process, this is something that potentially could have been avoided.

In another example, the New Orleans City Council – despite clear City Planning Commission opposition – recently voted to effectively downzone the neighborhoods surrounding Tulane and Loyola universities. This will make it that much harder to preserve the kind of walkable, convenient, and affordable communities that transit service needs to thrive.

Regional and local decisionmakers should pay close attention to this issue in the coming years and strive for policies that prioritize putting major new facilities in areas with existing transit service and make it easier – not harder to build doubles, triples, and fourplexes in our historic core neighborhoods. The Cantrell Administration's Transit Oriented Communities (TOC) planning process – still being finalized as of press time – appears to have potential to move New Orleans in a better direction on this issue.

Transit Oriented Communities (TOC) study

In July 2020, the Mayor directed the City Planning Commission (CPC) to complete a study establishing recommendations for Transit Oriented Communities (TOC) policies in New Orleans. The CPC partnered with the RTA, the Regional Planning Commission, and the Mayor's Office of Transportation to develop the study. The study focuses on land use regulations, urban design standards, affordability incentives, small business support, and right-of-way improvements to optimize the relationship between transit infrastructure and land use, resulting in an increased supply of transit-accessible and affordable housing. A TOC program can further boost the transit investments made through the New Links network redesign by enabling better transit access while creating beautiful, walkable, mixed-use corridors around the high-frequency lines.

The TOC working group has completed a review of TOC programs in other cities, developed a methodology for establishing station area typologies for the city of New Orleans, and has begun crafting recommendations for TOC policies for New Orleans. A draft version of the study is expected to be released in Fall/Winter 2021.



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