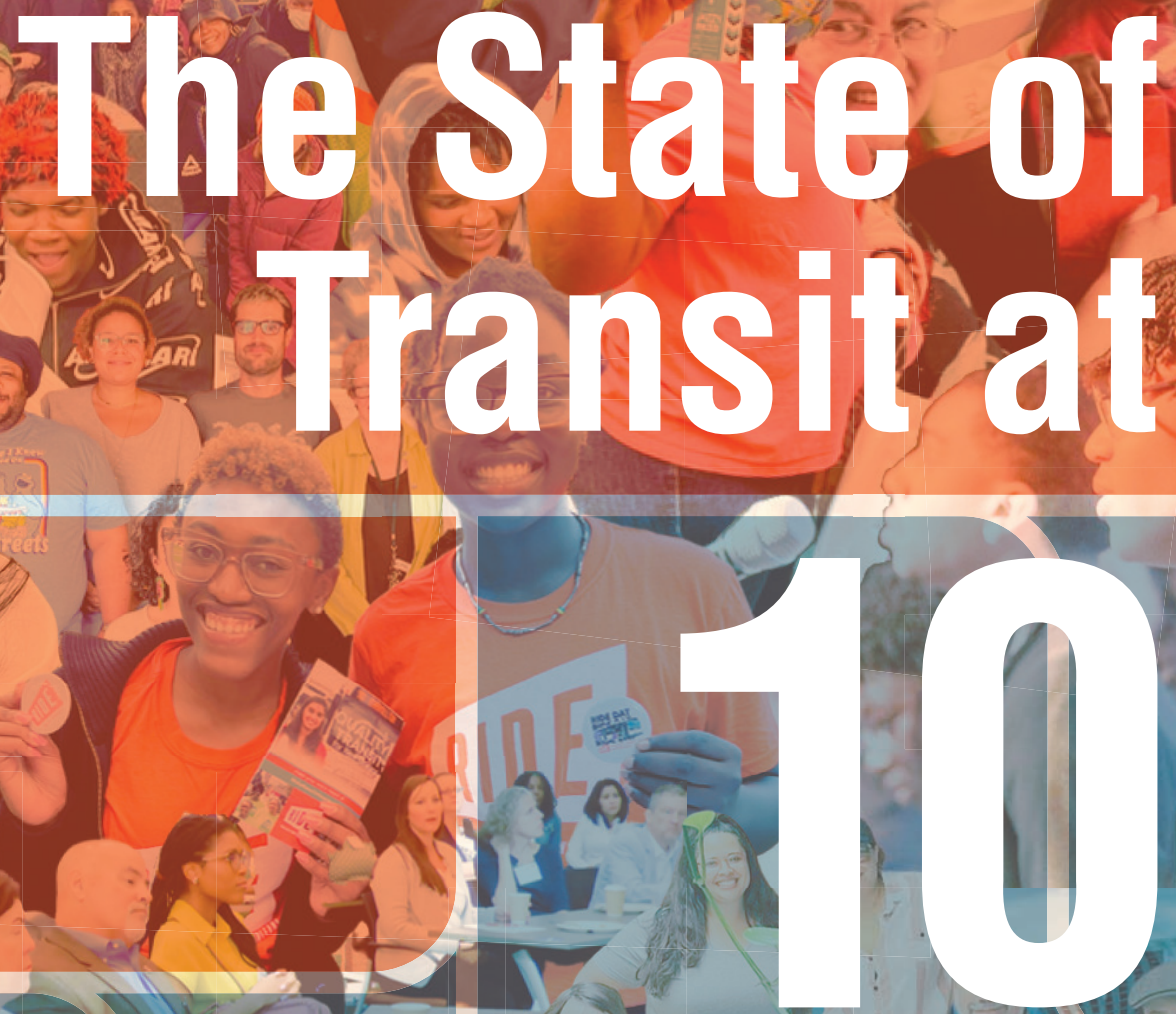


The logo for RIDE (Regional Inland Development Express) is displayed in a white, slanted rectangular box. The word "RIDE" is written in a bold, orange, sans-serif font.

WORLD CLASS TRANSIT FOR NEW ORLEANS

The main title "The State of Transit at 10" is centered on the page in a large, white, sans-serif font. The background is a collage of various images related to transit, including people at a public meeting, a transit worker in a safety vest, and a woman holding a "THANK YOU! NEW ORLEANS & COMPANY" sign. The collage is overlaid with semi-transparent orange and blue shapes.

NOVEMBER
2023

Charting the past, present, and
future of world class transit
for Greater New Orleans

About Our Organization



WORLD CLASS TRANSIT FOR NEW ORLEANS

rideneworleans.org

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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Letter from the Executive Director

As the Ride New Orleans (RIDE) team began our discussion and reflection on the 10th State of Transit we found ourselves feeling a range of emotions. We saw the many ways our city's transit system has grown and improved from where we started in 2014, and the immense challenges that remain.

We felt power because our advocacy efforts continue to grow and uplift the importance of public transportation, giving us the capacity to continue this important work. We felt anger and sadness for the state of our current system - due to both unforeseen nationwide challenges and what lately feels like a lack of concern for the daily rider experience. We felt hope because for 10 years, **RIDE has been driving the conversation on the state of our regional transit system, and in doing so made long-lasting, rider-centric meaningful change.**

And as we contemplate our past works and look towards the future at all that we can achieve, we do so with a strong foundation: **we advocate for transit riders.** From our founding in 2009 to today, this model has stayed true; we continue to prove time and again our work is a reflection of the riders we serve. The rider voice has and will continue to lead our charge in every part of our efforts to build a world-class system that our region and its riders deserve.

This year, the State of Transit is a meditation on 10 years of necessary work done with, for, and in honor of our region's transit riders. We hope that with this report, we continue RIDE's legacy of leadership in the transit advocacy community we are so proud to be a part of and serve.

Thank you,



A handwritten signature in orange ink that reads "Courtney Jackson".

Courtney Jackson
Executive Director, Ride New Orleans

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Executive Summary: The State of Transit at 10

This year marks the 10th annual State of Transit Report produced by Ride New Orleans (RIDE).

Since our inception in 2009, RIDE, originally founded as Transport for NOLA, has advocated for world-class transit to serve the greater New Orleans region. Our first annual report published in July 2014, *The State of Transit in New Orleans*, highlighted significant flaws in transit investment strategies by the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) and the City of New Orleans.

In our inaugural report, and in subsequent years, RIDE developed and advocated for a policy platform calling upon transit decisionmakers to create a comprehensive strategic plan to guide transit service expansion. The plan would provide a well-defined vision, clearly established goals, and the input of community and stakeholders. We encouraged the RTA and City to prioritize new service growth and investment. We urged the RTA to adopt a more publicly accountable management structure, increase transparency, and meaningfully involve transit riders in decisionmaking. Even as our policy focus has grown into new areas, RIDE has continued to champion these goals, with an increased emphasis on improving regional service and an expanded focus on bringing rider voices into our policy work,

A major focus of this year's report will be to track the implementation of RIDE's recommendations over the last 10 years and the impacts of our advocacy work. In the years since we published our first State of Transit Report and held our inaugural breakfast briefing, there have been significant policy victories. Access to jobs via transit, which RIDE first began tracking in 2016, has slowly but measurably improved over in response to increased service investments and the implementation of the New Links Transit System Redesign in 2022. Our operating costs for running transit service, which were once among the highest in the nation, have fallen significantly. The RTA has committed to a more transparent and comprehensive process for making service and capital investments with the adoption of and recent update to the Strategic Mobility Plan. Equitable access to frequent transit service in neighborhoods without streetcar lines has improved.

These improvements, along with a host of other, modest but tangible, policy wins point to a transit system that is meaningfully stronger, more efficient, and more equitable than when our first State of Transit report was released in 2014.

While it is worth acknowledging these victories, it must also be noted that in many areas, the quality of public transit has failed to advance in the ways RIDE has advocated for. Operating resources for transit service continue to be significantly constrained, and transit stakeholders and elected officials have not taken impactful steps towards securing new local funding to grow and expand transit service. There has been little-to-no progress in implementing transit priority improvements (such as bus lanes) which would facilitate faster, more cost effective service.

The quality and accessibility of real-time service information provided by the RTA and Jefferson Parish Transit (JP Transit) continues to lag behind many other agencies across the country. Important capital priorities, such as the Downtown Transit Center, are on the horizon but remain undelivered.

In addition, transit in the New Orleans region has experienced new challenges and crises over the past ten years, which have resulted in new and evolving priorities and needs. Most significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic presented an existential crisis for public transit service across the country, fundamentally shifting the policy environment for transit in many areas-- including transit funding and fare policy objectives.

Over the past year, transit service in Greater New Orleans has seen significant new challenges which represent a step backward for the region's bus and streetcar service following the implementation of the New Links in September 2022. Most notably, the Jefferson Parish administration chose to make drastic cuts to Jefferson Parish transit service earlier this year. The cuts were implemented with minimal public notice and without the conducting of any advanced planning for service restructuring. There was also seemingly no effort put forth to seek new operations funding. This decision effectively rolled back the implementation of New Links and reduced transit service in the Parish back to 2018 levels. Meanwhile, the RTA is currently experiencing a severe service delivery crisis due to a lack of working transit vehicles. This issue forced the agency to make 'temporary' reductions to bus service in June 2023 which have caused service reliability on many core routes to suffer significantly.

Without downplaying the grave challenges transit faces right now, **RIDE is optimistic about the future of transit in New Orleans.** We believe this year's report presents an opportunity to look forward beyond our immediate challenges and to present a vision of what the region's system could (and should) look like within the next ten years-- all while making the case for funding to turn that vision into a reality.

For *The State of Transit at 10*, RIDE has modeled a scenario for transit service expansion based on service priorities identified in the 2023 Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) update, the New Links service plan, and the Bus Rapid Transit feasibility study. The bottom line is that there have been some real improvements in the way our region's transit service operates and how service is structured. However, there remain significant challenges, most of which cannot be addressed without major new investments in transit service. RIDE is therefore renewing the challenge we first made to the City of New Orleans and the RTA in 2016: to commit to increasing transit service to at least 1,000,000 vehicle revenue hours over the next ten years, with similar increases to Jefferson Parish service over the same period. This level of investment will make it possible to deliver the truly transformative, world-class transit service that our region deserves.

“ Without downplaying the grave challenges transit faces right now, **RIDE is optimistic about the future of transit in New Orleans.** We believe this year's report presents an opportunity to look beyond our immediate challenges to present a vision for what the region's system could (and should) look like within the next ten years-- all while making the case for funding to turn that vision into a reality. ”

Part I: Signs of Progress

A more equitable system

RIDE came into being in 2009 when a group of concerned community members and transit riders questioned planned streetcar expansion that would benefit tourists over residents. We've since grown into a trusted and respected organization, carrying out responsible and inclusive advocacy by blending grassroots organizing and community empowerment with research and policy development. This proven approach has steered more than \$1 million in public funding to needed planning studies, infrastructure improvements and public agency reforms.

In June 2014, *The State of Transit in New Orleans*, RIDE's first annual comprehensive research report, demonstrated that the RTA had restored only 36% of its pre-Katrina transit service since the hurricane occurred in 2005; meanwhile, New Orleans' population had grown to 86% of its pre-Katrina levels. Our analysis showed that the communities hit hardest by those service cuts included residents of color, low-income residents, and households without car access - in short, those who need transit service the most.

A particular focus of RIDE's policy work in early State of Transit reports was the RTA's insistence on restoring and expanding streetcar service at the expense of the region's bus network. By 2014, while the RTA was running bus service at less than half (48%) of its pre-Katrina levels, the agency was running more streetcar service than pre-2005.

Figure 1 - Ratio of RTA bus and streetcar service as percent of agency total by year - 2003-2022 and projected 2023

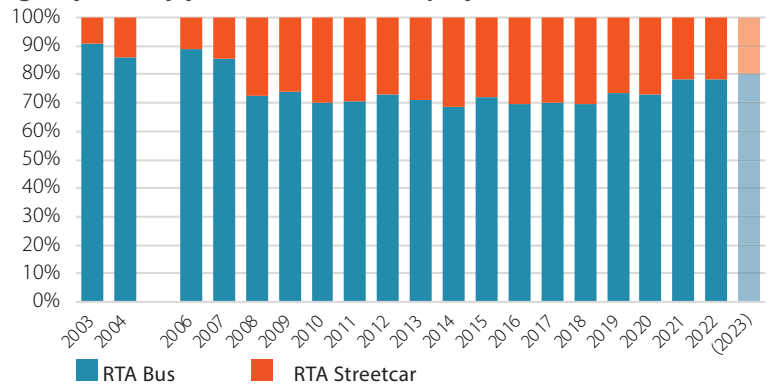


Figure 2 - RTA bus and streetcar vehicle revenue hours (VRH) by year - 2014-2022 and projected 2023

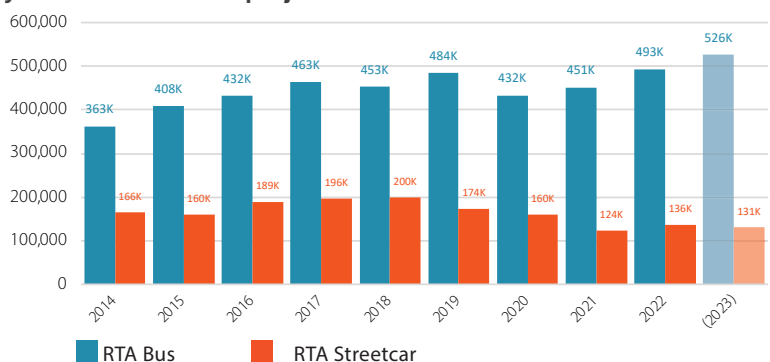


Figure 3 - 2013 peak hour wait by RTA line and 2010 percent non-white population by census tract



One consequence of this investment focus on streetcar service was that whiter and wealthier areas of the city saw faster service improvements following Katrina than other parts of the City. Our 2014 report found that even after controlling for population change, there was a significant negative correlation between the RTA's transit service investments from 2005 to 2012 and the share of non-white residents and the percentage of households without cars in Orleans Parish neighborhoods (as shown in the Figure 3 map reproduced from our 2014 report). Over the same period, the RTA also prioritized capital investments that would facilitate streetcar service expansion, including the introduction of the Loyola-Rampart streetcar line.

The situation for RTA bus service now looks very different than it did 10 years ago. Over the past 10 years, and particularly beginning in 2019, the RTA has shifted its investments toward improving bus service while limiting new investment in expanding streetcar service. This shift can be seen in Figure 1, which compares the ratio of RTA bus and streetcar service by year, and Figure 2, showing annual bus and streetcar vehicle revenue hours (VRH) by year from 2014-2023.

These figures show that from 2014 to 2018, the RTA made modest expansions to streetcar service but expanded bus service at equal or greater levels, with bus service growing by 24% while streetcar service grew 20% over that period. However, from 2019 onwards, streetcar revenue hours have actually declined.

“Neighborhoods with high percentages of non-white residents have experienced a greater decrease in transit availability than neighborhoods where greater proportions of white residents reside. After controlling for population change, there remains a significant negative correlation between a neighborhood’s percentage of non-white residents and the percentage change in weekly transit volume between 2005 and 2012 [...]”

The costs associated with the construction, operations, and financing of new streetcar lines may be decreasing the RTA’s ability to re-introduce adequate bus service to communities that depend on buses as their only transit option.”

- State of Transit 2014

Methodology Note: System Data

To analyze job access, stop-level frequency, and other geospatial service information, this report relies on General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) data obtained from the RTA and JP Transit for the existing regional transit network as of Fall 2023. All analysis of current job access and service frequency reflect service as of October 2023.

It should be noted that the decline in streetcar revenue hours is due, in part, to temporary reductions in streetcar service as a result of both planned repairs as well as unplanned events. Events such as the 2019 collapse of the Hard Rock Hotel construction site onto the Rampart Streetcar line (which has yet to reopen as of October 2023), and reductions in service due to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, greatly affected streetcar revenue hours. However, this shift also represents a deliberate strategy by the RTA to prioritize bus service. The New Links planning process in 2019 found that while streetcar routes had high ridership productivity overall, the RTA was running excessive amounts of late-night streetcar service that could be better invested in expanding daytime bus service. When implementing the New Links redesign in 2022, the RTA acted upon this finding by permanently reallocating excess late-night streetcar service towards improving daytime bus frequency on many lines.

This shift in service is one of several factors contributing to an overall increase in access to frequent transit service for Orleans Parish residents from 2013-2023. This can be seen in the maps on page 10 and page 11, both of which illustrate the average peak wait time for service at RTA stops within a 5 minute (1/4 mile) walk as of Fall 2005 (prior to Hurricane Katrina), Fall 2013, and Fall 2023. Although service frequency in much of the city remains below pre-Katrina levels, access to frequent service has improved substantially in many neighborhoods since 2013, even after accounting for reductions earlier this year.

Figure 4 - Average time between buses during peak service at RTA stops within a 5 minute walk, Fall 2005

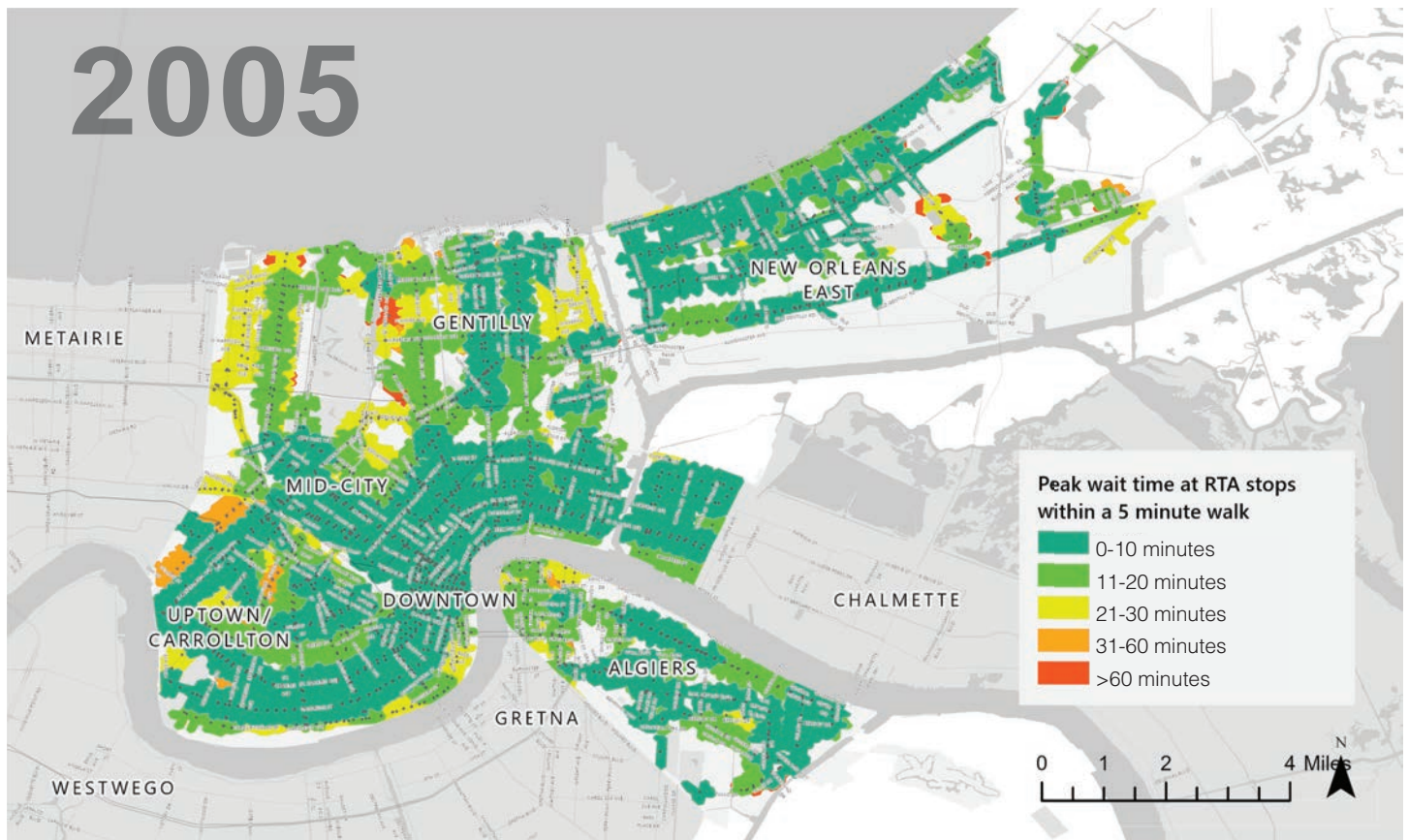


Figure 5 - Average time between buses during peak service at RTA stops within a 5 minute walk, Fall 2013

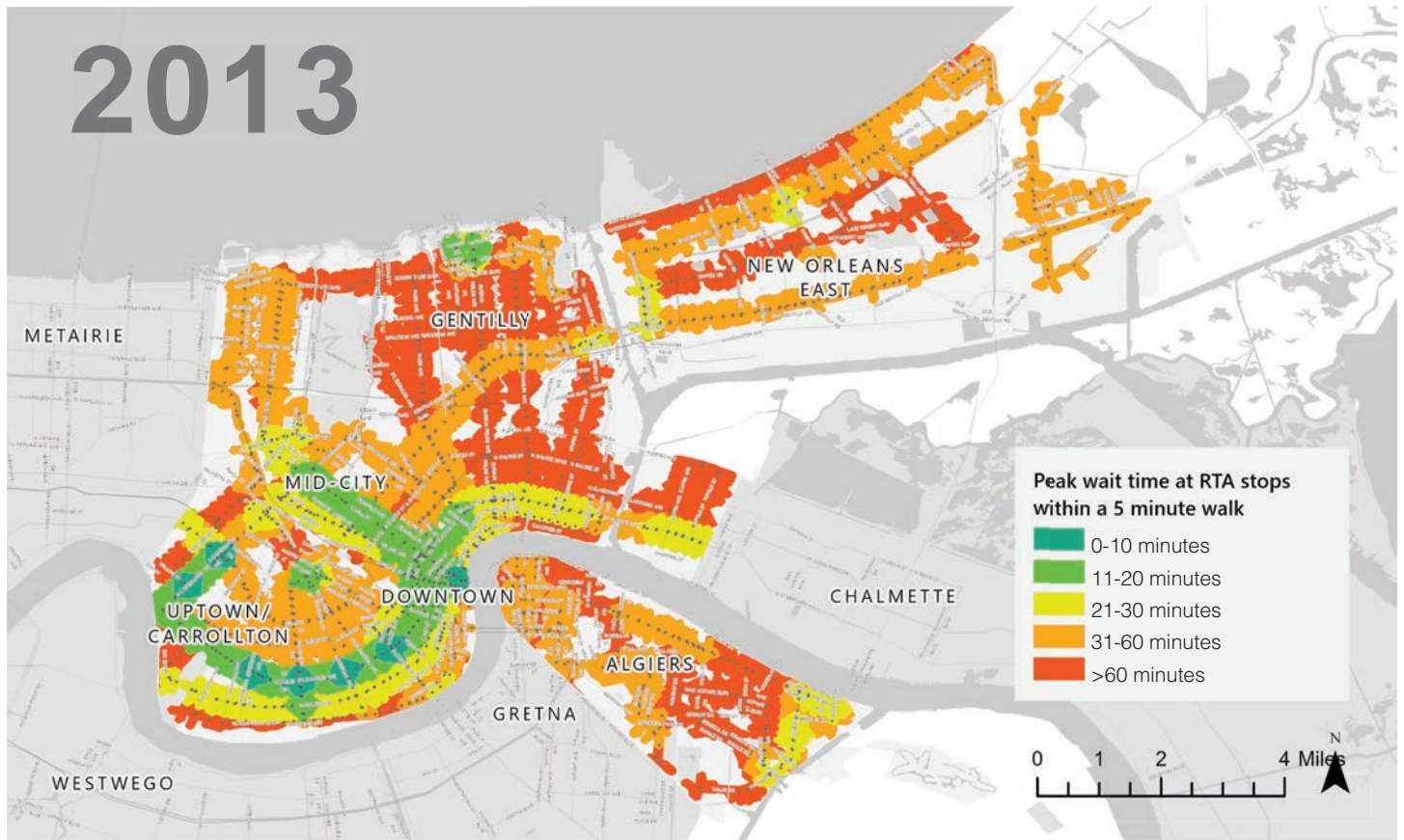
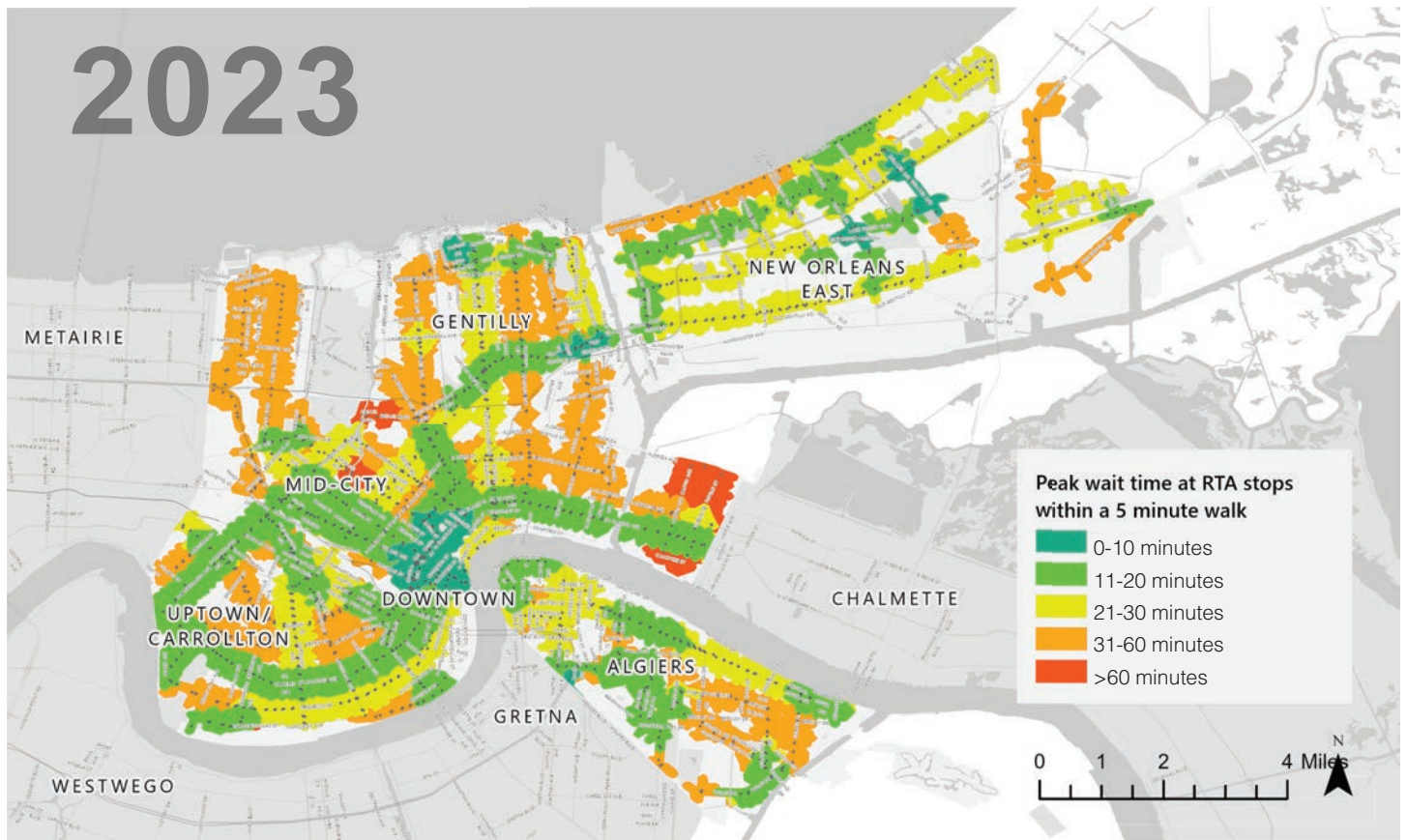


Figure 6 - Average time between buses during peak service at RTA stops within a 5 minute walk, Fall 2023



Methodology Note: Service Data

In this report, we rely on service data self-reported by the RTA to the National Transit Database and data the RTA provided directly to RIDE on the availability of transit service. RIDE also collected population data from the U.S. Census to compare service availability with demographic trends from 2000 through 2021. Additionally, we dive into the current state of financial affairs at the RTA; our financial analysis is based on annual RTA budget documentation that RIDE received through Freedom of Information Act requests. We explore the amount and quality of transit service that New Orleanians are receiving for their investment in the transit system – or more simply put, what bang we’re getting for our buck. In order to ensure that our analysis on this point is objective, we benchmark the financial on-the-ground realities in New Orleans with national trends experienced by transit agencies operating in comparable cities and markets across the country.

“Given the city’s many competing budget priorities, it will likely be hard to identify significant new sources of revenue for transit service without addressing the higher cost of service and looking into possibilities of cost savings via increased service efficiency or other areas. We recommend that this be a key question in the strategic transit planning process.”

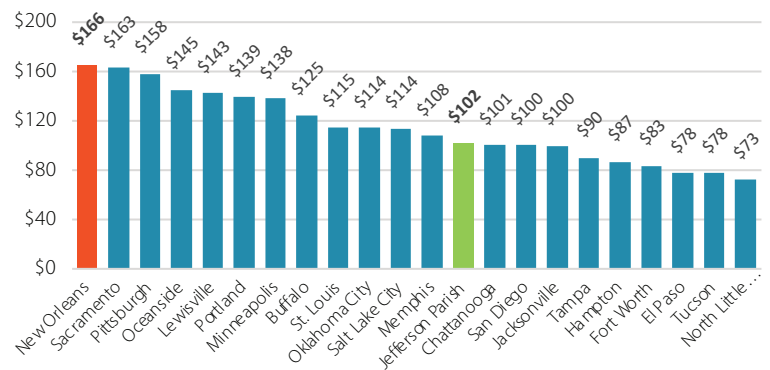
-State of Transit 2016

A more efficient system

To evaluate cost effectiveness, RIDE annually tracks the cost of RTA service per vehicle revenue hour (VRH) and compares it to the hourly costs of a group of peer transit agencies in other regions, as identified by the Urban Integrated National Transit Database (iNTD). A major issue identified in the early years of State of Transit was the significantly higher cost of operating fixed-route service compared to peer agencies. As we noted in our inaugural State of Transit report, the RTA’s high operating costs contributed to the region’s slow transit recovery along with the substantial decrease in operating funding for transit over the same period.

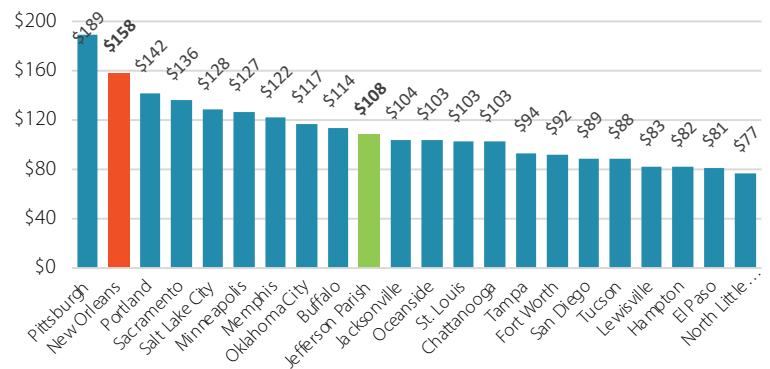
In 2012, the RTA’s operating expenses for transit service were \$166 per revenue hour, an amount higher than the costs of service at any of the 20 transit agencies identified as the closest peers of the RTA by iNTD, as shown in Figure 7 (Jefferson Parish operating costs are also shown for reference).

Figure 7 - Total Operating Expenses per VRH, 2012 - Peer Agencies



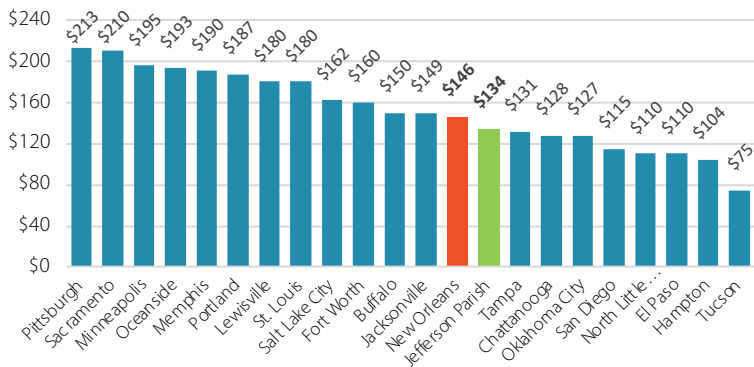
The RTA’s operating expenses were higher than other agencies, in part, because the agency runs so much streetcar service, which is typically more expensive to operate than bus service. As not all transit agencies run streetcars, it is also worth looking at the operating cost for bus service at peer agencies. By this measure, the RTA’s service costs were also high, at \$158 per VRH of bus service. Of the 20 peer agencies, only Pittsburgh exceeded that level, at \$189 per VRH of bus service in 2012 (Figure 8).

Figure 8 - Bus Operating Expenses per VRH, 2012 - Peer Agencies



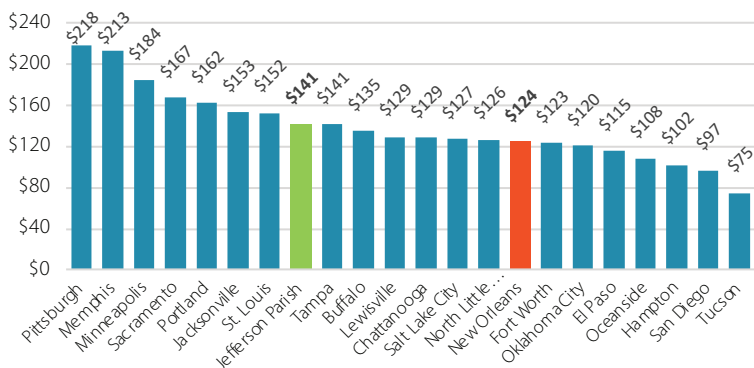
However, since 2012, the overall cost effectiveness of RTA service has improved significantly. As of 2021, the RTA's operating costs for transit service have decreased to \$146 per vehicle revenue hour, aligning more closely with the operating costs of peer agencies. Despite the overall increase in operating costs nationwide, the RTA's service costs per hour for bus service are now lower than they were in 2012 (Figure 9).

Figure 9 - Total Operating Expenses per VRH, 2021 - Peer Agencies



This downward trend in operating costs can be attributed to several factors. Because heritage streetcar service is significantly more expensive to operate than bus service, as the RTA has shifted operating resources towards expanded bus service, this also means that the overall hourly operating cost of service has fallen-- even if relative costs by service type remain unchanged. However, even when specifically considering the cost of bus service, the RTA's operating costs have also fallen from 2012-2021, and have decreased even more on a percentage basis than other services (Figure 10).

Figure 10 - Bus Operating Expenses per VRH, 2021 - Peer Agencies



Additional factors contributing to this overall decrease in service costs include the shift from a delegated operations model (in which a private contractor, Transdev, ran and managed RTA services) to a fully public agency model, a process that was initiated in 2019 and completed in stages by 2021. A positive consequence in decreasing operating costs is that the RTA has been able to modestly expand service since 2014, despite continued overall operating budget constraints for the agency.

Methodology Note: Peer Comparisons

Peer comparison analysis can help transit agencies to more objectively evaluate the performance of their transit systems in relation to their peers. This allows them to better identify and prioritize problem areas for management actions. The first step in this comparative analysis is to identify comparable peer agencies or systems that share similar characteristics.

RIDE's peer analysis uses the Urban Integrated National Transit Database (iNTD), which identifies peer agencies via a methodology developed as part of the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) Project G-11, A Methodology for Performance Measurement and Peer Comparison in the Public Transportation Industry (see http://www.ftis.org/iNTD-Urban/tcrp_peers.aspx). The iNTD is sponsored and overseen by the Florida Department of Transportation and the peer selection model was developed as part of the TCRP-G11 project, which was led by Kittelson and Associates, Inc.

RIDE's peer analysis excludes ferry ridership and costs as the Canal Street and Lower Algiers ferries are funded separately from the rest of the RTA system.

Methodology: Access to Jobs

The methodology used for this study reflects the cumulative opportunity metric 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 2019. The calculations are based on the travel times observed between every US Census Block Group (CBG) in Jefferson Parish, Orleans Parish, and St. Bernard Parish.

To calculate trip origin and destinations, weighted centroids are used to reflect where workers reside and are employed within each CBG. Travel times are calculated in ArcGIS Pro using the Network Analyst toolset, road network data obtained from OpenStreetMap, and General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) schedule data published by the RTA and JP Transit. Driving times assume that vehicles do not encounter any congestion and travel at the speed limit. Transit travel times operate on an assumption of perfect schedule adherence. These travel times also assume that portions of a trip not on-board a transit vehicle take place by walking at a speed of 3 miles per hour along sidewalks, trails, or other designated pedestrian facilities. 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:

- $Weighted\ Average = (w1/a)j1 + (w2/a)j2 \dots wn/a)jn$
- w = workers residing in CBG
- a = all workers residing in Orleans Parish
- j = jobs accessible from CBG
- n = Each CBG in Orleans Parish

Modest improvements to job access

RIDE first began tracking the share of the region’s jobs accessible to a typical resident of Orleans and Jefferson parish in our 2016 State of Transit report, and have presented this metric annually since, using a methodology derived from the “Access Across America” report by the University of Minnesota Center for Transportation Studies.

What Is Accessibility?

“In the context of transportation, accessibility refers to the ability of people to reach the destinations they must visit in order to meet their needs and desire to visit to satisfy their wants.

Working, shopping, education, and recreation are just some of the human activities that motivate people to travel to a variety of destinations [...] In an ideal metropolitan area, all residents would be able to easily access preferred destinations. Looking at the real metropolitan areas of today, however, it is easy to see that differences in accessibility exist. People residing in different geographic areas may be more able to access jobs or shopping centers; likewise, the ability to use certain modes of transportation (such as the private automobile) may have dramatic effects on the ability to reach different types of destinations. The concept of accessibility provides an objective way of understanding these differences.”

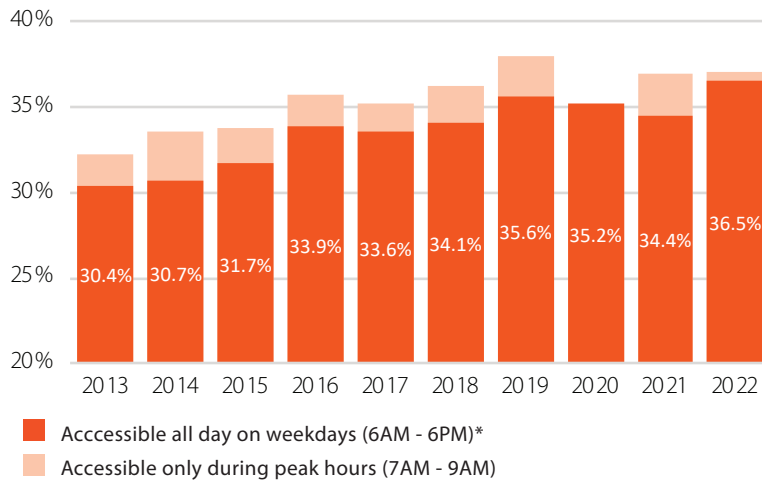
- “What is Accessibility?” University of Minnesota Access Observatory (cts.umn.edu/programs/ao/aboutaccessibility)

RIDE’s job access analysis quantifies the disparity in mobility for transit users versus residents with access to a personal vehicle. Our analysis has consistently found that the average New Orleans resident with access to a car can reach significantly more jobs compared to a resident who must walk or take the bus to work. RIDE has consistently found that transit riders in Orleans and Jefferson parishes can access only a fraction of the region’s jobs within an hour (typically less than 40%), while a driver can access well over 95% of jobs within the same window.

The job access analysis also provides a useful metric for measuring the impacts of new service investments and changes to the transit network on regional mobility.

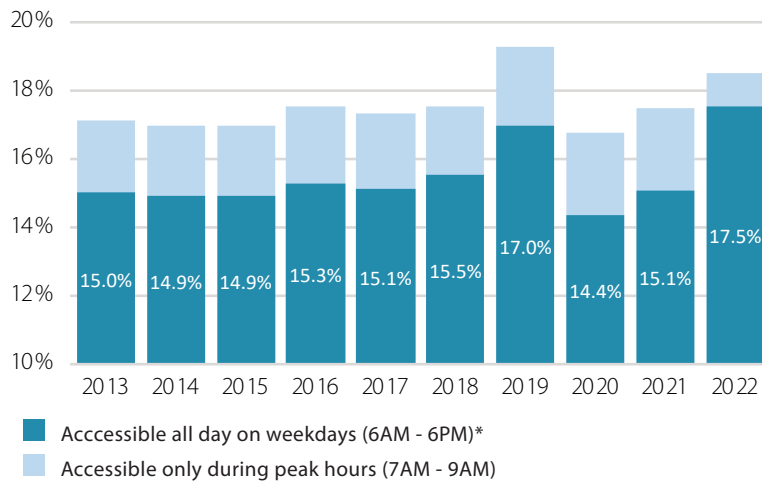
Overall, the share of jobs accessible by transit improved in modest but meaningful ways when measured over the 10 year period between 2013-2022 for Orleans Parish residents (Figure 11) and to a lesser extent for Jefferson Parish residents (Figure 12). This is particularly true when considering “all day” access - which measures the share of jobs that are accessible throughout the day on weekdays, not just the during peak morning service period.

Figure 11 - Average share of the region’s jobs accessible to Orleans Parish residents by transit within an hour - 2013-2022



These figures show a trend in slowly increasing access from 2013 to 2019 resulting from service expansion and other improvements to the transit network. This trend was interrupted by the significant disruptions to service that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Increases were observed once again following the implementation of the New Links service redesign in 2022.

Figure 12 - Average share of the region’s jobs accessible to Jefferson Parish residents by transit within an hour - 2013-2022



*Column labels indicate jobs accessible all day on weekdays from 6am-6pm

Notes on the 2023 Access to Jobs Analysis

For *The State of Transit at 10*, RIDE has recalculated all access to jobs statistics for transit service from 2012 to 2023 (and our modeled 2033 network) with an updated workflow and datasets. We did this to ensure a consistent baseline across all years, using the same methodology and data sources. Although the overall methodology for the access to jobs analysis has remained consistent since RIDE began performing the analysis annually in 2016, there have been minor changes to the workflow, methodology, and data sources used during that period (for example, in 2017, the State of Transit analysis used slightly different boundaries that included portions of neighboring parishes; and since 2021 RIDE uses a different workflow to develop the pedestrian network dataset used in the analysis).

Additionally, for this year’s report RIDE has updated to the Version 8 release of LODES data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Longitudinal Employment Household Dynamics (LEHD) program. LODES Version 8 is based on 2020 census geographies, which redefined the boundaries of many census block groups in Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard boundaries. The redefinition of base geographies led to a decrease in the number of census block groups in Orleans Parish, Jefferson Parish, and St. Bernard Parish, meaning that on average, a typical census block group is now slightly larger. Because the access to jobs analysis involves calculating travel times between block groups, these changes would make it more difficult to compare year-over-year changes between access numbers using the old and new census geographies. To avoid this issue, RIDE has recalculated access statistics from all previous years using data from the new LODES Version 8 release. For that reason, access metrics in this report may differ slightly from numbers presented in previous State of Transit reports.

As we have done in several recent State of Transit reports, RIDE will present two versions of the accessibility analysis:

- **All day access** showing the number of jobs that can be reached throughout the day on weekdays
- **Peak hour access** showing the number of jobs that can be reached during 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. peak service.

About the Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP)

The RTA's Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) is a long range plan that provides direction and guidance for the agency. The SMP articulates a vision for the future of the RTA and reflects the priorities collected from the community through the SMP planning process. The initial SMP was developed through a yearlong planning process in 2017 and formed through 4,500+ engagements with community members and stakeholders, which culminated in the adoption of the SMP in 2018.

The RTA recently completed its 5-year update of the SMP which was adopted by the board in August 2022. This update is not a comprehensive re-plan, but rather a refresh that draws on previously collected data and community input from the original 2018 plan and subsequent work done as part of the New Links planning process. A comprehensive update is called for by 2028, at which point a full planning process will be undertaken to reform the SMP.

"Ride New Orleans is calling for the NORTA Board to work collaboratively with City leaders to to develop a stakeholder-led transit master plan that dovetails into the City's Master Plan update. Through community visioning sessions, NORTA should work to set longterm goals and priorities and develop a multi-modal operating and capital investment plan that optimizes existing transit services while envisioning a system expansion that supports businesses and workers in our local and regional economy to thrive. We have nothing to gain by waiting any longer to create a truly comprehensive, transit master plan."

- 2015 State of Transit

More transparent decisionmaking

In 2014, when RIDE began producing the State of Transit report, the RTA was investing heavily in new streetcar service without a comprehensive or publicly endorsed strategic plan. These investments lacked clear goals or targets and did not result from meaningful public planning. At RIDE's urging, the RTA started developing a comprehensive transit master plan. RIDE called for this plan as one of our initial policy requests to the agency.

During this period, the private company Transdev, which then operated RTA services, presented a 20-year service plan to the RTA Board of Commissioners that was poorly received and ultimately not adopted. Following this incident, the RTA initiated the Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP). The SMP was launched in 2016 and completed in 2018. It included a set of investment priorities, goals, and targets for improving transit service over the next 5, 10, and 20 years. After the plan was adopted, the RTA provided regular updates on its implementation.

One of the plan's 5-year goals was to develop and implement a network redesign of existing transit service, which led to the creation of the New Links Bus Network Redesign. The RTA recently updated the SMP to reflect progress and real-world events over the past 5 years, revising many of the goals, targets, and action items from the original plan.

While the SMP is not perfect, RIDE believes it is a significant achievement in transit policymaking. It was developed through a public process with public input and provides clear and measurable goals, targets, and investment priorities for enhancing transit service. It serves as both a planning document and a tool for holding the agency accountable for its actions.



RIDE supports the RTA's continued investment in the SMP but also emphasizes the importance of transparency and public accountability during its implementation. We have noted that several near-term action items identified in the SMP, such as the development of public-facing dashboards, metrics, and public data, have yet to be implemented. RIDE encourages the RTA to prioritize the implementation of these items as soon as possible, as was committed to in the adopted plan and endorsed by the RTA Board of Commissioners.

Additionally, we urge the RTA to proactively update riders, stakeholders, and the public on the progress of the plan's implementation. Prior to 2020, the RTA provided quarterly updates on plan implementation to a stakeholder committee, offering detailed information about specific action items. These updates were valuable in tracking progress and keeping stakeholders informed and engaged in transit service improvements. We encourage the RTA to resume these quarterly updates and provide updates in other venues, such as the City Council Transportation and Airport Committee. Prioritizing public updates on the plan is not only good policy but also helps maintain the interest and investment of public officials and stakeholders in transit matters.

Improved regional service options

Over the past 10 years, efforts have been made to improve coordination between the RTA and JP Transit, the primary transit providers in the region. This has included implementing a consolidated customer service phone line called the RideLine for riders in both parishes, as well as enhancing regional service coordination.

Specific improvements have been made, such as extending the Tulane bus to serve Ochsner in 2018, and (as part of the New Links service redesign) to Elmwood in 2022. In 2018, a cross-agency day pass, Regional Ride, was also implemented. More recently, real-time tracking data and fare payment options from JP Transit have been integrated into the RTA's Le Pass app.

Additionally, the RTA has started coordinating with transit officials and elected stakeholders in St. Bernard Parish. In June of this year, the RTA extended the 86 St. Maurice bus to Chalmette, serving Nunez Community College in coordination with St. Bernard Parish. This enhancement improved access for Orleans parish residents to retail and educational opportunities in St. Bernard Parish, while also improving service accessibility for St. Bernard Parish residents.

RIDE's Priority Public Information Actions and Strategies from the SMP Update

The updated SMP contains the following action items related to public accountability which RIDE encourages the RTA to move forward with implementing as quickly as possible. This is discussed in more detail in the "Way Forward" section of this report.

- ET02 - By 2024, provide SMP implementation updates at least twice a year
- ET03 - By 2023, post an easy-to-understand Annual Budget Report online with funding and expenses by major categories and a list of planned projects
- ET05 - By 2023, create a publicly available dashboard that shares up-to-date performance data, including plan metrics, on-time performance data, and ridership by route

Figure 13 - Percentage of jobs reachable in 60 minutes using public transit and walking, Fall 2013

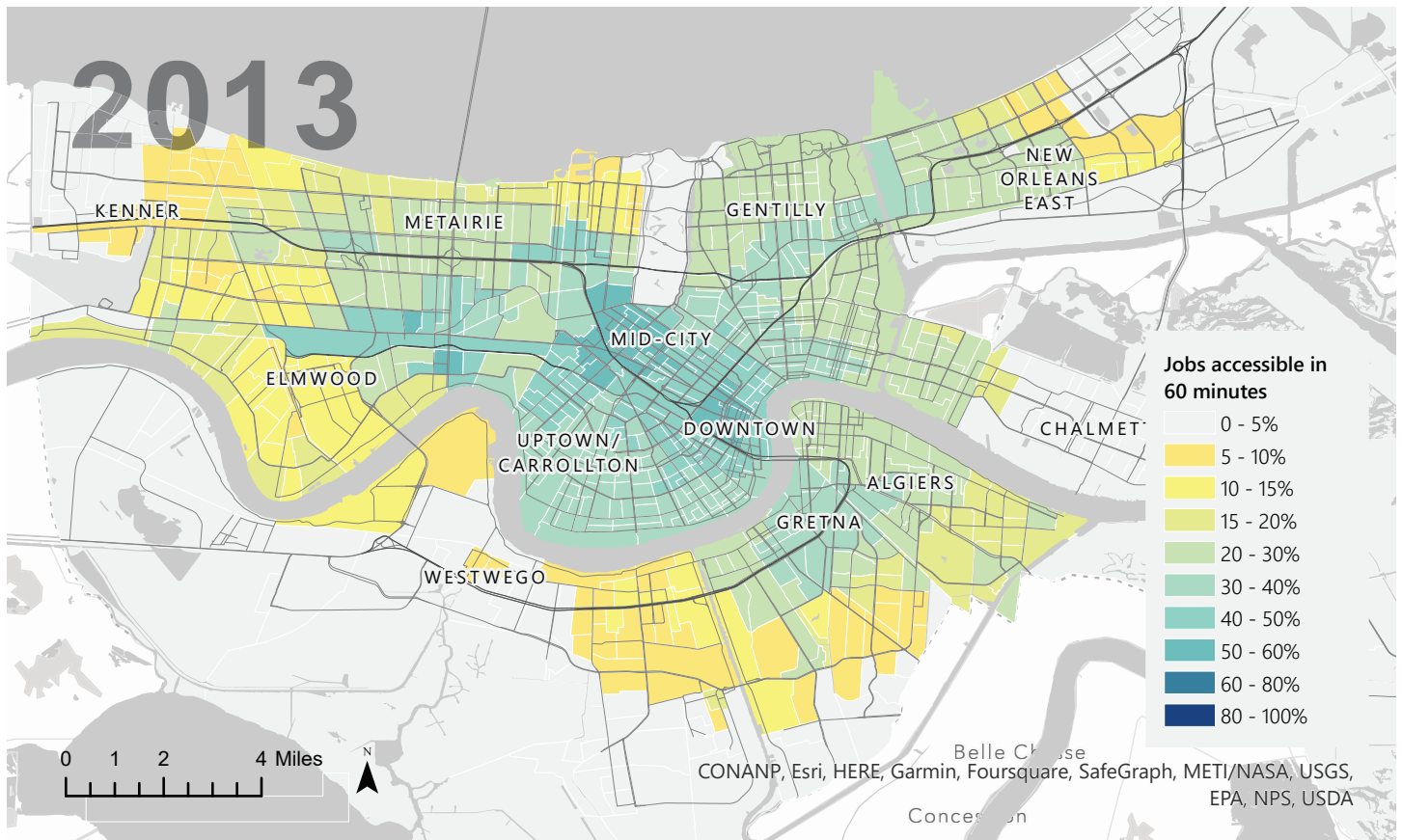
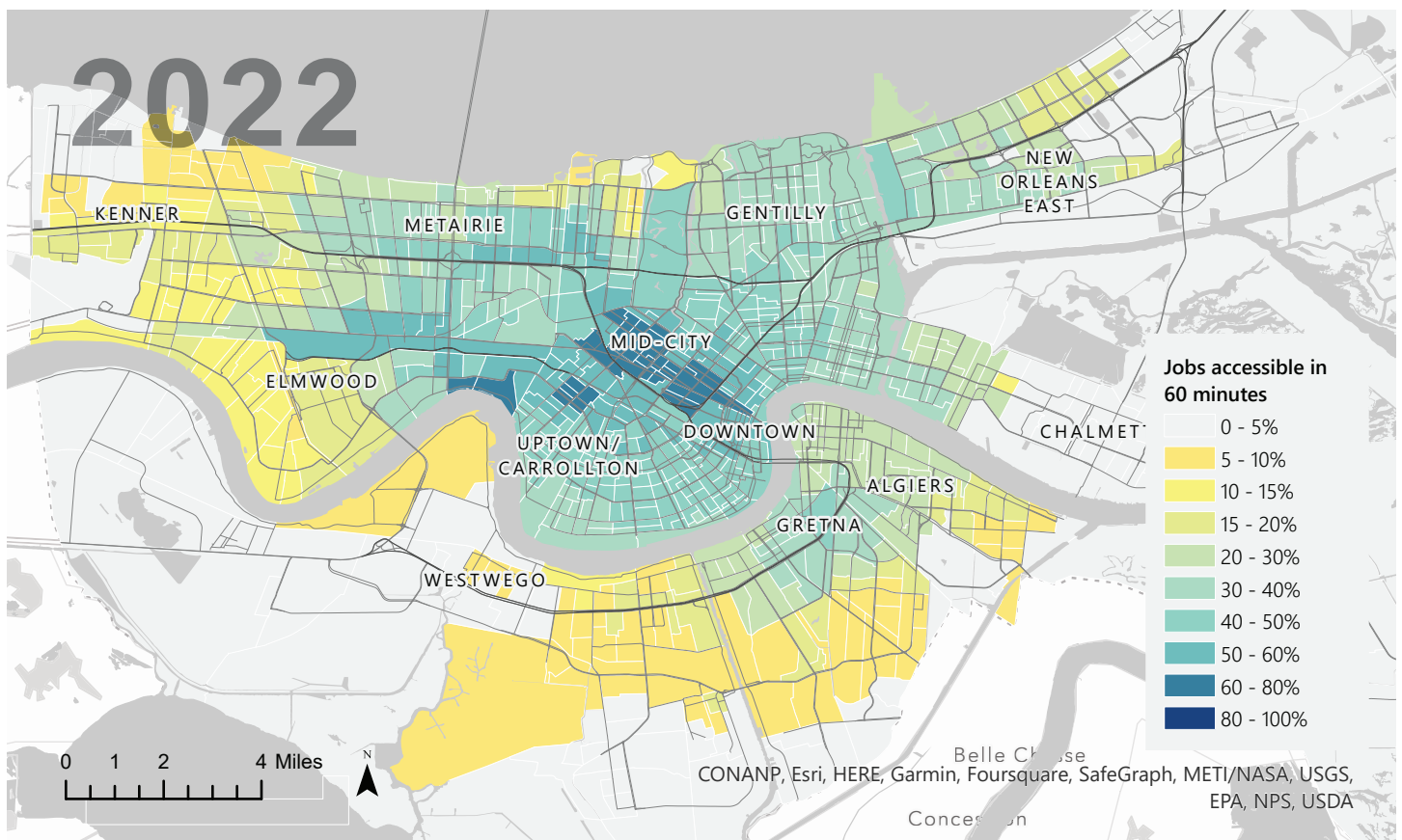


Figure 14 - Percentage of jobs reachable in 60 minutes using public transit and walking, Fall 2022



A better designed system

RIDE initially called for a network redesign of bus service in our 2015 State of Transit report and made this recommendation to the RTA repeatedly in subsequent years. The concept behind a bus network redesign is to reallocate current transit resources in order to provide the best possible service within available means. Successful network redesigns in Houston and other cities have resulted in increased transit ridership by focusing on frequent high-ridership routes and creating strong connections to employment opportunities.

RIDE's advocacy for a bus network redesign was eventually included as a priority in the RTA's SMP, leading to the implementation of the New Links Network Redesign. Both the RTA and Jefferson Parish completed the implementation of the New Links Plan in 2022. This plan brought about significant changes to the transit network, such as reallocating some streetcar resources to expand bus service, establishing improved regional connections between Orleans Parish and Jefferson Parish, and increasing bus frequency on high-ridership routes. Although the rollout and implementation faced some challenges, particularly in terms of engaging riders, the implementation of New Links was a crucial step for the RTA in reevaluating the overall structure of the transit network, which had remained largely unchanged since Hurricane Katrina.

According to RIDE's analysis, the service changes implemented in September 2022 resulted in modest yet tangible improvements in job access for residents of Orleans Parish and Jefferson Parish. RIDE's analysis of the overall impact of the New Links implementation found that New Links increased the number of jobs accessible within 60 minutes using transit in both parishes.

The implementation of New Links was one of several important policy victories contributing to the overall increase in access to jobs achieved by transit riders in Orleans and Jefferson parishes from 2013-2022. This increase can be seen in the maps on page 18 comparing the share of jobs accessible in 60 minutes by transit for the 2013 and 2022 transit systems.

About New Links

New Links was a planning project to reimagine how public transit connects Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard parishes. The project was a follow-up to the adoption of the Strategic Mobility Plan by the RTA Board of Commissioners in 2018. As part of the SMP, the RTA committed to developing (and implementing) a plan for a network redesign of public transit service.

A network redesign is a transit planning process that begins by wiping the slate clean and starting from scratch. The goal of a network redesign project is to rethink how existing bus lines are structured and come up with a plan for creating better, more efficient service using existing operating resources. This can involve designing new bus routes, eliminating or restructuring routes with low ridership, and reallocating resources to increase the number of lines with frequent service.

The New Links planning effort launched in 2019 and was lead by the Regional Planning Commission (RPC) in partnership with the City of New Orleans, Jefferson Parish, the RTA, and RIDE. After multiple rounds of interactive planning and community engagement, the RPC released the Final Recommended Network Plan in 2021. The RTA implemented new bus routes in September 2022 which were generally based on the New Links recommendations.

JP Transit initially implemented service changes in Jefferson Parish based on the New Links recommendations in January 2021, but rolled back the majority of these changes in June 2023 as part of a broader cut to transit service in the Parish.

“Many cities across the country have invested in infrastructure at their bustling central transit hubs to create comfortable, easy-to-navigate, pedestrian-friendly pavilions and structures to serve waiting riders. In some cases, cities recognize that a transit hub has the potential to be much more than just a place to catch a bus or streetcar. Transit hubs can take many shapes and forms. From striking architecture to simple shade structures with bus bays, the design of a transit hub can vary dramatically. In some cities, transit hubs are built into larger development projects, sitting under office towers to make for easy work commutes or being co-located with an eclectic mix of retail and other businesses.

In New Orleans, a transit hub could serve as a central location for all transportation-related activities including tourist charter buses, future bike share and car share facilities, a park-n-Ride, easy connections to Amtrak and inter-city bus lines like Greyhound and Megabus and much, much more. It’s clear that the current facilities at the CBD transit hub not only fail existing and potential transit riders, but that they are restricting the Loyola Avenue corridor from realizing its full potential as a vibrant and thriving downtown neighborhood.”

- Ride New Orleans, “Smart Transit for a Strong Economy: Why New Orleans should Invest in a CBD Transit Hub” (2014)



Improving downtown options for riders

In 2013, RIDE released a white paper titled “Smart Transit for a Strong Economy,” which highlighted the need for New Orleans to invest in a Central Business District (CBD) transit hub. The report emphasized that the CBD had historically been neglected in terms of utilizing transit to access downtown New Orleans. During that time, the Loyola branch of the Loyola Rampart streetcar line had recently opened, and transit shelters were constructed for streetcar riders. However, equivalent resources were not allocated for bus riders.

In early 2012, the construction of the Loyola Union Passenger Terminal streetcar line led to the displacement of the CBD transit hub to a two-block area between Marais and North Robertson streets on Rampart. This detour negatively affected bus riders, prompting RIDE to advocate for the development of a consolidated CBD transit hub. We believed it would serve as a community asset, enhance the city’s cultural identity, stimulate smart development opportunities, and improve transit convenience and comfort.

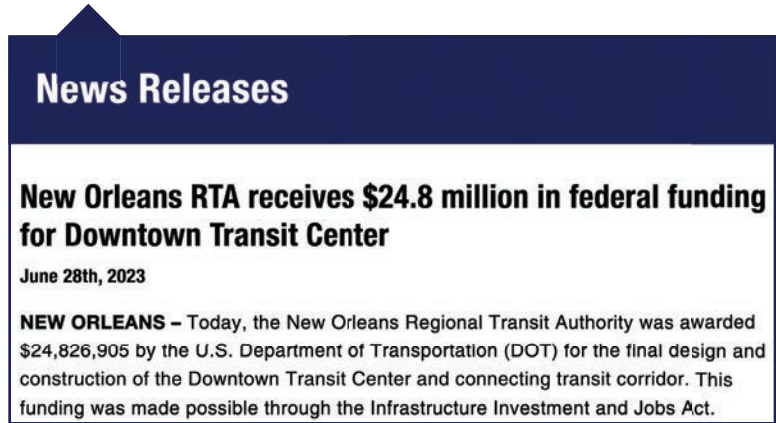
The journey towards establishing a downtown CBD transit hub has been lengthy and complex. In 2015, the RTA initiated a study to determine a permanent location for the hub. However, the project was eventually suspended due to opposition from the then-administration. The issue of adequate facilities for transit riders downtown became even more apparent in 2019 when the Hard Rock Hotel construction site at Canal and North Rampart collapsed. This event displaced transit riders from the main hub at Elk Place and Canal Street.

The collapse of the Hard Rock Hotel led to the long-term closure of sections of Canal and Rampart Street, affecting vehicular and bus traffic. Consequently, the primary transit hub for bus riders underwent several temporary relocations. It was first moved to the RTA Headquarters on Canal Street and then to an interim location on Canal at Claiborne. Finally, it settled in a long-term interim location at Duncan Plaza on Loyola. However, each of these locations had significant drawbacks as transit hubs. They

were considerably farther from many employment destinations in the CBD and French Quarter compared to the previous hub at Elk Place and Canal. Additionally, all three locations lacked certain amenities.

Over the past two years, there have been significant improvements in the prospects of a high-quality transit hub in the New Orleans CBD. Firstly, the RTA partnered with the New Orleans Public Library to relocate the primary transfer hub one block down Loyola to the Main Library branch. This new library hub is much better in terms of operations and rider facilities compared to the previous site at Duncan Plaza.

The new location at the Main Library is closer to Canal Street, making it easier for transfers to the Canal Streetcar. Additionally, the RTA revived and completed the Downtown Transit Hub Study, which had been put on hold previously. This study identified a permanent location for a transit hub at Basin Street in the neutral ground. Earlier this year, the RTA secured a \$24.8 million grant to implement the new transit hub in partnership with the City.



News Releases

New Orleans RTA receives \$24.8 million in federal funding for Downtown Transit Center

June 28th, 2023

NEW ORLEANS – Today, the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority was awarded \$24,826,905 by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) for the final design and construction of the Downtown Transit Center and connecting transit corridor. This funding was made possible through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

While implementation of the transit hub is not yet guaranteed, these actions by the RTA demonstrate a genuine commitment to the creation of a permanent downtown transit hub. This has given stakeholders confidence that the project will be realized. In the meantime, the relocation of the main hub to the library, along with the installation of new shelters, benches, and lighting, has created a more dignified and comfortable experience for riders at the temporary hub.

Although RIDE acknowledges and supports these improvements, we believe that the RTA can and should do more to further enhance the rider experience at the temporary hub during the design and construction of the permanent hub at Basin Street. This can include installing more robust wayfinding, such as maps and signage, at both the Main Library stops and nearby areas in the CBD. We also urge the RTA and City to prioritize the installation of additional temporary benches and shelters at all stops within the downtown hub footprint, including those across Loyola, at Elk Place, Duncan Plaza, and Tulane Avenue.

“One of the most glaring accessibility issues is the city’s inaccessible transit stops. Although all public transit vehicles (bus, streetcar, ferries, and paratransit) are accessible in the New Orleans region, the vast majority of stops are not. An internal audit of bus stops in New Orleans found that around 94% of bus stops were inaccessible. A 2017 lawsuit forced the city and RTA to agree to make stops ADA-compliant by 2031, a goal which is now established in the RTA’s Strategic Mobility Plan. There is still time to reach that goal, but so far, a cursory look around the city suggests that little action has occurred. This means many places are simply not reachable or safe for people with disabilities.”

- State of Transit 2022

Transit service accessibility improves

Previous reports on transit accessibility have consistently highlighted the issue of poor accessibility in both fixed-route systems and paratransit services. However, there have been notable improvements in these areas. The RTA and JP Transit have conducted a joint analysis of paratransit operations and have implemented the recommendations to enhance the quality of paratransit services. Additionally, the St. Charles streetcar line has undergone accessibility upgrades, including the installation of ADA platforms at major stops and the use of ADA accessible streetcars.

The city of New Orleans has also made significant investments in ADA curb ramp infrastructure as part of its efforts to comply with the public right-of-way accessibility plan and the ADA consent decree. These investments aim to improve accessibility for individuals with disabilities. The city has further demonstrated transparency by providing public data on ADA implementation through the City’s ADA dashboard, which shows improvements in curb ramps and intersections brought into ADA compliance.

One area where the city has made particular progress over the past year is in the implementation of ADA-accessible curb and intersection infrastructure. These investments have increased the share of RTA stops that are adjacent to fully-accessible intersections, as shown in Figure 15 comparing the percentage of fully compliant, partially compliant, and non-compliant ADA intersections in the City. From May 2022 to September 2023, the share of ADA-accessible RTA stops has grown substantially, with nearly half of all stops fully compliant as of September 2023.

While there is still room for improvement in overall service accessibility, it is important to acknowledge the progress that has been made in addressing transit accessibility issues. The collaborative efforts and investments made by the RTA, JP Transit and the city of New Orleans have contributed to enhancing the accessibility of transit services and infrastructure.

Better fare payment options

In 2014 and 2015, RIDE advocated for the RTA to offer more accessible transit fare payment options to riders. At the time, the RTA only accepted cash and tokens. Since then, both the RTA and JP Transit have made progress in implementing more accessible fare payment options. The RTA now provides passes through the Le Pass app. The introduction of accessible fare payment began in 2019 with the GoMobile app and continued when the RTA introduced the Le Pass app in 2022. In 2023, Jefferson Parish entered into a CEA (Cooperative Endeavor Agreement) with the RTA to offer pass-based fare payment for routes in Jefferson Parish.

Figure 15 - ADA Curb Ramp Compliance at RTA Stops, May 2022 and September 2023

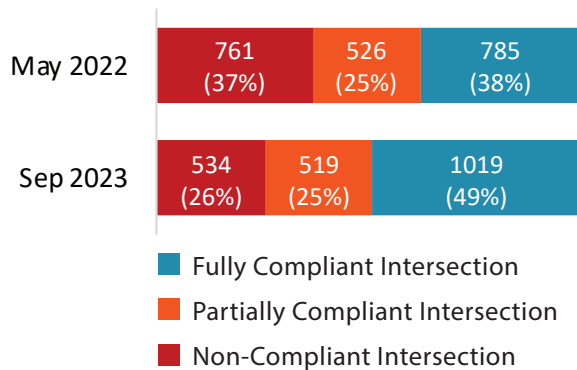


Figure 16 - ADA accessible intersections, May 2022 and September 2023



Real-time tracking

In 2016, RIDE initially advocated for the RTA to provide real-time tracking information for buses and streetcars. We argued that this was crucial for both the public, who would benefit from knowing the whereabouts of bus services, and for internal purposes, such as managing transit performance. After the implementation of real-time tracking, RIDE continued to push for the RTA to make the tracking data accessible to the public and other developers, allowing integration into various transit apps beyond Le Pass. In 2018, Jefferson also made real-time tracking information available.

Now, both agencies have integrated real-time GTFS feeds into the Le Pass app, as well as other transit mobility tools like Moovit and Transit App. Numerous studies have consistently shown that real-time tracking reduces both perceived and actual wait times for riders. It has also been consistently requested and prioritized during comprehensive planning processes for the RTA and JP Transit. We are pleased that both agencies have implemented real-time tracking, although there are still some concerns regarding the reliability and consistency of the data. Nonetheless, the functionality of the real-time information provided by both agencies has significantly improved over the past decade.

“One frustration for riders in recent years has been the aging and faulty equipment that tracks and relays transit vehicle locations – the key ingredient for “real-time” data. Even for riders without smart phones or interest in transit tracking apps, this can be a problem as it keeps the RTA from more effectively tracking buses and identifying problems with the schedule – based on driver error, traffic conditions, crowded stops, or other issues – and quickly correcting them.

This deficiency can also be an impediment for increased ridership. The New York City bus system saw a two percent increase in ridership between 2011 and 2013 after reliable arrival time data was introduced and made available to the public.¹ In the RTA system in 2016, that would have meant an additional 369,000 riders, or almost \$500,000 in additional revenue.”

- State of Transit 2017

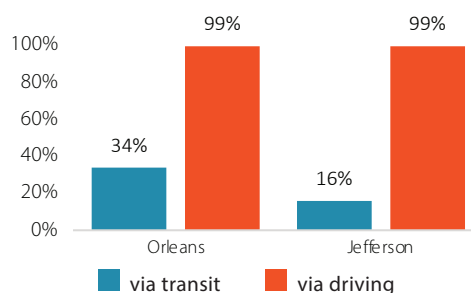
Part II: Where We've Stalled

Introduction: access to jobs remains limited

Over the past decade, there have been significant achievements in improving regional transit, including better governance at the RTA, reducing operating costs for service, and some new investments in service. Transit decisionmakers from both parishes also successfully came together to rethink the structure of the regional transit network as part of the New Links planning process. These policy victories resulted in modest but real improvements to transit service quality in the region. However, there are still major challenges to overcome and limited or no progress has been made in many areas:

- As measured by vehicle revenue hours (VRH), transit service is no longer expanding, with service levels peaking in 2019 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This stalled growth leaves the region significantly short of service levels prior to 2005.
- Access to jobs and other destinations remains very limited for Orleans and Jefferson parish residents relying on transit when compared to those with access to a vehicle.
- Despite some promising planning work being undertaken by the RTA, virtually no on-the-ground progress has been made to give transit service priority on the road, and transit operating speeds remain far below those in other US cities.
- Despite years of advocacy by RIDE, transit leaders and elected officials have not seriously embraced discussions regarding new funding sources for transit, an issue which has taken on new urgency since the pandemic.
- Many areas of the user experience for transit riders continue to need significant improvement, including rider amenities such as shelters and wayfinding, as well as rider communications such as real-time service alerts and reliable bus tracking.

Figure 17 - Average share of the region's jobs accessible to Orleans and Jefferson residents by public transit and driving within an hour - 2023 (all day access)



As of September 2023, New Orleans residents can reach fewer than one-third of the approximately 375,000 jobs available in Jefferson, Orleans, and St. Bernard parishes on public transportation within 60 minutes. Residents with access to a private vehicle can reach over 99% of jobs in the same period. These figures are significantly worse for other parishes and at lower time thresholds (e.g. 30 and 45 minutes).

This disparity means that, except for a few neighborhoods near frequent transit service or the New Orleans CBD, transit remains an inferior option for transportation and is seen as a last resort. Those who rely on transit continue to have limited opportunities compared to drivers. This disparity in access also means that there are few opportunities for ridership growth in the near future.

A step backward: job access fell from 2022-2023

Most troublingly, the past year has actually seen a significant step back for the region's transit service as measured by access to the region's jobs. In both Orleans and Jefferson parishes, the number of jobs accessible by transit fell by almost 10%. This decline can be attributed to service cuts implemented by Jefferson Parish and the RTA in June, as well as reduced regional connections between the parishes.

This drop in access is significant enough to effectively undo many of the gains resulting from the implementation of New Links in 2022 for both peak hour (Figure 19) and all-day job access (Figure 18). While peak hour job access remains slightly higher than prior to New Links, as measured by the number of accessible jobs, this is partially due to an increase in the overall number of jobs. Over the same period, and within the employment data used for the analysis, Orleans Parish residents able to access a smaller percentage of the region's jobs than in 2021 despite the increase. Meanwhile, all-day access to jobs on weekdays fell in both Orleans and Jefferson parishes.

This loss in access also complicates the previous trend of job access changes since 2014, which were generally characterized by slow but measurable growth interrupted by the pandemic (Figure 20 and Figure 21).

Figure 18 - Jobs accessible within 60 minutes via transit for the average Orleans and Jefferson Parish worker from 11am to 1pm

	2021	2022	2023
Jefferson Parish (Total Jobs)	55,022	65,617	59,923
Jefferson Parish (% Jobs)	15.1%	17.5%	16.0%
Orleans Parish (Total Jobs)	125,802	136,735	126,701
Orleans Parish (% Jobs)	34.4%	36.5%	33.8%

Figure 19 - Jobs accessible within 60 minutes via transit for the average Orleans and Jefferson Parish worker from 7am to 9am

	2021	2022	2023
Jefferson Parish (Total Jobs)	63,900	69,307	62,236
Jefferson Parish (% Jobs)	17.5%	18.5%	16.6%
Orleans Parish (Total Jobs)	134,792	138,714	129,254
Orleans Parish (% Jobs)	36.9%	37.0%	34.5%

Figure 20 - Share of jobs accessible to Jefferson Parish residents by transit within an hour, 2013-2023

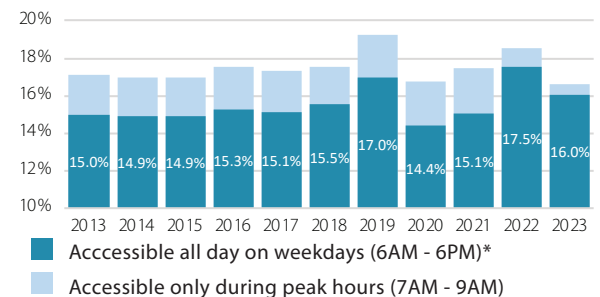
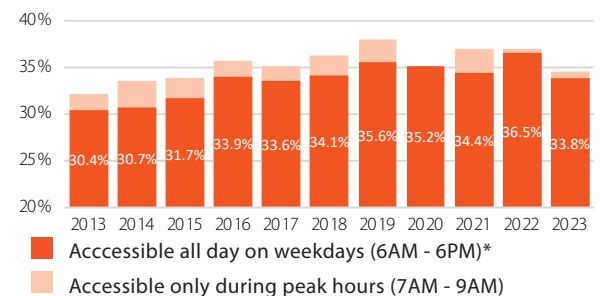


Figure 21 - Share of jobs accessible to Orleans Parish residents by transit within an hour, 2013-2023



*Column labels indicate jobs accessible all day on weekdays from 6am-6pm

Jefferson Parish says no to transit

In June of this year, Jefferson Parish, with very minimal outreach, analysis or communication to the public, made severe cuts to transit service. These cuts substantially undid the progress that was made for improved regional service in New Links and effectively restored the parish to 2018 levels of transit service. The most significant consequences of the cuts included eliminating the downtown portion of the E1 Veterans Bus Line down Canal Street, along with drastic cuts to service levels on the W2 West Bank Expressway and W3 LaPalco bus routes.

The E1, W2, and W3 are the three highest ridership routes in JP Transit's system, and combined, account for well over half its ridership. In addition to these cuts, the E6 Metairie Local Bus Line, a new route that was introduced as part of the New Links service redesign, which provided service to several high-need portions of Jefferson Parish, including the West Napoleon Corridor, was eliminated.

RIDE was very troubled by these cuts, which represent a significant step backward for transit service in the region. As of publication time for this report, Jefferson Parish has not provided what we believe to be an adequate explanation for the process behind these cuts or a valid reason as to why they were undertaken in such a fashion-- particularly after the implementation of the New Links recommendations less than 18 months before.

RIDE received minimal information from Jefferson Parish when requesting an explanation for these service cuts. The parish only held two public meetings prior to implementing the cuts, one on the East Bank and one on the West Bank, both of which were attended by a significant number of riders expressing opposition to the service reductions. RIDE views this decision as a profoundly disappointing and short-sighted move by parish administration.

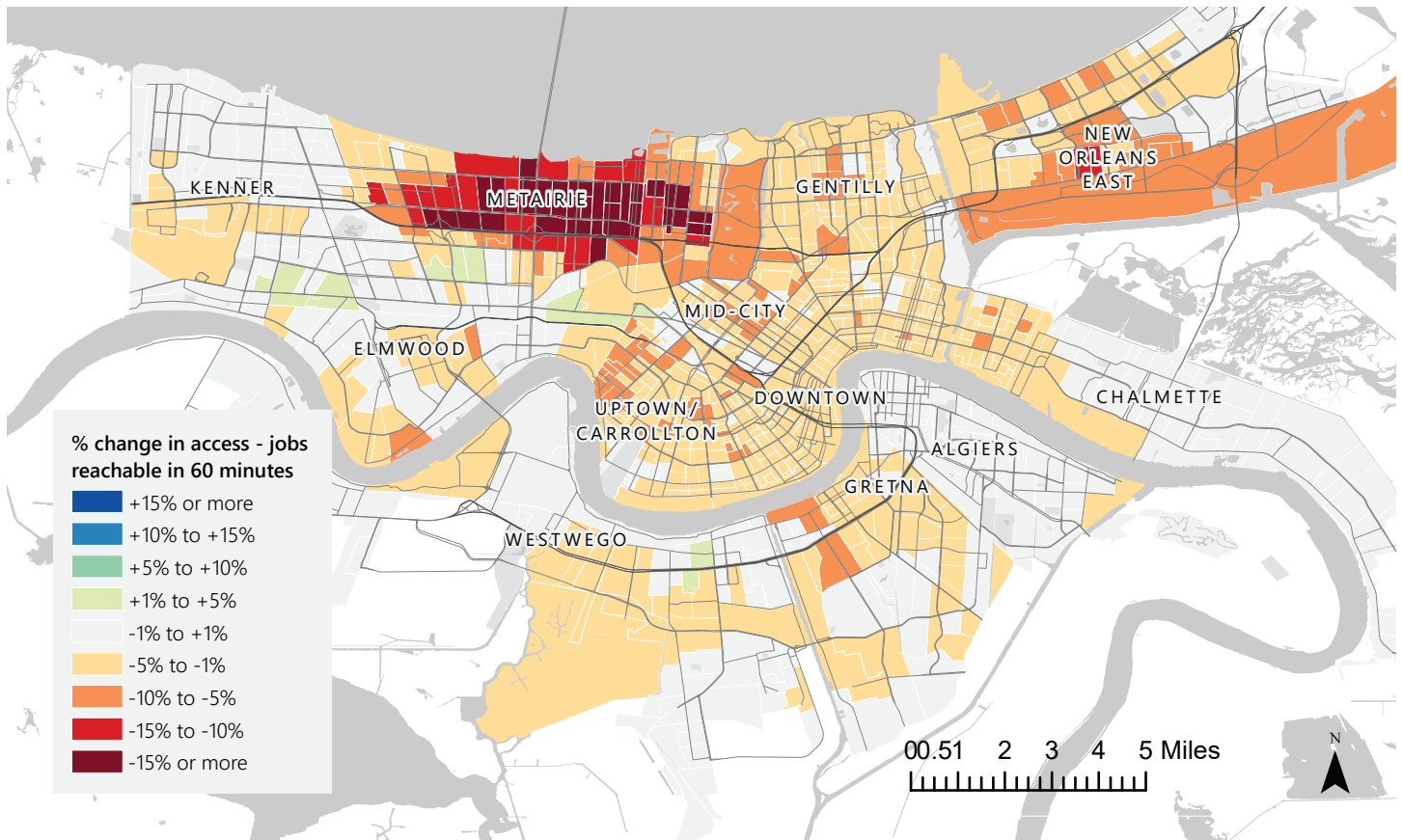
The Jefferson Parish administration justified the need to make immediate service cuts by noting that transit service in the parish was operating at a deficit, with the annual cost of fixed-route transit operations exceeded the millage and other revenues which fund transit. While this is an accurate picture of transit finances in the parish, this issue has been known to the Jefferson Parish transit administration and elected officials for many years. It has been highlighted by RIDE in previous State of Transit reports and addressed through recent transit service planning efforts including the 2019 Jefferson Parish Transit Strategic Plan, which incorporated scenarios for preserving essential transit service in the event of a funding shortfall.

We therefore believe it is disingenuous for Parish elected officials and administrators to portray the funding deficit for transit as a new and urgent issue. Furthermore, despite an ongoing operating deficit, the parish retained a substantial fund balance for transit which (per RIDE's analysis) is more than sufficient to operate service at current levels for a number of years before cuts to

"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."

- 2021 State of Transit

Figure 22 - Change in percentage of jobs accessible within 60 minutes during peak hours before and after 2023 Service Cuts



service will become necessary. In fact, over the past several years, the fund balance for transit has actually grown substantially, as the parish has received more than \$27 million in COVID-19 relief funds dedicated for transit operations through the 2020 CARES Act and the 2021 American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act.

Given that transit service was not in immediate danger of insolvency, RIDE encouraged Jefferson Parish leadership to undertake a more comprehensive, public-facing process around restructuring service, including a serious conversation around new funding sources. Unfortunately, the Jefferson Parish administration chose to move forward with service cuts in June. Rather than incorporate any of the contingency planning for reduced service which came out of the 2019 strategic planning process for the Parish (or the reduced service scenarios which were incorporated into the Final Recommended Network plan for New Links), the Parish “rolled back” service to its 2018 configuration, essentially undoing the implementation of New Links service in the Parish.

Jefferson Parish Cuts: Impact by Neighborhood

The Jefferson Parish cuts are responsible for the majority of the decline in access to jobs from 2022-2023, as can be seen in Figure 22 highlighting the percentage change in job access by neighborhood before and after June 4, when the cuts went into effect. The largest drop in access can be seen for neighborhoods adjacent to the Veterans Boulevard corridor which no longer have direct access to the CBD via the E1 bus. These neighborhoods also include the business core of Jefferson Parish between Causeway Blvd and Clearview Blvd, which is no longer accessible within 60 minutes to many Orleans Parish residents.

The **service delivery** metric compares the number of vehicle revenue hours (VRH) of service which a transit agency runs over a given period compared to the amount of revenue hours which were scheduled. This percentage drops when scheduled service does not begin on time, or when a breakdown occurs mid-run if the vehicle cannot be repaired or replaced. A low service delivery percentage can indicate that a transit agency is facing a shortage of available drivers, vehicles, or both.

RTA experiences a fleet maintenance crisis

The RTA is currently facing a transit service delivery crisis because it lacks a sufficient number of operational buses to run its scheduled service. This crisis is the result of a combination of national and local issues. The agency is currently experiencing a significant number of vehicles out of service for maintenance or other reasons.

On paper, the RTA has 140 buses available for scheduled service, and prior to June, only 97 were needed at any given time. However, over the past year, the RTA has often had 50 or more buses out of service at any given time due to mechanical breakdowns and other issues.

Figure 23 compares the average number of buses available and out of service by month to the number required by the RTA to run peak weekday service. Prior to June of this year, the RTA required 97 vehicles in operation to run its full weekday schedule. In addition to those 97 vehicles, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) sets a guideline for transit agencies to maintain a “spare ratio” of available contingency vehicles— typically 20% of the number required for peak service. This allows agencies to swap out vehicles if a breakdown occurs and makes it easier to perform preventative maintenance by rotating vehicles in and out of service.

As the figure above shows, the RTA has typically had far fewer vehicles available for service than is recommended by best practices, and in some months, it has had fewer vehicles in operation than the minimum required to run service.

As a result, the RTA’s service delivery, which measures the amount of scheduled service provided each month, has consistently fallen below 95% for the past year. While the RTA attempted to mitigate service delivery issues in June by cutting peak service from 97 to 87 buses, this has not significantly improved service completion, as the number of buses awaiting repairs has continued to increase. This has caused severe impacts to transit service reliability that are not captured in traditional on-time performance data for transit service, which only measures completed service.

While a 95% service completion rate may not seem like a significant drop from 100%, it has substantially impacted service during peak weekday hours when riders are using transit the most. This can be demonstrated by breaking out the number of buses being taken out of service at different times of day (Figure 25).

Figure 23 - Buses needed for peak RTA service versus available vehicles, April to September 2023

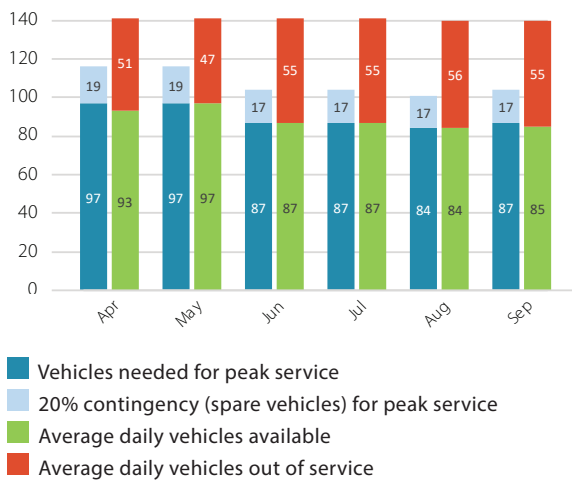
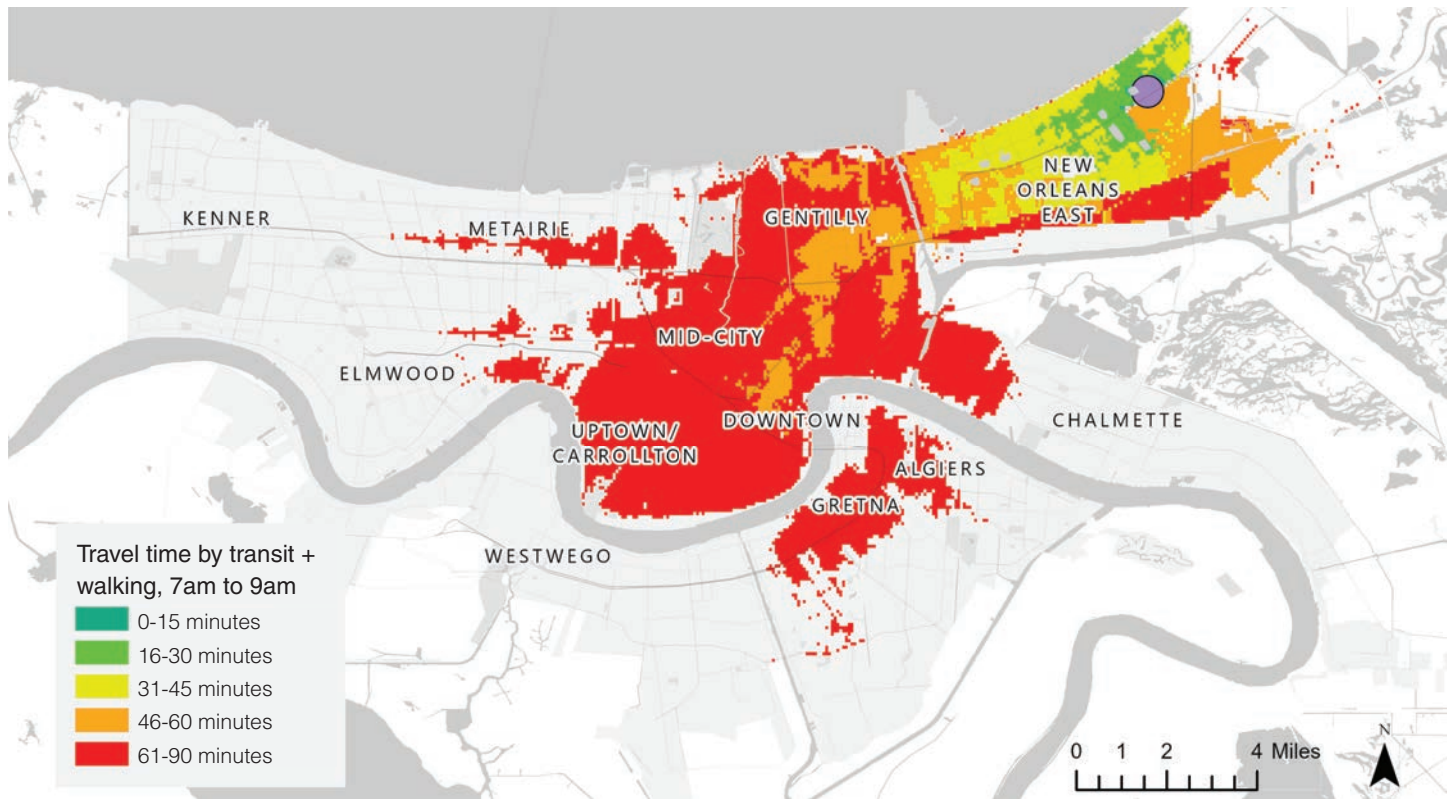


Figure 24 - Destinations accessible from New Orleans East by transit during peak service, October 2023



Typical Trip

New Orleans East (Little Woods) to CBD (Harrah's Casino)

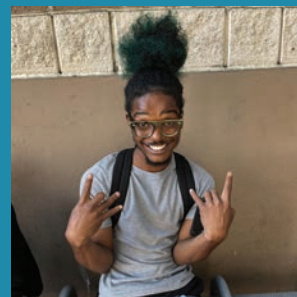
Bus Lines

61-Lake Forest, 62-Morrison, 68-Little Woods

Dillion's Transit Experience

- I work at Harrah's Casino. I stay way out on Bullard at Carmel Brooks Apartments, so I gotta catch two or three buses just to get there. They are late, they pass us up ... I could be standing at the bus stop and if I'm not right at that bus stop, they pass me up.
- Sometimes they pick and choose, which I don't like. They'll pick up old people, but a young person like me, they'll pass us up. I'll be going to work. I'll have my work uniform on and everything, and they'll pass me up. I have 3 disciplinary points right now, and we're on a 4 point system. It's because of the bus, and my job doesn't want to hear that. They want me there.
- At night, I'm waiting extremely long. I get off at 2 or 3 in the morning sometimes and those buses take all day. I hate that they stop here and at the library for like an hour. People have places to go and they're breaking too long. I'm not getting home until like 6 am.

TRANSIT RIDER PROFILE Dillion (N.O. East Resident)



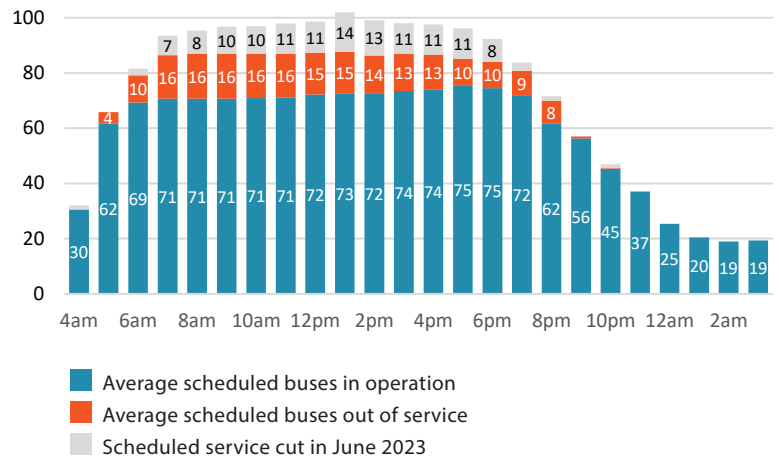
“They need a bus coming every 20 minutes, not every hour. They need a 20 minute schedule, and they need to be on time.

We need another bus app. I liked the old app, because I could see where the bus was at and make sure I was there. This one works, but not like the old one. When I watch the bus, it jumps. On the old app, you could see the bus moving. This one jumps, oh it's on this stop, the next stop, now it's four stops ahead. I don't like that.”

Methodology Note: Hourly Vehicles In Service

To calculate weekday buses in service by hour, RIDE relied on daily RTA logs reflecting late and cancelled bus pull-outs (LPOs), and scheduled weekday trips obtained through a public records request. Because data includes both scheduled revenue trips and ‘deadhead’ (non-revenue) trips, the total number of buses shown in peak service in Figure 25 is slightly higher than the required number of peak buses for revenue service.

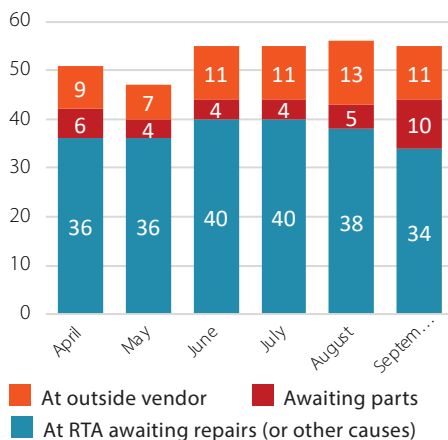
Figure 25 - Average buses in service by hour on all RTA routes, week of September 25-29, 2023



The current service crisis is being caused by a combination of local and national issues, including:

- A large portion of the RTA bus fleet is nearing the end of its useful service life and is scheduled to be retired within 1-2 years.
- RTA buses often experience additional wear and tear and require extra maintenance due to poor roadway conditions on many New Orleans streets.
- Due to national supply chain issues, there are shortages for the bus parts needed to repair certain vehicles.
- Both locally and nationally, there is a significant labor shortage of qualified bus mechanics, creating a backlog for vehicle repairs. The RTA reported in June that the agency was short six bus mechanics. This shortage has also delayed fixes to buses sent to outside vendors for repairs (Figure 26).

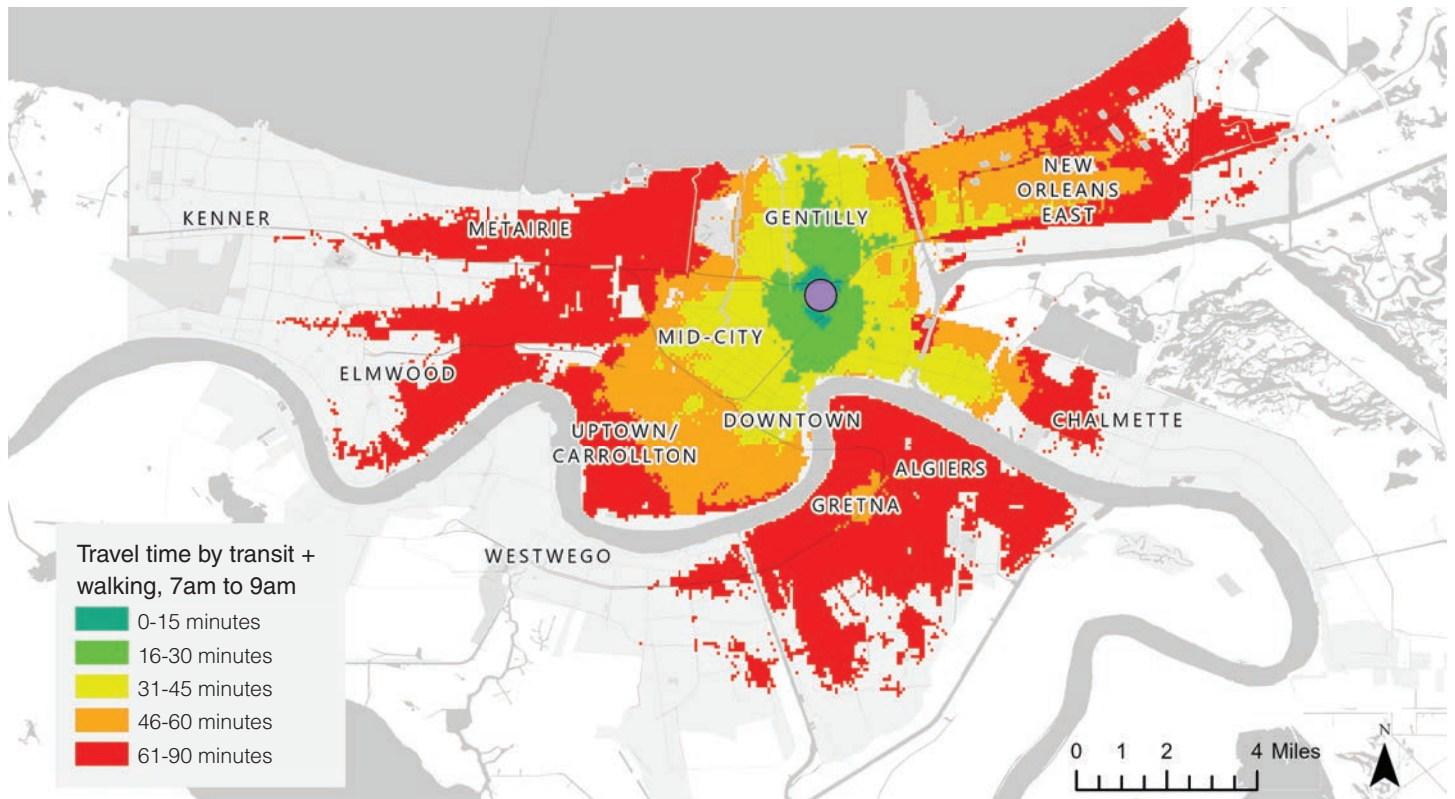
Figure 26 - Status of RTA buses out of service - April to September, 2023



RIDE recognizes that the current service crisis is both complex and only partially within the RTA's control. We acknowledge that it will take time both to restore existing buses and procure new vehicles, as a typical bus procurement process may take 18 months from purchase to delivery. Nevertheless, we have expressed concerns that the RTA is providing inadequate information on vehicles in service through the Le Pass app, which is a grievance frequently raised to RIDE staff by riders who have been impacted by missed or cancelled service. Based on rider feedback, it appears that service is being disproportionately cut from certain routes when vehicles are unavailable. This reflects a policy choice by agency operations staff to prioritize maintaining service on certain routes at the expense of others.

That being the case, we believe it is essential for the RTA to be transparent about the decisionmaking framework used to prioritize service when vehicles are unavailable so that riders can make informed travel decisions based on the likelihood that service will be available. We also believe the agency must prioritize improving the real-time information available to riders via the Le Pass app regarding out of service vehicles.

Figure 27 - Destinations accessible from Elysian Fields by transit during peak service, October 2023



Typical Trip

Elysian Fields, (off O'reilly Road) to Walmart.

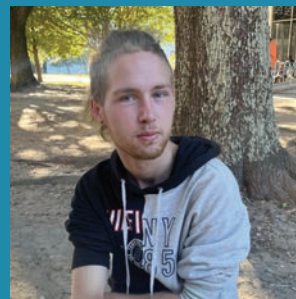
Bus Lines

55-Elysian Fields, 91-Jackson-Esplanade, 3-Tulane-Elmwood

Levi's Transit Experience

- [On how often buses are late] It all depends on the bus driver. It says 15 minutes, but they take 29, 30, 40, or whatever so it's like, 'Okay, where is the bus!'
- Sometimes they're a little late and that's kind of overbearing because you gotta get to places on time and stuff. But overall, it's pretty good. I have a few friends who work at RTA and drive the buses, so it's not all that bad.
- When we transfer, it's basically all we do is get a transfer card and transfer to the next bus. The only hassle is, you can't use the same card multiple times with the same bus—which is kind of unfair.
- [On using Le Pass to track buses] I use the app all the time. The tricky part is when the app says it'll be there in 15 minutes, then 15 minutes comes and the bus isn't there.

TRANSIT RIDER PROFILE Levi (Elysian Fields)



"If you see that a whole bunch of people are coming on, get them all seated then after you take off, have them come up one by one and pay. Instead of having to wait for everyone to [scan] their card, put in their money, then go.

It's kind of unfair. Say for instance one of us has to get to a job for 3:00, and it's 2:30 and you're taking 30 minutes just to get everyone on. You get to work late, and then get in trouble with your boss."



“In order for transit to offer a competitive choice over automobile travel, it must be given priority on the roadway. Transit travel times are slow in large part because we do not design and operate our roadways in a manner that allows transit to succeed at providing quick, easy trips. Transit priority lanes and signal prioritization will enable transit vehicles to operate on schedule, even when there is traffic, making for a reliably convenient commute. For streetcars, transit priority additionally means placing the streetcar tracks in the neutral ground or in dedicated and grade-separated transit lanes in the roadway [and] reducing the number of intersections where vehicles can cross over streetcar tracks.”

- State of Transit 2015

Little progress on giving transit priority on the road

One area where the greater New Orleans region has failed to make significant progress since 2014 is giving transit priority on the road. In prior State of Transit briefings, RIDE noted that our region operates significantly slower transit service than other US cities. The reliance on outdated heritage streetcar design and road design decisions in New Orleans has resulted in a slow system, limiting the growth potential of the system and its usefulness for residents. RIDE has consistently advocated for investments in transit priority infrastructure and the modernization of streetcar service to make it faster and more functional.

A slow transit system hinders transit access to jobs and amenities, making it less useful. It also increases the cost and inefficiency of running the service. Slower transit requires more operating hours to maintain the same service frequency, while faster transit allows for the same level of service to be run with fewer resources. This adjustment would free up resources to invest in other areas of the transit system.

About Transit Priority Improvements

Transit priority treatments include roadway projects designed to make transit service faster, more reliable, and more efficient. They can be implemented at a fraction of the cost of large capital projects, while reducing transit vehicle delays leading to increased frequency and reliability. They also often have a positive impact on overall traffic flow.

In the New Orleans context, transit priority improvements can consist of some combination of the following:

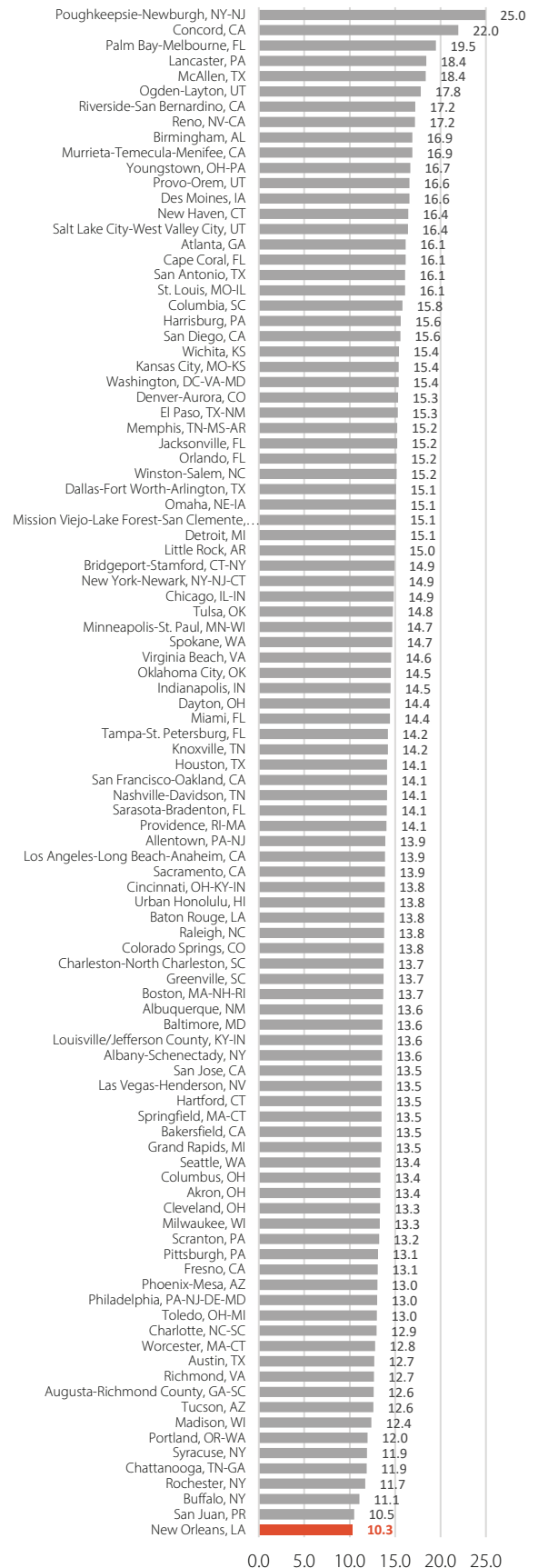
- Dedicated lanes for transit vehicles
- Traffic signal priority for transit (giving special treatment to transit vehicles at signalized intersections)
- Curb bump outs for bus stops so buses don't have to cut back into traffic
- Placement of bus stops on the far side of intersections
- Queue jumps for transit vehicles to get through busy intersections
- Limiting turns and access across the neutral ground in order to reduce conflicts between cars and streetcars.
- Placing the streetcar tracks in the neutral ground or in dedicated and grade-separated transit lanes in the roadway.

Unfortunately, there has been little to no tangible progress in this area to date. As of 2021, New Orleans has the slowest fixed-route transit system among major cities in the United States, as measured by annual vehicle revenue miles per hour. This is partly due to the large share of streetcar service run by the RTA compared to other agencies, but also reflects bus service that is slower than many peer agencies. The City's lack of modern infrastructure and investment in transit priority infrastructure for buses also plays a role.

Currently, the only dedicated bus lanes in Greater New Orleans are a short section on the Basin Street Health Place Corridor in the CBD. The RTA has recognized the importance of transit priority infrastructure in the updated Strategic Mobility Plan, which calls for the implementation of multiple Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) routes over the next ten years and "adding dedicated transit lanes, signal priority improvements, and other transit priority treatments" to speed up transit service. The City of New Orleans Climate Action Plan has also incorporated a goal of installing six miles of dedicated transit infrastructure by 2030.

However, there have been no specific proposals beyond the current New Orleans East to Algiers BRT project with regard to the location, type, and phasing of additional priority treatments.

Figure 28 - 2021 Average transit operating speeds for the 100 largest US urban areas



Explanation of Funding Categories

Sales Taxes. The RTA’s primary source of revenue for operating expenses is a 1% Orleans Parish sales tax approved by voters in 1985.

Hotel Motel Tax. In 1999, the RTA and the New Orleans Tourism & Marketing Corp. signed an agreement under which the revenue of one percent of the tax collected by hotels and motels will be shared. Under this deal, the marketing corporation gets 40 percent of the first \$7.2 million generated by that one percent tax in hotels and motels, while the RTA keeps the remaining 60 percent.

State Motor Vehicle Tax. The RTA and JP Transit receive operating assistance from the state through the from a portion of the State’s gas tax that is set aside in the State Parish Transportation Fund (included in the miscellaneous sources portion of the JP Transit budget).

Fare Revenue. The agencies anticipate generating \$11 million (RTA) and \$2 million (JP Transit) in fare revenue in 2023.

Federal Support. The RTA and JP Transit both receive operating assistance from the federal government for a variety of purposes. Since 2020, the amount of federal support has increased dramatically as a result of operating assistance during the pandemic. The majority of this funding is from Section 5307 operating assistance funds distributed to transit agencies as part of the 2020 CARES Act and 2021 American Rescue Plan (ARP).

Property Taxes. Local JP Transit operating funds primarily come from two parish-wide millages, one for bus service and one for paratransit. These millages must be renewed every 10 years and were last approved by voters in 2017.

Funding remains limited and undiversified

After several years of significant departures from long term funding trends due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2023 operating budgets for the RTA and JP Transit have begun to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Broadly speaking, the local funding structure for public transit service has not changed significantly since the publication of the first State of Transit report in 2014. The RTA receives the majority of its operating funding from a one cent Orleans Parish sales tax, and JP Transit receives local operating funding through two parish-wide millages to support transit and paratransit.

Figure 29 - 2023 Adopted RTA Operating Budget (excluding ferry service)

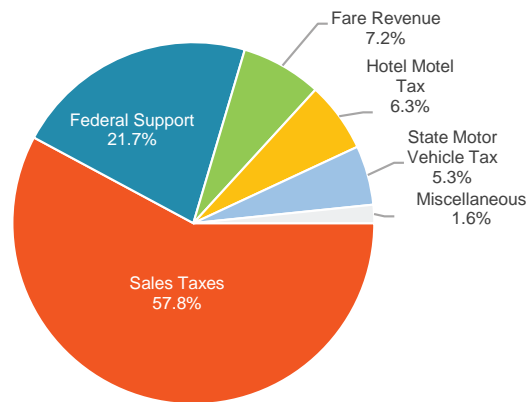
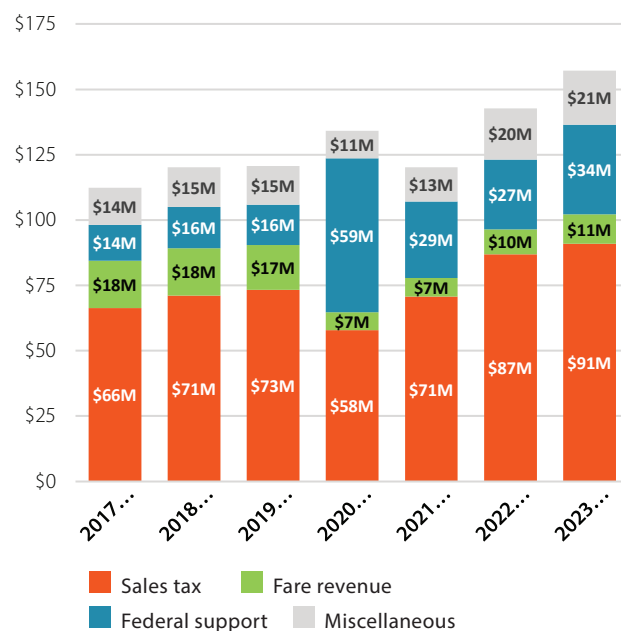


Figure 30 - 2017-2022 RTA Operating Revenues and 2023 Adopted Budget (excluding ferry service)



As RIDE has previously emphasized, RTA will ultimately not be possible to grow service or implement many of the improvements identified in the Strategic Mobility Plan without identifying new sources of operations funding. With limited exceptions (including operating assistance provided during the pandemic), the federal government does not make funding available for local transit operations, meaning that elected officials and decisionmakers must commit to finding new local funding for transit to implement any form of service expansion.

Figure 31 - 2023 Adopted JP Transit Operating Budget

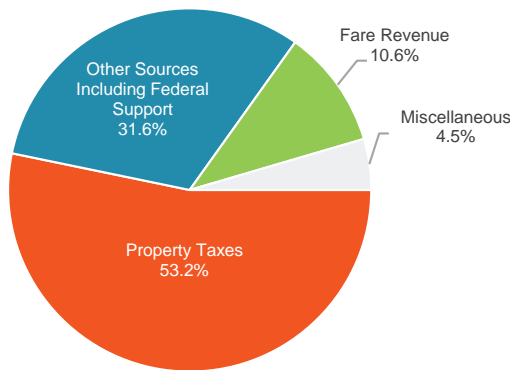
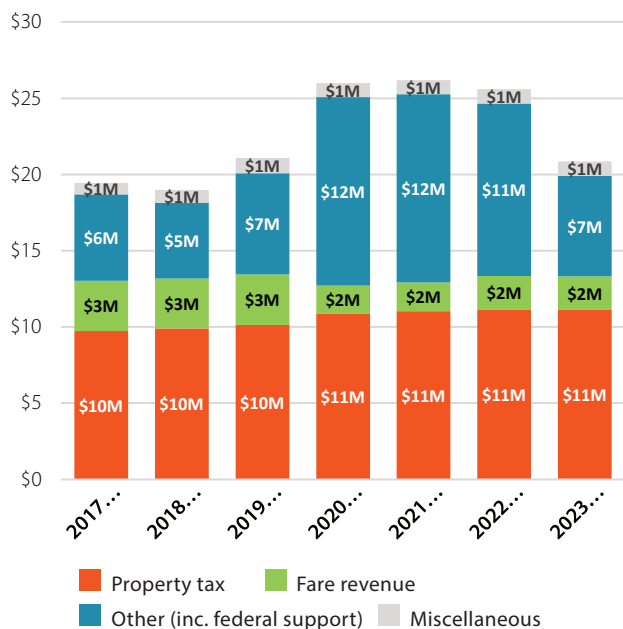


Figure 32 - 2017-2022 JP Transit Operating Revenues and 2023 Adopted Budget



Capital vs. Operating Expenses and Budgets

Like most public agencies, transit agencies such as the RTA and JP Transit organize revenues and expenditures into two main categories: capital and operating. Capital expenses are the purchase of equipment, defined in the National Transit Database Glossary “an article of non-expendable tangible personal property having a useful life of more than one year and an acquisition cost which equals the lesser of: The capitalization level established by the government unit for financial statement purposes, or \$5,000.” Examples include vehicles, major software, and debt payments for streetcar infrastructure. Operating expenses are “consumable items with a useful life of less than one year or an acquisition cost which is less than the capitalization level established by the governmental unit for financial statement purposes.” Examples include staff salaries, insurance, and taxes.

Operating Costs for Ferry Service

RIDE does not include ferry operations in its assessment of the RTA operating budget, as the RTA itemizes ferry revenues and funding separately from other operations costs, and ferry service is nominally covered by state subsidy (though that subsidy does not always cover the full cost).

“Our research confirms that there is too little transit service in New Orleans. By the end of 2012, less than half of the pre-Katrina transit service offered by the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA) in 2005 had been restored, even though the population had recovered to 86% of its pre-Katrina numbers [...] serving our population with service that is frequent, convenient, and safe must be a top priority to help our region grow.”

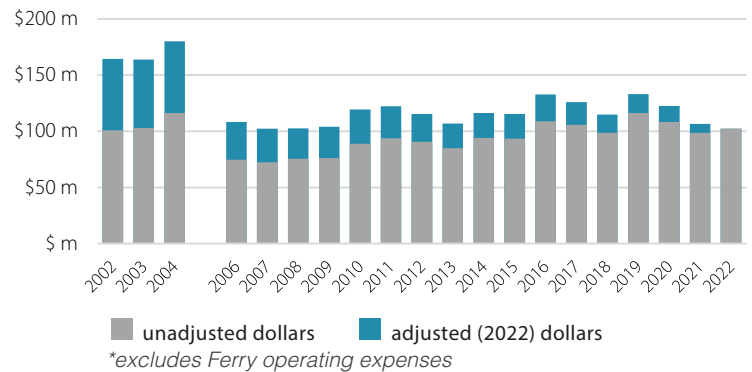
- State of Transit 2014

Operating budgets and service remain constrained

In early State of Transit briefings, RIDE highlighted the fact that the RTA was spending far less on transit than it did prior to Hurricane Katrina, and made a case for restoring service and funding to pre-2005 service levels.

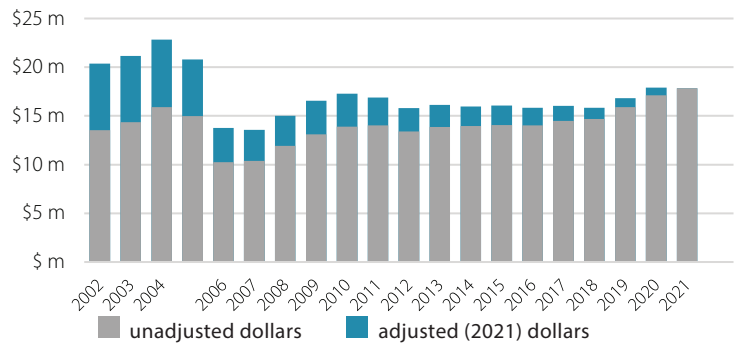
Although RIDE no longer uses pre-Katrina service as a primary benchmark, we have continued to advocate for expanding service funding in both Orleans and Jefferson parishes to support transit in the current context. However, little progress has been made in either parish to expand operating funding for transit service.

Figure 33 - RTA Operating Expenses, 2002-2022*



In 2022, the RTA's operating expenses (excluding ferry service, which receives separate funding from the state) were \$102.4 million dollars, only a small increase from 2021. In both unadjusted and adjusted dollars, the RTA's operating budget for service has decreased each year since 2019 (Figure 33),

Figure 34 - JP Transit Operating Expenses, 2002-2021



Similar trends are apparent for Jefferson Parish's transit operating budget from 2002-2021 (Figure 34). Although transit spending for operations did increase modestly beginning in 2019 in both unadjusted and adjusted dollars, this growth will be undone by the June 2023 service cuts discussed earlier in this report, which were made with the express intention of reducing transit operating expenses back to 2018 levels.

The overall service run by each agency reflects the operating budgets for service as measured by Vehicle Revenue Hours (VRH) annually since 2006 (Figure 35 and Figure 36), with both agencies projected to have decreased service in 2024 based on annualized estimates from current service schedules.

Figure 35 - RTA Bus and Streetcar Vehicle Revenue Hours (VRH), 2002-2022 and projected 2023-2024

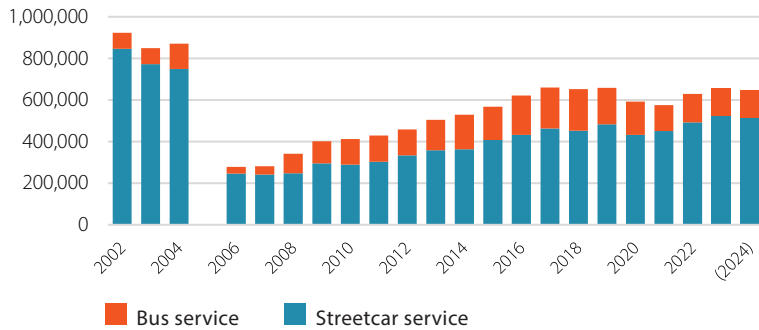
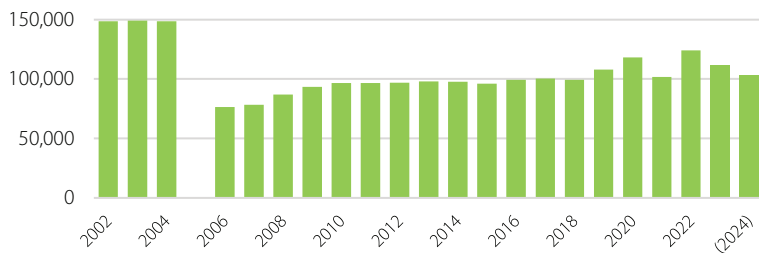


Figure 36 - JP Transit Vehicle Revenue Hours (VRH), 2002-2022 and projected 2023-2024



“While preserving (or even improving) transit affordability is an important goal, it is also important to understand that the current financial model for transit in the United States generally factors in fare revenues as an important part of operating revenues. If fares had kept pace with inflation since 1999, the RTA base fare would be \$1.84, giving the agency significantly more operating revenue, potentially leading to enhanced service.”

State of Transit 2016

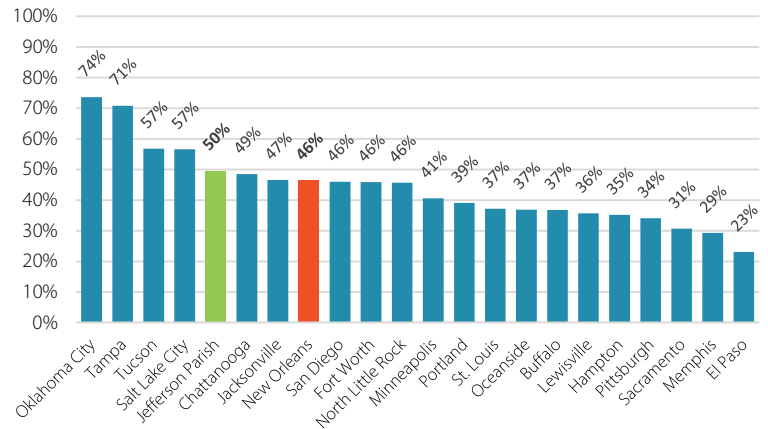
An agency's **farebox recovery** ratio is the percentage of operating expenses made up by passenger fares.

RIDE's evolving perspective on fares and ridership

One area where RIDE's advocacy and policy positions have shifted since 2014 is fares and fare policy. In early State of Transit briefings, we noted that the RTA's \$1.25 fare had not increased since 1999, even to account for inflation, and highlighted that the cost of an adult fare for RTA service was lower than that of many peer transit agencies. While not explicitly calling for a fare increase, we encouraged the RTA and the City of New Orleans to consider fare increases as one possible source of funding for transit service expansion.

Over the past 10 years, and particularly since the COVID 19 pandemic, RIDE's thinking on fare policy has evolved, and we are now more hesitant about the possibility of endorsing a fare increase proposal. Our policy thinking has evolved in part because the on-the-ground situation for ridership and funding has fundamentally changed since the pandemic. Prior to 2020, RIDE correctly observed that the RTA's fare revenue collection and farebox recovery were both lower than average among peer agencies, but since the pandemic, this is simply not the case. Farebox recovery for most transit agencies across the country has plummeted, including among the RTA's peers (Figure 37)

Figure 37 - Percent change in Annual Passenger Boardings, 2014-2021 - Peer Agencies



This decrease in farebox recovery is partially due to the dramatic drop in ridership for all transit service following the start of the pandemic in March 2020 (Figure 38). Because ridership continues to be well below pre-pandemic levels both locally and nationally, the financial case for raising fares is weaker as it would generate less revenue, at least in the near term. This is one of several reasons that RIDE does not believe fare increases should be a focus right now in revenue discussions related to transit service expansion.

In October 2022, RIDE released a white paper, “Fare Free Transit for Youth in New Orleans,” which made the policy case for implementing a youth zero fare program for Orleans Parish, highlighting precedents from programs in Boston, San Francisco, and Omaha. In May 2023, the New Orleans City Council voted to allocate \$2.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding for a one year, zero fares pilot program focused on opportunity youth ages 16-24, which is anticipated to launch in the summer of 2024.

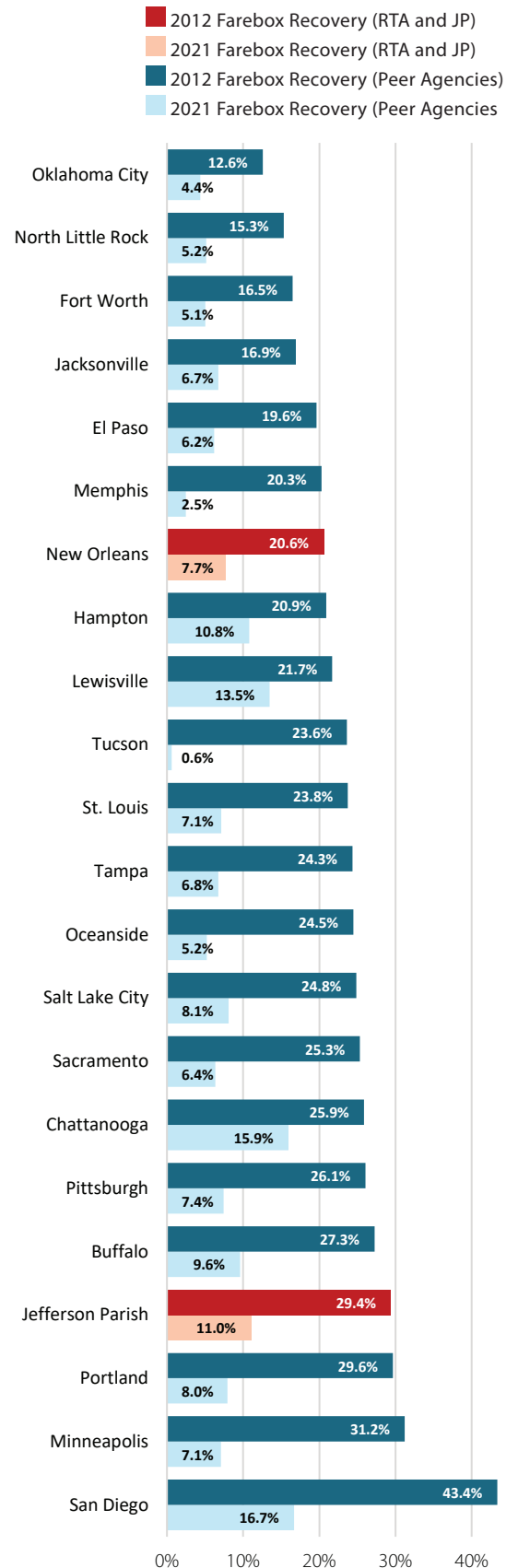
Beyond the drop in ridership, shifts in fare collection practices have also been a factor in declining farebox recovery. Early in the pandemic, a substantial number of transit agencies nationally (including the RTA and JP Transit) temporarily suspended fare collection as a public health measure to protect drivers and riders. While most agencies resumed fare collection after several months, a small number chose to continue offering fare fares throughout the pandemic, with some agencies permanently eliminating fares. Included in this list is the City of Tucson, one of RTA's top peer agencies identified through iNTD, which has repeatedly extended

SunTran, which serves Tucson, AZ, first eliminated transit fares in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and transit has remained free ever since, with funding provided by the City of Tucson to replace lost fare revenue.

its free fare program, with all transit remaining free as of October 2023. Other cities have experimented with zero fare programs on a pilot basis for specific populations such as youth and seniors.

An additional reason for RIDE's evolving position on fares is that making transit free has been shown to increase transit ridership, which is a policy goal of many zero fare pilot programs. RIDE has consistently highlighted growing and sustaining ridership as an key metric for transit success, and we believe it is reasonable to consider reducing fares as a tool for inducing ridership growth to stimulate transit growth following the pandemic.

Figure 38 - Farebox Recovery Ratio, 2012 and 2021 - Peer Agencies



Part IV: Transit 2033: RIDE's Vision for World Class Service

Over the past 10 years of RIDE's advocacy work, we have repeatedly returned to a consistent theme: in order to truly achieve world-class transit service for the region, there are fundamental limits on what can be done to improve service with existing resources. Over the course of our advocacy work this past decade, we have encouraged the RTA and other transit partners to improve coordination, optimize existing resources, and engage in comprehensive planning to establish a clear vision for identifying the new investments in transit service that should be prioritized, and where resources should be invested when they become available.

As a result of this work, the RTA is a more efficient and more transparent agency than it was 10 years ago. In many areas, resources are being allocated more effectively. The RTA has also engaged in bold planning efforts to sketch out the future of the agency, including the Strategic Mobility Plan and the Bus Rapid Transit Feasibility Study.

These plans, while serving as a valuable foundation to discuss service growth, will be squandered without a serious push to commit the resources and political will necessary to achieve them. The City and RTA have already made important steps towards the implementation of some major priorities to commit and secure funding, including the \$25 million RAISE grant which was recently awarded to support construction of the Downtown Transit Center. However, as highlighted elsewhere in this report, there has been limited to no forward progress in identifying the operating resources necessary to support a substantial expansion of service above existing levels.

RIDE has returned time and time again to this point in prior State of Transit briefings, going back to 2014. The Strategic Mobility Plan identifies many projects for which federal capital funding may be available, but which will ultimately require sustained annual operating resources to implement. As an example, while much work has been done to address the implementing of bus rapid transit from New Orleans East to Algiers, the operating costs of service were not discussed in any detail in the feasibility study released earlier this year, nor have they been meaningfully addressed in public comments by RTA leadership.

According to a conservative cost estimate by RIDE staff, BRT service will cost over \$7 million a year to operate, representing more than 5% of the RTA's current annual operating budget. In 2021, RIDE estimated that implementing the "125% expansion scenario" included in the New Links Final Recommended Network Plan would cost at least \$25 million per year, which is consistent with our findings for this year's report.

Why transit needs new local funding

Identifying new local operating funds for transit is essential because, with very limited exceptions, the federal government does not provide operating support for urban transit services.

While the Federal Transit Administration currently distributes more than \$13 billion annually to support transit nationwide, that funding can typically only go toward transit an agency's capital expenses like purchasing vehicles or paying for large one-time projects such as 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 the 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.

In previous State of Transit briefings, RIDE has assessed potential funding sources for transit in some detail. To broadly summarize our previous findings, we have found that for large-scale service expansion, it will likely be necessary to implement a dedicated parish-wide assessment or levy, while for smaller or more targeted operating investments (such as downtown or along a specific transit corridor), other innovative financing methods such as value capture or a special assessment district may be feasible. In all cases, securing dedicated funding for transit operations will require political will from all stakeholders.

"We need to be ready for a comprehensive evaluation of options for funding the public transit network that best meets the needs of New Orleans and the greater region."

- State of Transit 2014

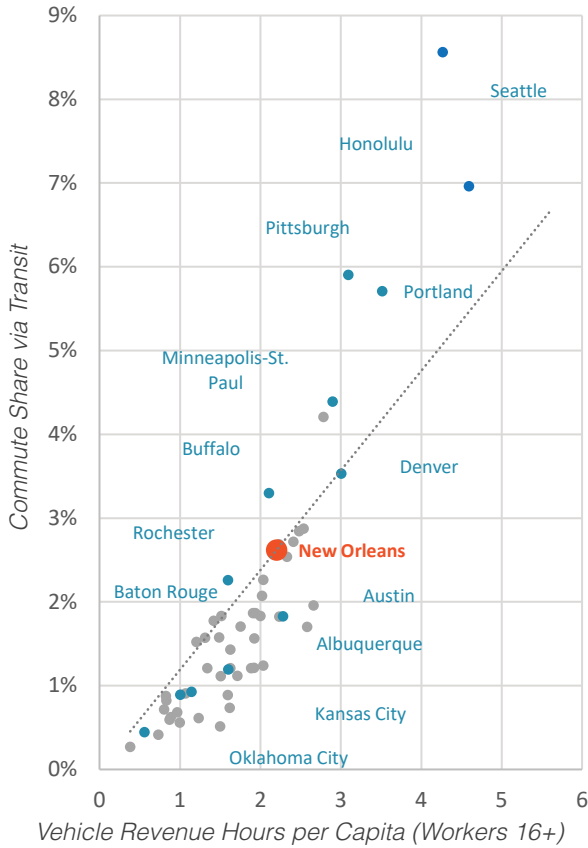
"Frequent, reliable service is the foundation for a quality transit system. That's why RIDE New Orleans calls on the Mayor's Administration, New Orleans City Council and RTA Board of Commissioners to commit to putting RTA busses and streetcars in service for 1,000,000 hours in the year 2020. This level of service will make it possible to restore frequent transit service to the majority of New Orleans neighborhoods and workers, putting better job and housing opportunities within easier reach."

- State of Transit 2016

"Ultimately, there may not be sufficient revenue currently to support transit operations at the level future riders and the region need to see. Increased capital funding may also be necessary to set up the equipment and infrastructure to achieve ambitious goals. An open and widespread conversation should be started about what these costs might look like and to identify potential revenue sources from local jurisdictions, the state, and the federal government. The completion of the strategic mobility plan will give some basis to this conversation, but it should not stop at that point."

- State of Transit 2017

Figure 39 - Vehicle revenue hours per capita for peer urban areas and % of workers commuting via public transit, 2021



Methodology Notes: Peer Urban Areas

To illustrate the relationship between service investment and transit ridership, RIDE defined a group of peer urban areas using U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) data in travel commute share in 2021. For this analysis, peer urban areas were defined as those sharing the following characteristics:

- Populations greater than 500,000 and less than 3 million, as of the 2010 census; and
- At least 80% of transit commuters travel to work by bus or streetcar.

This definition excludes urban areas with significantly smaller or larger populations than New Orleans, as well as cities with primarily heavy rail or commuter rail-based transit systems which have substantially different ridership and service characteristics.

Why transit service expansion is essential

The RTA and City of New Orleans have set a number of ambitious targets for transit ridership and service investment through recent planning efforts, including the City of New Orleans Climate Action Plan and RTA Strategic Mobility Plan. Specific targets cited by the City include:

- Ensuring that the average low-income household within RTA's service area can reach at least 65% of jobs in Orleans and Jefferson parishes within 60 minutes by transit during peak periods
- Increasing the overall transit system speed by 20% by 2030
- Installing at least 6 miles of transit-only infrastructure by 2027
- Increasing the share of work trips made by transit in New Orleans to 20% by 2030 (currently 6%)

Making any of these targets will require a sustained, dedicated commitment from community stakeholders and decision-makers to prioritize transit service expansion and decision-making over the next ten years.

This is particularly true for the goal of having 20% of New Orleans workers commute by transit. As can be seen when comparing New Orleans to other peer US cities, transit commute share is very closely tied to levels of overall service investment.

The recent service cuts in Orleans and Jefferson parishes have highlighted the limitations of what can be done to improve regional transit service due to lack of funding. Funding levels are the most important factor in determining the quality of transit service and ridership. Without investment in additional bus service and sustainable sources of operational revenue, there are very limited improvements that can be made to the current service.

This is clear when looking at how job access has grown (and fallen) over the past 10 years in Orleans and Jefferson parishes based on transit service levels. Over the past 10 years, the expansion in job access closely correlated with the expansion in transit service from 2012 to the present. The New Links service redesign, which optimized existing resources, did make some modest improvements to overall job access. However, the subsequent service cuts, especially in Jefferson Parish, undid those gains.

The connection between job access and service investment can be illustrated further by looking at the correlation between service investment and the share of commuters who commute to work using transit across different US cities. Utilizing data on commuting modes from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, it is clear-- when more jobs are accessible by transit, more workers will use transit to get to work, making commuting share a useful proxy metric for comparing relative job access across different cities. The share of workers using transit is a useful proxy for transit agencies.

Figure 39 compares total transit investment in peer US cities (as measured by vehicle revenue hours operated by all agencies) to commute shares for each urban area. As can be seen in this graphic, as of 2021, approximately 11,400 workers across the entire greater New Orleans region commute to work by transit, of whom the majority (9,400) live in New Orleans. For the 20% service goal to be a reality, more than 25,000 additional workers per day in Orleans Parish would need to use transit to get to work, more than tripling the number of daily commutes taken via transit.

What transit service expansion could accomplish

In previous State of Transit briefings, RIDE has not delved into the specifics of what an expanded network would look like and the regional impacts it would have. When RIDE first called for the City of New Orleans and RTA to commit to putting 1,000,000 vehicle revenue hours of service on the road in 2016, we stressed the importance of making decisions about service expansion as part of the strategic planning process for transit and the accompanying network redesign. More recently, in the 2021 State of Transit briefing, RIDE endorsed the “125% Service Scenario” from the New Links Final Recommended network as a basis for expanding service, but did not conduct a detailed follow up analysis on service impacts.

Another reasons why RIDE has not thoroughly assessed a service expansion in the past is due to technical limitations on our end for developing metrics like job access. Developing these metrics typically requires access to detailed underlying service planning data beyond what is included in public facing reports such as the BRT Feasibility Study or New Links Recommended Network Report. In addition, modeling detailed service impacts can be relatively time-intensive for RIDE to conduct given our resource limitations.

However, this year, RIDE believes it is an appropriate time to present a more detailed vision for what expanded transit service could mean for Greater New Orleans. This vision can inform a more robust discussion about the benefits of expanding service. There are several reasons why we think this analysis is appropriate now.

Firstly, the RTA and other transit decision-makers have conducted extensive comprehensive planning over the past few years. This planning provides a solid foundation for envisioning an expanded transit network if sufficient resources are available. Additionally, RIDE has allocated resources this year to develop a hypothetical service expansion scenario in enough detail to highlight changes in job accessibility and other important transit service metrics. Finally, we believe it is important to communicate a clear vision for what we noted in our 2021 State of Transit briefing, “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.” We believe it is the right time to communicate a clearer vision of what an expanded network could look like, its impacts, distribution, and cost.

In the following sections of this chapter, we will present RIDE’s analysis of a service scenario for an expanded 2033 transit network, including a potential shift in job access that could result from expanding service. We conclude this report by identifying action items from recent public plans that RIDE believes are important next steps to support service expansion, and more broadly, to achieve the world class transit service that New Orleans deserves.

Transit 2033: a vision for expanding service to achieve world class transit for Greater New Orleans

For this analysis, RIDE modeled a 10-year service scenario for an expanded transit network, in which we anticipate that fixed-route service expands approximately 768,000 per year in 2023 to 1,036,000 by 2033, as shown in Figure 40. This increase would represent a 34% increase in RTA bus and streetcar service and 40% increase in Jefferson Parish bus service. The service expansion target of 35-40% was chosen for several reasons.

Figure 40 - Projected Vehicle Revenue Hours (VRH), existing service and 2033 expansion scenario

	2023*	2033
RTA Bus	526,191	759,396
RTA Streetcar	130,995	119,356
JP Transit Bus	111,768	155,920
Total	768,955	1,036,078

First, as shown in Figure 40, this level of service growth would bring the Greater New Orleans area back to pre-Katrina levels of public transit service, achieving full restoration of transit service that was lost after 2005. Second, this level of service expansion is grounded in plans adopted by the RTA, and can be modeled using existing planning work done from the SMP, Bus Rapid Transit Feasibility Study, and New Links service recommendations. Finally, RIDE believes expanding bus and streetcar service by 35-40% over 10 years represents an ambitious but potentially achievable target for implementing world class transit service, if there is a committed effort to secure new resources for transit.

In addition to these targets, our scenario incorporates the following assumptions related to service speeds and transit priority:

- Operating speeds on existing bus routes increase by approximately 20%.
- Operating speeds on existing streetcar routes increase to approximately 10mph.
- The RTA and other partners fully implement Bus Rapid Transit service from New Orleans East to Algiers along the recommended Locally Preferred Alternative route.
- BRT or similar high-frequency select service is implemented on the Veterans Boulevard corridor to the CBD, as recommended in the Strategic Mobility Plan.

Increasing service speeds is important for improving both travel times and the cost effectiveness of service, as improved running times allow the RTA to run the same amount of service with fewer resources. This impact can particularly be seen in the case of streetcar revenue hours under the 2033 scenario: despite increased streetcar frequencies being included in the scenario, revenue hours actually decrease due to increased operating speeds.

Figure 41 - Bus Rapid Transit Locally Preferred Alternative

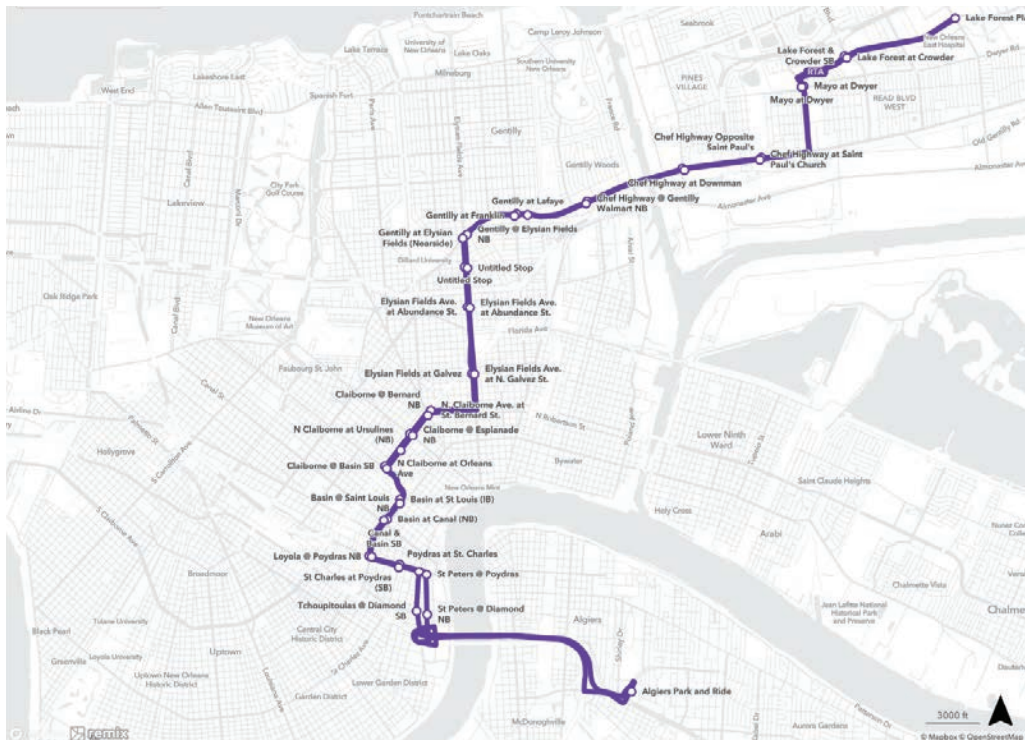
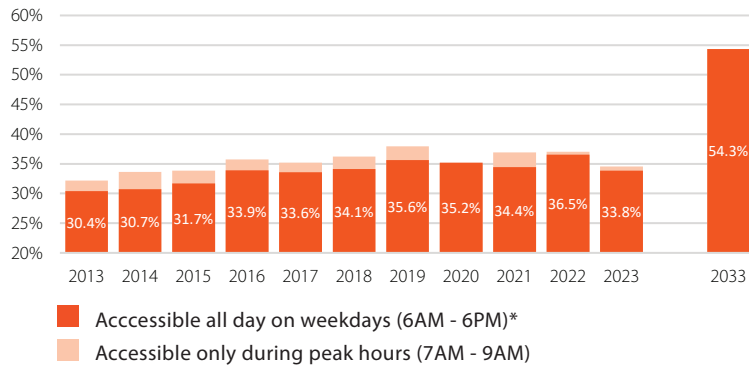


Figure 42 - Average share of jobs accessible to Orleans Parish residents by transit within an hour, 2013-2022 and 2033 scenario



How could expanded service improve transit outcomes?

RIDE's analysis found that increased investment in transit service could dramatically expand the share of regional jobs accessible within 60 minutes for transit riders in both Orleans and Jefferson parishes, as shown in Figure 42 and Figure 43. In Orleans Parish, the typical resident would be able to access over 60% more jobs (increasing from 126,701 jobs accessible by transit in 2023 to over 203,487 in the service expansion scenario. Meanwhile, job access for the typical Jefferson Parish transit rider would nearly double, increasing from 59,923 jobs accessible by transit in 2023 to 111,507 jobs accessible by transit within an hour in 2033.

The 2033 service expansion scenario modeled by RIDE includes the same service frequency levels for both peak hour and midday service, meaning that estimated access to jobs by transit remains the same throughout the day.

Figure 43 - Average share of jobs accessible to Jefferson Parish residents by transit within an hour, 2013-2022 and 2033 scenario

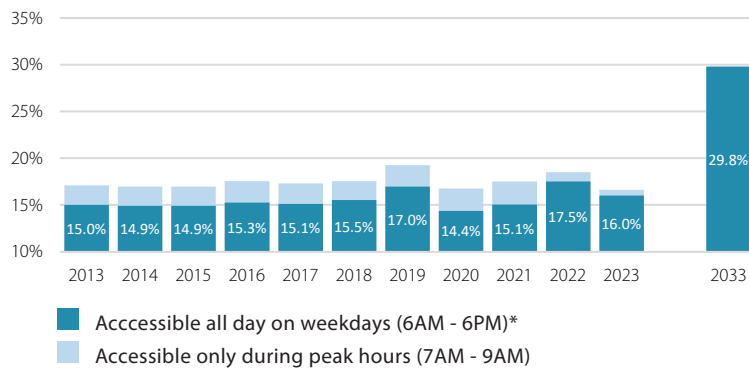
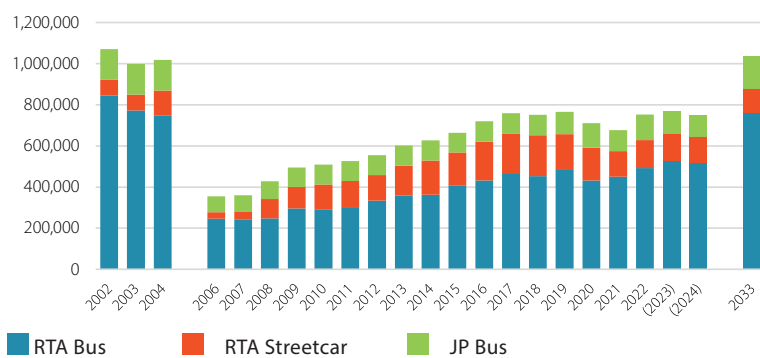


Figure 44 - RTA and JP Bus and Streetcar Vehicle Revenue Hours (VRH), 2002-2024 and 2033 growth scenario



Methodology Notes: Operating Costs and Vehicle Estimates

For this analysis, RIDE developed an estimate of variable operating costs for RTA and Jefferson Parish bus service using an average of 2020 and 2021 NTD data. The formula for estimated hourly service costs is $(\text{Annual Vehicle Operating Costs} + \text{Vehicle Maintenance Costs}) / (\text{Vehicle Revenue Hours}) \times 1.05$. Because this scenario assumes streetcar revenue hours will stay the same or decrease, the cost estimates included in this section use the estimated variable cost of bus service rather than bus and streetcar service combined.

- RTA estimated variable hourly cost for bus service: \$114.93
- JP Transit estimated variable hourly cost for bus service: \$110.78

Figure 45 - Projected annual operating expenses for fixed-route transit service for RTA and JP transit, existing service and 2033 scenario

	2024	2033	Change
RTA	\$77,666,112	\$105,256,080	\$27,589,968
JP	\$11,309,815	\$17,151,200	\$5,841,385

Based on this estimated variable cost rate, RIDE estimated that increasing revenue hours of service to 1,036,078 by 2033 would increase operating costs by approximately \$27,500,000 for the RTA in 2023 dollars, and by \$5,800,000 annually for Jefferson Parish. This baseline estimate does not take into account other costs which may be associated with service expansion.

Figure 46 - Projected Vehicles Operated in Maximum Service (VOMS), existing service and 2033 scenario

	2024*	2033
RTA Bus	87	137
JP Transit Bus	24	37

RIDE estimates that to operate peak service in the modeled scenario, the RTA will need to field approximately 137 vehicles in peak revenue service, an increase of 40 vehicles from current peak service as of Fall 2023. Jefferson Transit will need to field 24 vehicles in peak service, an increase in 13 from 2023.

How could expanded service improve neighborhood access?

Figure 49 and Figure 50 compare all-day job access using the public transit for the existing network as of 2023 compared to an expanded service scenario. These maps illustrate the potentially transformative impacts of service expansion on job accessibility for both Orleans and Jefferson parishes. Figure 47 and Figure 48 illustrate impacts to service frequency in Orleans Parish. Overall, service expansion would significantly expand access to service frequency throughout the RTA's service area, achieving service levels similar to pre-Katrina across much of Orleans Parish.

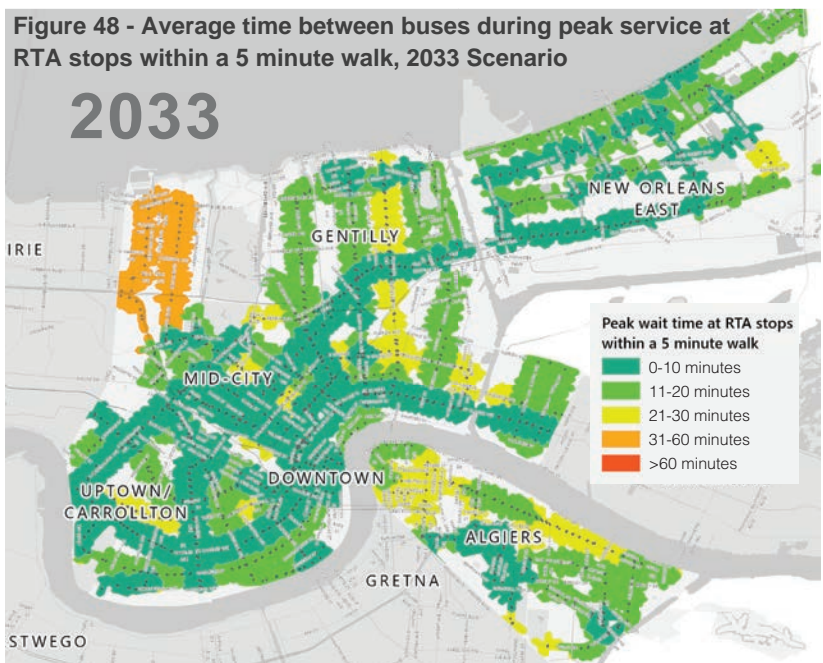
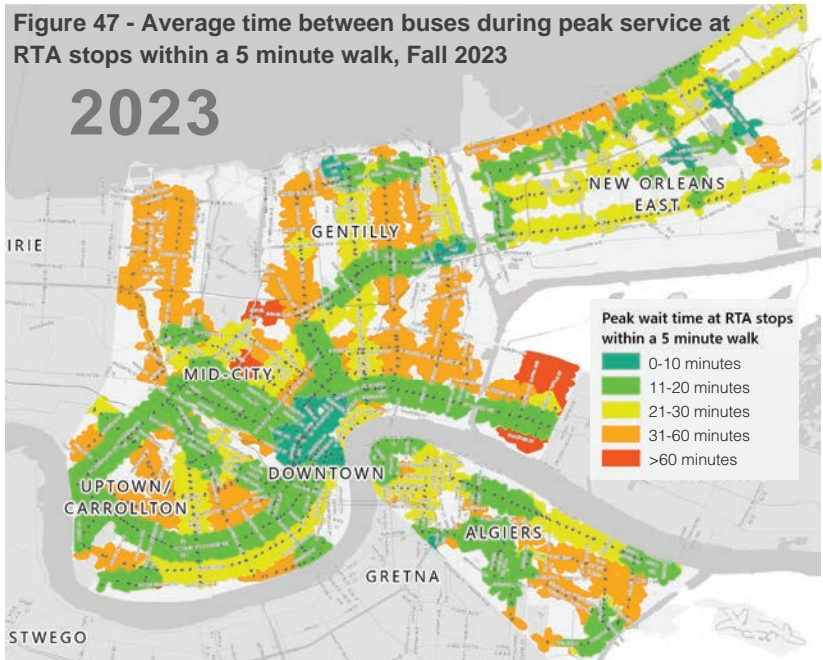


Figure 49 - Percentage of jobs reachable in 60 minutes using public transit and walking, Fall 2023

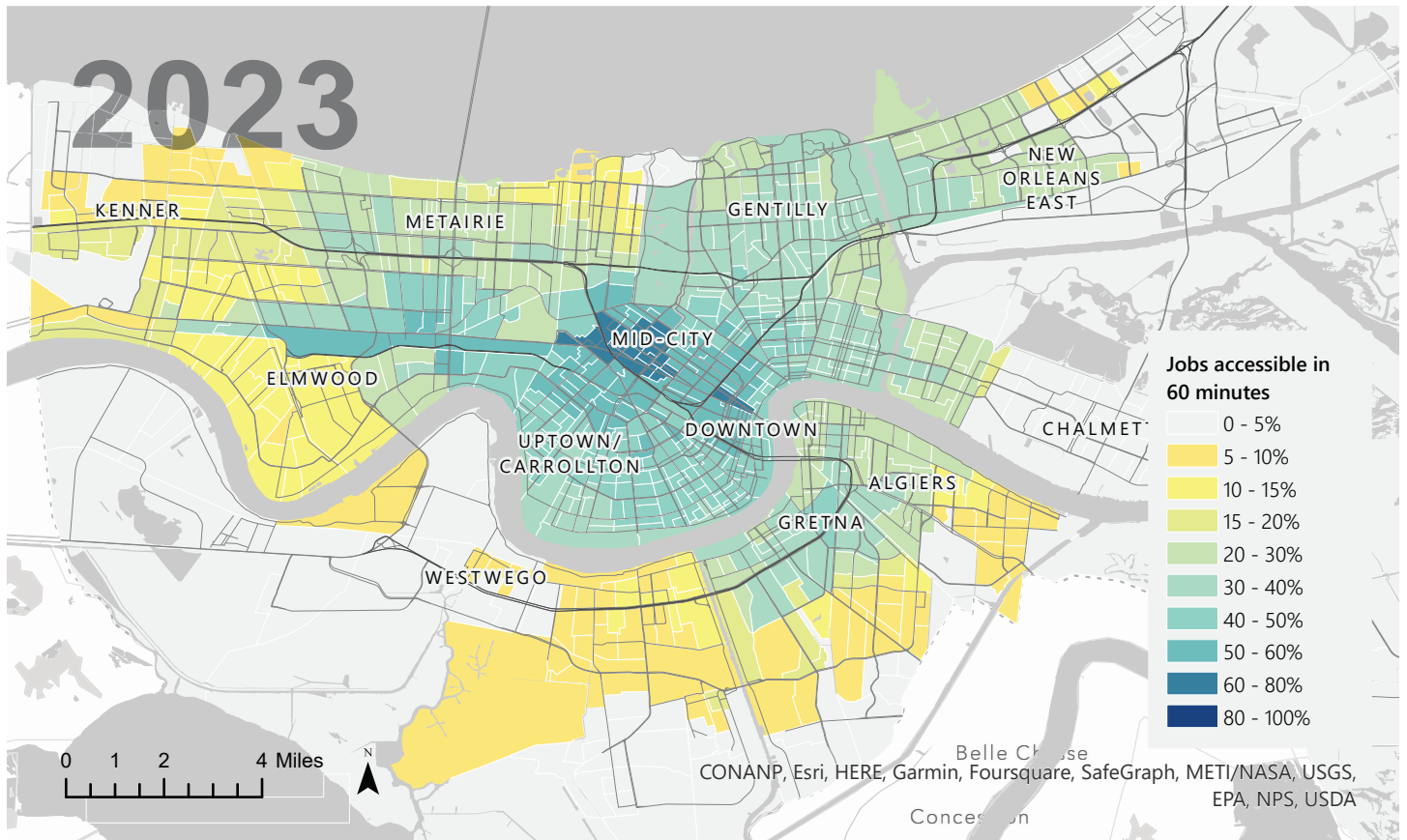
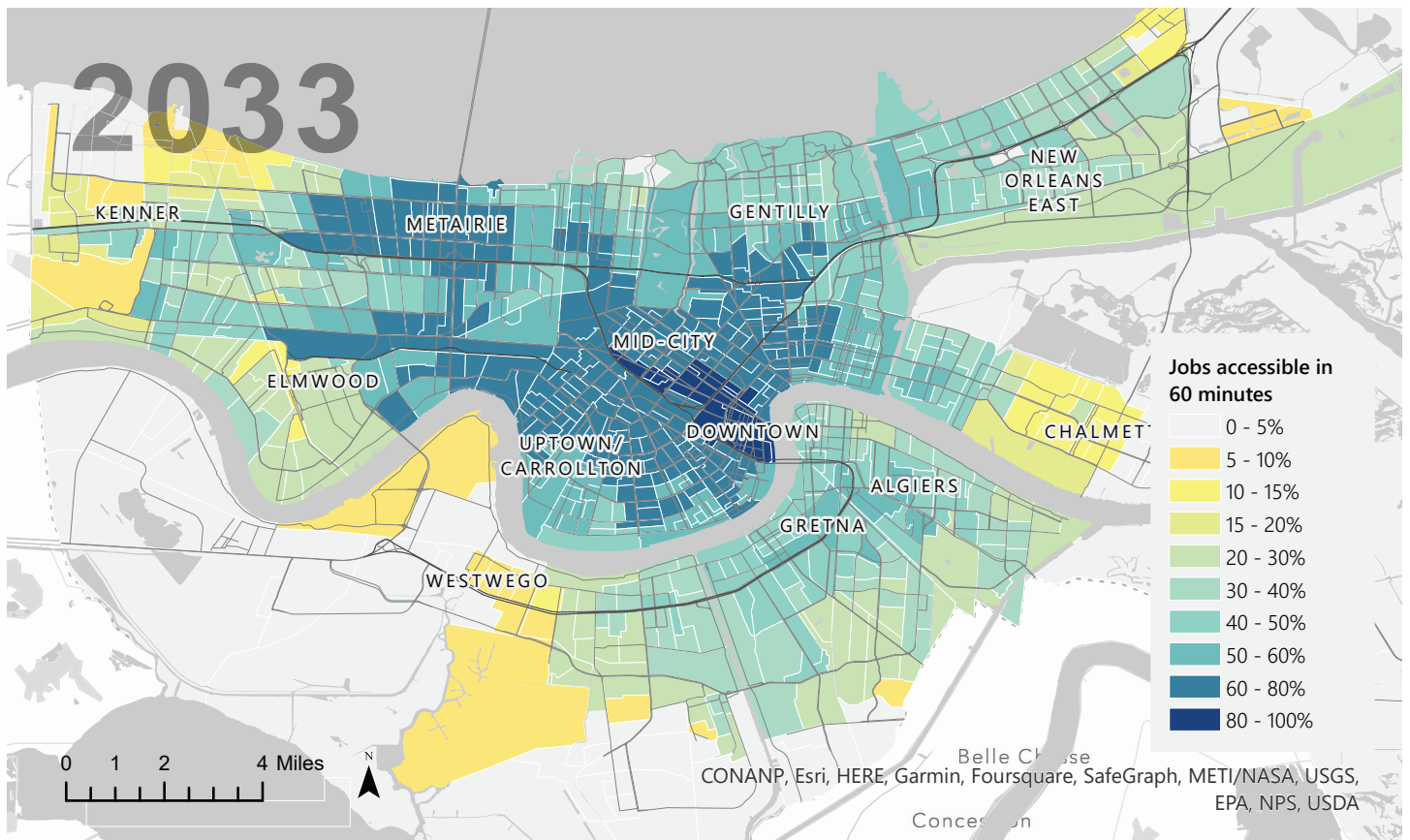


Figure 50 - Percentage of jobs reachable in 60 minutes using public transit and walking, 2033 Scenario



Part V: Ten-Year Actions and Strategies for Enhancing Transit

In recent years, the New Orleans region has completed many planning studies which advance bold goals for creating and expanding world-class transit. These plans are strong documents, but without a clear implementation plan, and sense of prioritization, the work may be squandered.

Successfully moving action items forward from plans to reality will require four things.

- First, there needs to be a clear implementation strategy for achieving these action items. Work must begin now for many of the goals and targets identified in public plans reviewed for this report, especially those listed as 5- or 10- year objectives, in order for them to be successfully accomplished.
- As a second, related need, transit advocates and partners must establish and clearly communicate the resource and funding needs necessary for advancing these plans. Many items in the updated Strategic Mobility Plan, City of New Orleans Climate Action Plan, and other documents will require substantial new investment. Clear resource needs must be established in order to achieve these goals and make it possible for transit allies to organize around securing the specific tools for implementation. By identifying high level costs, we can begin to have a more focused conversation around feasible funding sources at the local, state, and federal levels.
- Third, RIDE and other advocates and partners need to clearly establish the potential benefits of implementing transit-supportive projects. These benefits must be quantified for stakeholders.
- Finally, RIDE recognizes that our own resources are limited and that, even with the support of our rider coalition and other transit advocates and allies, we must prioritize our advocacy around actions that stand a real chance of being implemented and are likely to deliver positive tangible change for transit service. When the Strategic Mobility Plan was first adopted in 2017, RIDE made the decision to focus our advocacy and organizing efforts around pushing for a network redesign (New Links) as the most important action item in the plan. The redesign remains an essential step toward creating successful regional service.

Moving forward, we must continue to organize around specific priority items within these plans to win tangible change.

Priority: Communications and Transparency

RIDE recommends the following:

Within one year (by 2024):

- Provide SMP implementation updates at least twice a year
- Develop policy for service disruptions, including information to be communicated and standards for timeliness of communication
- Review new mobile app functionality (including accessibility) and make all upgrades necessary and possible
- Continue to integrate ferry schedules with schedules for fixed bus routes serving the ferry terminals
- Post an easy-to-understand Annual Budget Report online with funding and expenses by major categories and a list of planned projects
- Create a publicly available dashboard that shares up-to-date performance data, including plan metrics, on-time performance data, and ridership by route
- Brand transit routes by frequency
- Fully integrate RTA schedules at transfer areas with surrounding transit agencies
- Provide public information and rider alerts in a timely manner online, on the mobile app and at impacted stops
- **Create an updated stops database and system for keeping it up-to-date**
- **Develop a prioritized list of locations for shelter installation and shelter improvements; report on progress annually**
- Replace all transit stop signs with permanent signage

Within three years (by 2026):

- Implement real-time signage at all major transit hubs
- Provide real-time arrival info at stops with more than 250 boardings a day

Priority: Streets Designed for Transit

RIDE recommends the following:

Within one year (by 2024):

- Evaluate the impact of opening High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes on the Mississippi River Bridge to transit only in both directions
- Minimize illegal parking in bus stops through highly visible bus stops and signage
- Complete a stop rebalancing plan to make service more efficient
- Identify a one-mile corridor in the New Orleans CBD for implementation of a transit priority pilot treatment
- Initiate a streetcar modernization study

Within three years (by 2026):

- Complete feasibility studies for transit priority treatments for all high frequency routes
- Implement transit signal priority improvements at 5 locations on core transit corridors
- Begin implementing dedicated lanes, HOV lanes, signal priority improvements, queue jumps, and other priority treatments for transit routes
- Pilot transit priority treatments for one or more non-BRT route with the City of New Orleans
- Invest in 6 miles of transit-only infrastructure, including bus lanes and dedicated right-of-way for streetcar service
- Implement the Westbank-to-CBD portion of the Bus Rapid Transit locally-preferred alternative

Within ten years (by 2033):

- Increase bus operating speeds by at least 20%
- Increase streetcar operating speeds by at least 33%
- Implement bus rapid transit service on one or more additional corridors including the Veterans to Airport corridor
- Fully implement New Orleans East to Westbank Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service

Priority: Transit Service Expansion

RIDE recommends the following:

Within one year (by 2024):

- Begin studying traditional and innovative options for increasing funding for services, such as value capture. Include consideration of impacts to low-income households
- Begin studying pathways for seeking additional dedicated funding sources
- Begin exploring feasibility of non-traditional funding sources
- Restore pre-June 2023 service in both Orleans and Jefferson parishes
- Release a detailed funding and implementation plan for service expansion over 10 years
- Update bus capital plans to reflect service expansion goals
- Dedicate at least \$5 million per year in new revenue to transit through a millage, charter amendment or other funding source for increased transit operations

Within three years (by 2026):

- Increase Transit Service Hours by at least 15%.
- Fully fund planned BRT service implementation
- Dedicate at least \$15 million per year in new revenue to transit through a millage, charter amendment or other funding source for increased transit operations.

Within ten years (by 2033):

- Increase Transit Service Hours by at least 50%
- Fully fund additional Bus Rapid Transit / overnight service

Priority: Youth and Workforce Development

RIDE recommends the following:

Within one year (by 2024):

- Partner with local colleges, schools and job training programs to create RTA apprenticeship programs
- Implement an opportunity youth (OY) focused zero fare pilot program
- Complete pilot program with Delgado and build out formalized program for universities to support student passes

Within three years (by 2026):

- Complete a feasibility study for implementing school travel-focused transportation improvements
- Identify funding for a permanent OY-focused zero fare program

Within ten years (by 2033):

- Establish a cost-sharing model with schools
- Increase number of public high schools using RTA as a transportation option for students.

Priority: Rider Amenities

RIDE recommends the following:

Within one year (by 2024):

- By 2024, complete studies for New Orleans East and Algiers transit centers and compile needs for mobility hubs
- Publish a plan for rapid implementation of shelter improvements
- Ensure 100% of bus stops have permanent signage

Within three years (by 2026):

- Design and construct the Downtown Transit Center
- Complete construction of 3 regional transit hubs
- Ensure 100% of stops with amenities in accordance with RTA service standards

Within ten years (by 2033):

- By 2030, construct all regional mobility hubs
- Build enhancements to the pedestrian environment along major corridors
- Identify and address major barriers to pedestrian access at high demand stops
- Ensure that all transit stops are fully ADA- compliant



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