



WORLD CLASS TRANSIT FOR NEW ORLEANS

RIDE NEW ORLEANS

504 345 8360

Po Box 19231

New Orleans LA 70179

Recommendations for the New Orleans Office of Transportation and transit priority improvements

Overview

In a climate of limited resources, transit priority improvements make transit service faster, more reliable, and more efficient. They can be implemented at a fraction of the cost of large capital projects, reduce delay to transit vehicles leading to increased frequency and reliability, and 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 (see Appendix B for a more detailed explanation of improvements):

- Dedicated lanes for transit vehicles
- Traffic signal priority for transit
- 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.

Transit priority improvements in New Orleans require cooperation across multiple agencies – especially the Department of Public Works (DPW) and New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA) – but also the Regional Planning Commission (RPC) Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD), and the New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board (S&WB).

Unfortunately, there has been a lack of coordination and cooperation in recent years. There are a number of areas to address, but, in general, the RTA has not pushed the City for assistance addressing specific “transit slow zones” – where transit service is impacted by congestion and poor road design and can be improved by street interventions and priority projects to improve reliability and travel time. DPW - with a few exceptions – has in turn not included transit priority improvements in road work.

Fortunately, we have a great opportunity for progress on transit priority improvements. In one of her first official acts, Mayor LaToya Cantrell created the Office of

Transportation (OOT) to coordinate and push on these issues, among other items. Already, we've seen some initial progress as the RTA and DPW have begun more regular consultation and meetings.

RIDE believes that the implementation of transit priority improvements is a critical ingredient for a more equitable and effective public transit network. Furthermore, we believe that the OOT is the right entity to coordinate and insure implementation of those improvements. With that in mind, we offer this memo to outline current best practices on interagency coordination and cooperation regarding transit priority improvements as well as specific recommendations to achieve tangible, short-term results in the local context.

The first part of this memo summarizes best practices, based on a recent report by TransitCenter, a foundation that supports advocacy, research, and leadership development for transit reform across the country (and is a funder of Ride New Orleans).

The second part contains specific recommendations for progress in the local context. We note what priorities need to be highlighted, what questions need to be asked, and what tasks need to be completed to allow the City to choose and then implement specific transit priority projects – both pilots and permanent infrastructure improvements.

Part I: TransitCenter Recommendations: “The Path to Partnership”

TransitCenter’s 2018 publication “The Path to Partnership” outlines best practices for how New Orleans’ nascent OOT and the RTA can coordinate together – in consultation with other agencies - for better transit outcomes.

The TransitCenter recommendations are transcribed below. They are organized by existing level of coordination and shared prioritization of transit between agencies, detailing a path from little to no collaboration to more in-depth partnerships and collaborations. The full report can be read at: <http://transitcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Collaboration.pdf>

1. For agencies that are just starting collaboration on a transit priority project:

Transit Agencies:

- Use data to identify top targets for projects (i.e. areas where many transit riders are delayed by traffic)
- Be opportunistic and suggest ways to insert transit priority into other projects (e.g. bridge replacements, street repavings)

City Agencies:

- Just try it! A pilot bus lane can be low-cost and high-return
- Develop ways to deliver small and medium-sized projects quickly, perhaps by reorganizing to bring project managers and planners together or identifying ways to use existing crews
- Build support for transit priority among leadership, project managers, engineers, and maintenance crews

2. For agencies that have committed to prioritizing transit and are preparing to work on their first few projects:**Both Agencies:**

- Identify ways bus priority improvements support other goals like service expansion or are cheaper alternatives to projects like streetcars
- Formalize conversations with a project agreement outlining responsibility for funding operations, maintenance, and capital improvements

City Agencies:

- Dedicate staff to transit, and grow in-house transit capacity, ideally by bringing on staff with experience at the local transit agency

3. For agencies that want to go beyond individual transit projects and develop ongoing improvement programs:**Both Agencies:**

- Prioritize projects jointly with shared metrics
- Develop branding for an improved route network
 - (NOTE: This is a recommendation in the RTA's Strategic Mobility Plan)

City Agencies:

- Build a spot improvement program to work with the transit agency on a pipeline of ongoing small projects

4. For agencies that want to develop even closer partnerships:**Both Agencies:**

- Establish regular coordination meetings, including agency leadership
- Develop a communications strategy for joint projects and involve communications staff in coordination meetings and early on projects
- Clearly define roles and responsibilities for different project components, particularly ongoing operations and maintenance funding

City Agencies:

- Develop a transit plan with input from the transit agency(ies) operating in the city

Part II: Recommendations for the local context

A tangible focus on transit priority improvements combined with real coordination between agencies – especially DPW and the RTA – can make a big difference for New Orleans transit. Utilizing the best practices listed in the previous section, the OOT is in a good position to secure real progress by taking a clear leading role.

The OOT can reduce department silos and improve communication and facilitate joint operations between DPW, the RTA, and others for transit priority improvements. With the Mayor's support, the office can ensure that improved transit utility is a top priority on all road projects and improvements and that a particular focus must be made to improve "transit slow zones" that currently add significant travel time to transit riders' daily commutes.

Empowered by the Mayor, the OOT can cut red tape and navigate agency/department specific politics and policies. With the Mayor's choice to head the office – Laura Bryan – also now appointed to the RTA board, there is a lot of potential synergy to strengthen partnerships and transit improvement programs.

To achieve this vision an emerging office like the OOT should first push forward with specific steps in order to establish results-based precedents that can build momentum for expanded coordination and success.

In this spirit, RIDE recommends the following specific steps to focus on during the first term of Mayor Cantrell's administration:

1. **Start a pilot:** A pilot is quick, easy to install, and cost effective - pilots are flexible and diverse and can range in scope from a single intersection to an entire high capacity transit corridor. The City is already, and successfully, experimenting with pilot demonstrations for bike lanes – the concept is the same, but dedicated toward buses and streetcars. Transit priority pilots are highly visible projects that will have immediate impacts and can provide benefits for all road users.
2. **Identify "transit slow zones" and diagnose solutions:** Identify when and where transit is getting stuck in traffic that causes unreliable service. The RTA and the City already have a good sense of where this is happening – and with the RTA's new, real time transit tracking system there's additional data to inform this understanding and formalize tracking methods. From there, diagnose the types of transit priority improvements (see toolbox in Appendix B) that are most appropriate to provide a traffic solution - then prioritize and implement the solutions that will have the most positive impact.

3. **Staff up:** It will take additional capacity to manage a greatly increased role for a City Hall coordination role. The OOT must staff up and bring on at least one person with 50 percent or more of her time focused on transit. Best practices suggest hiring a transit planning professional familiar with the RTA. By prioritizing transit, the OOT can take charge and lead the change towards a world class, equitable transit system.
4. **Road project collaboration:** The City has a \$2.3 billion capital improvement program with over 200 individual DPW and S&WB projects. For every road project, the OOT should identify how they impact and overlap with transit operations and evaluate opportunities to install various transit priority improvements. When these projects overlap with key corridors or priorities listed in the RTA's Strategic Mobility Plan there is a unique opportunity to fast track high capacity transit routes and other improvements. But we must be proactive in identifying these possibilities well ahead of time before planning and budgeting have been finalized. Collaboration on these projects is a way to create efficiencies in the short term and provide long term cost savings for all agencies involved. The OOT can play the key role in making sure this collaboration happens.
5. **Systematic coordination:** The need to increase coordination between agencies cannot be overstated but what needs to happen in order to expand cooperation? Currently, coordination occurs on an ad hoc basis related to individual projects and there is no consistent communication or conduits for collaborative input regarding all road design and transit improvements. Developing successful partnerships starts with RTA planners consistently participating in DPW and relevant agency meetings and offering expertise regarding transit needs and potential enhancements. Creating this more systematic approach will establish leadership and supportive roles, iron out agreements on who will pay for what, and encourage stronger partnerships.
6. **Incorporate into COA and SMP:** Utilize transit priority improvements to meet the goals outlined in the RTA's Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) and upcoming Comprehensive Operations Analyses (COA). This is especially important to expand regional transit service and to improve transit access to the region's jobs.

Appendix A: Transit priority delivers immediate benefits

Cities can improve transit efficiency without adding costs by giving priority to transit vehicles on the road. Giving transit vehicles priority reduces the time it takes to travel from the beginning to the end of a transit route. That, in turn, leads to more frequent service without the need for more buses, drivers, or other additional resources.

Transit priority treatments utilize various techniques to reduce delays and provide faster, more efficient transit service. They can be implemented at a fraction of the cost of other road projects and often have little to no impact on automobile traffic. In fact, many times they have a positive impact on overall traffic conditions. Specific benefits include:

- The ability to move more people, more quickly, to important destinations
- The creation of time savings on each transit vehicle run that can lead to more frequent service, increasing operational capacity at no additional cost
- The opportunity to use in combination with other complete streets amenities, including safer pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, to provide enhanced and more equitable multimodal options – especially for the “first and last mile”
- Emergency response vehicles can use the improvements as well to improve response times
- If warranted, they can be flexible and utilized only during only peak commute times and/or special events to help transit vehicles through targeted “transit slow zones”
- Easy to pilot and relatively inexpensive to install.

Appendix B: Different types of transit priority improvements

The following improvements have proven to have the most impact, especially when implemented together:

- **Dedicated transit lanes:** Bus and/or streetcars have their own dedicated lane of traffic and are applied where traffic congestion impacts transit reliability. These lanes can be located at key intersections, for short intervals, or longer stretches of freeway. They can be applied on a 24-hour basis or managed during specific times of day.
- **Transit Signal Priority (TSP):** Traffic signals alter timing and phasing for a specific transit vehicle or general traffic with approaching transit. The priority extends green lights or allows transit its own cycle to bypass congestion. For example, the RPC is advancing a plan to install signal preemption technology on traffic signals on Veterans Boulevard. That will allow Jefferson Transit (JeT) buses running late to hold a green light a little longer or to change the light to green slightly ahead of the cycle to get through an intersection.

These tactics can make buses more reliable and allow transit operators to increase the scheduled frequency with confidence.

- **Transit queue jumps:** Typically combined with a dedicated lane and some form of signal prioritization that allows transit vehicles to “jump ahead” of congestion at near or far side intersections.

Other tactics can also help to reduce transit vehicle travel time and magnify transit priority improvement benefits, including:

- **Off-board/pre-payment fare collection:** The time it takes a passenger to pay a fare when they board a transit vehicle adds time to each run. This adds up with each additional passenger. Collecting fares off the vehicle – through ticket machines, tap cards, or other techniques reduces payment delays for more efficient and faster service. Combined with all-door boarding, this best practice will move more people, more quickly.
- **All-door boarding:** Speeds dwell time by allowing passengers to board and alight from all vehicle doors. Usually combined with off-board payment systems.
- **Far-side stops:** Locating transit stops at far sides of intersections decreases delays so that vehicles do not get stuck at multiple light cycles. Eliminates dangerous right turns by automobiles in front of buses at near side stops and creates more space for buses to pull in and out traffic.
- **Bus bump-outs (bus bulbs):** Extends the sidewalk at bus stops so buses do not have to pull in and out of traffic reducing collisions. It makes it easier and safer for passengers to enter and exit the vehicle and provides more visibility and protection for pedestrians at crosswalks.
- **Island stations:** Places the transit station on the road side of a protected bike lane to reduce bike/bus conflict. There is already one local example of the combined bus island and protected bike lane at Basin and St. Louis.
- **Transit-only apertures:** Redirects general traffic away from a transit route that continues through an intersection. Traffic diversion features (curbs, pavement markings, and/or median islands) are accompanied by signage prohibiting general vehicle travel through the aperture. It may include contra-flow bus and/or bicycle lanes and can be enhanced with dedicated signal phasing.

Appendix C: Potential local examples

Transit priority improvements have great potential in New Orleans to help the City meet our transit goals. But to fulfill that potential we must move forward with implementation. Below are some suggested local examples by location and treatment type intended to facilitate the conversation and increase the potential for action:

- **Canal Street streetcars:** Provide signal priority for streetcars at key intersections; analyze stop removal and consolidation; limit left turn interaction

with automobiles; provide off-board payment systems and all-door boarding and alighting. This would likely be especially productive between the river and Elk Place.

- **Elk Place bus infrastructure:** Implement dedicated lanes and signal priority for the busiest transit hub in the RTA system in order to move buses much more quickly in and out of downtown; improve rider experience through wayfinding, shelters and seating, sidewalk extensions, and other pedestrian safety improvements.
- **Dedicated lane on “game day”:** Create a streetcar only lane for the Rampart/St. Claude streetcar and/or a dedicated bus lane through the CBD for the #15 Freret and #91 Jackson-Esplanade bus lines during Saints’ game days and for other major events and festivals. Incentivize transit use through express service that can be implemented temporarily with traffic cones and parking enforcement.
- **St. Charles streetcar:** Dedicated streetcar lanes from Poydras to Canal Street on Carondelet and St. Charles for improved performance reliability. Should include off-board payment options at its busiest stops at Canal at Carondelet and St. Charles and Common – this already occurs in a de facto manner during major events and could easily be made permanent.
- **Queue jump at Downman Road:** Create a queue jump in New Orleans East for buses during peak hours to better access the Danziger Bridge. Major congestion in this corridor impacts reliability for bus service in the East. Help buses jump the line by allowing service along shoulders combined with minimal parking removal during the busiest times of day. Analyze and diagnose other adjacent street interventions at similar choke points.
- **Crescent City Connection transit only lanes:** Provide dedicated transit lanes to not only access the Crescent City Connection, but also provide transit only lanes on the bridge during peak times. Can utilize current HOV lanes, evaluate contraflow options, and/or use lane shoulders as queue jumps. There are many creative transit priority options that could be used for better access on bridges to and from the West Bank and New Orleans East.