

# NEW LINKS & NEXT STEPS



WORLD CLASS TRANSIT FOR NEW ORLEANS

## STATE OF TRANSIT 2019

# About our Organization

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

Visit [rideneworleans.org](http://rideneworleans.org) for more information.

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# Executive Summary

For a decade now, Ride New Orleans has pushed the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA), Jefferson Transit (JeT), and elected officials throughout the Greater New Orleans region for better planning and clearer priorities to improve regional transit service. The current transit systems fundamentally aren't getting the job done.

Recently, we've started to see real progress:

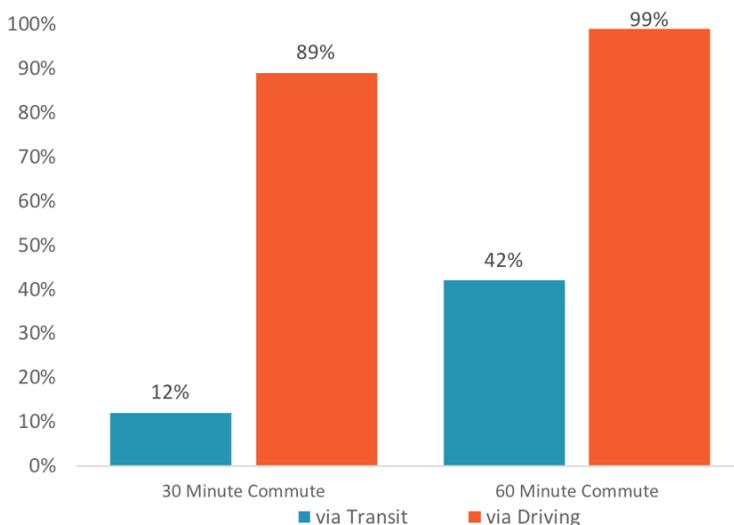
- *In 2016-2017, the RTA completed a year-long public process to produce a long-term strategic plan – the Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP). This plan set new goals for the agency, clarified big picture priorities for the next two decades, and implemented new metrics such as reduced travel time and better on-time performance to gauge progress.*
- *In 2018, JeT followed suit, with an agency strategic plan that laid out the financial realities facing JeT and presented clear proposals for how to improve service.*
- *In 2019, both agencies started the New Links comprehensive operations analysis and regional network redesign that could bring tangible changes to transit in the near future and could fundamentally rethink New Orleans transit for the better.*

But despite the progress toward better long-term planning and prioritization, we understand why the average New Orleans transit rider dealing with today's realities does not feel optimism.

That average rider faces depressingly consistent problems year over year. If they live in New Orleans, they can only reach 12 percent of the region's jobs in 30-minutes-or-less via transit and walking. In 60 minutes, they can only reach 42 percent of the region's jobs.

For riders living in Jefferson or St. Bernard parishes, the experience is even worse. On average, riders in those parishes can only reach 23 percent and three percent of the region's jobs via transit in 60 minutes-or-less, respectively.

**Figure 1: Average percent of jobs accessible, by mode**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2019. LODES Data. Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program. <http://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/lodes/>; Ride New Orleans analysis

It remains very difficult for the average transit rider to get to the wide range of services that residents with private vehicles take for granted. While some neighborhoods may have adequate service and connection options, for many transit-reliant riders, transportation – or the lack thereof – is an almost-insurmountable barrier to accessing economic and educational opportunities.

On top of this fundamental crisis, many other problems continue to fester and make transit less pleasant, less reliable, and less useful than it should and could be. Examples include:

- *Less than 300 of the RTA's 2,222 bus stops have shelters to protect riders from the hot sun and powerful storms in our climate. Even after the RTA board approved 50 new shelters in September 2018, the vast majority have yet to arrive.*
- *Service continues to be unreliable on many lines. According to RTA data in 2018, RTA buses were on time only 74 percent of the time, with streetcars performing even worse, only arriving on time 65 percent of the time. Meanwhile, Canal Street/Algiers Point ferry service was halted due to mechanical issues for an entire day or longer two times in the summer of 2019 alone.*
- *Many of the most heavily traveled lines are prone to not only unpredictable arrival times but also slow travel times. An effort to address this on the busy Canal streetcar lines fell apart after initial outreach and communication stumbles.*

These problems need to be acknowledged and fixed. Not only do they hurt individual riders, they hurt the future of the system. Growing rider frustration and disillusionment reduces community trust. It also likely contributed to a 4.8 percent drop in ridership from 2017 to 2018 – a worrying decline that could become a financial problem if it becomes a trend.

But as we acknowledge that frustration and must be honest about the problems, we also must acknowledge progress. Not only has a foundation for a potential turnaround been laid by the long-term plans referenced above, but further progress in the last year has built upon that foundation.

New leadership – especially New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell and at the RTA staff and board level – has secured important progress that puts our region closer to fixing systemic issues and implementing tangible improvements that make it easier to rely on transit:

- *Last fall, the RTA board voted to fundamentally change the structure of RTA operations. By the end of this summer, the RTA will have transitioned from a system where a private contractor controls all aspects of transit decision without direct oversight to one with a robust public staff that reports only to the publicly-accountable RTA board. This is a big step forward in transparency, accountability, continuity, and – we believe – will lead to tangible progress that will benefit riders for years to come.*
- *Last summer, Orleans and Jefferson parishes jointly agreed to expand the RTA's #39 Tulane bus line across the Jefferson Parish line to the Ochsner Medical Center on Jefferson Highway – directly linking the New Orleans CBD with an important and growing jobs center, and cutting up to an hour of total commuting time for some riders.*
- *Earlier this year, the RTA and JeT agreed to permanently adopt a regional day pass that allows for unlimited travel on both systems over a 24-hour period, making life just a little bit easier and more affordable for riders who have to transfer between the systems.*



**NEW LINKS IS THE REGION'S BEST**

**CHANCE TO COMPREHENSIVELY**

**INCREASE TRANSIT RIDERS'**

**ACCESS TO JOBS AND OTHER**

**SERVICES IN THE NEXT DECADE.**

Most importantly, the New Links regional transit network redesign process is expected to be completed early next year.

While some might understandably tune out yet another planning process, New Links has potential to deliver significant and tangible short-term change for the better – if decision makers allow it.

The basic concept of a network redesign is for a transit agency, a city, or a region to rethink where bus lines go and where to prioritize limited resources, starting from a clean slate. It is premised on the acknowledgement that a transit system – as currently designed and funded – is not up to the task of meeting the goals of the system.

Peer cities like Houston, Texas, and Richmond, Virginia, have redesigned their networks in recent years and seen not only reduced travel time for many low-income households but significant ridership gains during a time when many US transit agencies – like the RTA – are losing customers and revenue.

Done right, the New Links process could make tangible changes to the transit network within the next year or two that improve transit service system-wide - especially for areas like New Orleans East, Algiers, and other neighborhoods that need it the most. With the RTA, JeT, and St. Bernard Urban Rapid Transit (SBURT) all fully participating in the process, it is the region's best chance to comprehensively increase transit riders' access to jobs and other services – without finding significant new revenue – in the next decade.

However, it's important to stress that it is no way guaranteed. Decision makers at the RTA and in Orleans and Jefferson parishes have made smart and forward-thinking choices in the last several years to get us to this point. But the problems we need to address are large and taking the next steps won't be any easier. There will be some tough calls in the year ahead. We urge officials to maintain their focus on the things that matter the most, specifically:

- *Ensure that bold changes to the regional transit network are thoroughly vetted with the public as part of the New Links process and push to implement the solutions that will help us take the biggest long-term steps toward a more equitable and effective regional transit network.*
- *Leverage the New Links process to achieve more tangible steps forward for regional transit coordination and cooperation.*
- *Improve the rider experience and regain rider trust with basic quality-of-life issues like more bus stop shelters, better communication with riders, and improved transfer points.*
- *Build off of the New Links findings to create a clear priority list for future transit improvement and develop a strategy to find the increased revenue to implement those improvements.*

The New Orleans region as a whole has taken important steps toward world-class and equitable transit in the last few years. Decision makers have an opportunity this year to take that progress to the next level. We urge them to take advantage of this opportunity.

# Forward Progress

New Orleans transit decision makers made some smart and timely choices over the last year, leading to some encouraging steps on operational issues and the continued improvement of long-standing governance and planning deficiencies.

Important steps to highlight include:

- *A transition to full public control of the RTA after a decade of private contractor control of key transit decisions*
- *Tangible steps forward on regional connectivity and regional transit cooperation*
- *The start of a transit network redesign that could lead to significant routing changes that could greatly increase regional transit utility over the next several years.*

## A NEW MODEL FOR RTA MANAGEMENT

After a decade of using the “delegated management” model of contracting, the RTA will move to a more accountable and publicly-led system of management at the conclusion of the current contract on August 31, 2019.



New RTA CEO Alex Wiggins

The positions that are most responsible for the overall direction of the agency are all slated to move out of the purview of the private contractor and on to the public payroll. Those positions include senior management, planning, finance, communications, marketing, administrative, and support roles. The transition is still in progress as of the publication of this report, but the new RTA CEO, Alex Wiggins, started on July 1, 2019. Wiggins, a New Orleans native, gained his experience at a number of different transit agencies, including, most recently, LA Metro where he directed safety and security.

A private contractor will still have a role – but a much reduced one. The day-to-day operations of the RTA – including vehicle operations, maintenance, and the immediate supervision of those functions – will continue to be contracted.

Transdev – the current contractor – won the bid for the new contract in Spring 2019. The new contract is only for three years with an RTA option for up to two three-year renewals before the contract legally has to be put out to bid again.

### *Why does this matter?*

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell and the RTA board deserve credit for the hard but necessary decision to significantly change the agency’s governance structure.

With the delegated management model, a single private company – Transdev – had effective control of all aspects of RTA service and planning. Through most of the delegated management contract,



the RTA had only one actual employee – the board secretary. That meant the all-volunteer RTA board was charged with the oversight of a large multi-national private corporation without being given sufficient tools to do the job.

From a purely operational standpoint, there is nothing inherently wrong with contracting. Transdev was able to accomplish the basics of the job – gradually returning transit service to a city devastated by Katrina. But the delegated management model presented real issues with transparency, accountability, and continuity. Those issues led to problems for transit riders which would have continued to worsen if the existing system had been left in place.

## Transparency

A lack of transparency is a problem for an agency that has an entire goal in its strategic plan devoted to building trust with the public. A snapshot of various issues includes:

- *Difficulty for anyone outside of Transdev to see and understand cost breakdowns – a problem for an agency that consistently ranked among the highest in costs for revenue hour over the last decade (see Page 23)*
- *Public records requests from advocates and the regional press that were often held up for long periods of time*
- *Little consultation with the community on important transit decision, with only slow and isolated progress over the last 10 years.*

## Accountability

With the RTA board the body formally responsible to the public, but unequipped to challenge the technical expertise of the contractor, there was a lack of accountability to the public around important decisions. Exacerbating this, the contractor's profit was primarily tied to the total amount of vehicle platform hours (the amount of time a transit vehicle is on its route or traveling to/from its route), with no contractual obligation to examine why the service was going there or whether it would make more sense elsewhere.

A proponent of the delegated-management model might counter that a better-structured and more publicly understood contract could lead to more accountability around improvements. But even assuming a more accountable contract could be forged without a public professional staff deeply familiar with RTA operations to negotiate said contract, there were a number of

other examples of problems through the delegated management years.

For example, In September 2017 the RTA board nearly agreed to pay an additional \$750,000 to unnecessarily expedite the delivery of new ferry boats without seeming to realize what they were approving. It took a member of the audience to raise the issue – something a professional finance team working directly for the RTA board would have been able to easily make clear.<sup>1</sup>

## Continuity

Continuity is key for an agency like the RTA where the status quo is not acceptable. It is desirable that, as much as possible, there is carryover in the team that creates and implements long-term plans for improvement. In-house expertise and accumulated knowledge should combine with fresh perspective and new ideas to help move an agency forward.

With a delegated management model, that continuity is always at risk. The entire point of the model is that a transit agency must always be looking for a better deal as a lower cost. Even if a transit authority were to stay with one contractor over a long period of time, the agency would ultimately be putting itself in a situation where it is more and more reliant on a particular company over the years and in danger of a rude awakening if the economics and assumptions of the private sector change.

But moving to a publicly-controlled model greatly increases the chances for the kind of continuity that can lead to a more consistent and accountable focus on achieving the goals of a long-term plan over a number of years.

## Next steps

Moving forward, there is no guarantee that the new model will assure the future success of the agency. Potential flash points of prioritization, strategy, transparency, public trust, and effectiveness will always hover over any large public agency.

But RIDE firmly believes that taking needed steps forward on improved service, regional connectivity, and increased revenue could not happen without the RTA's move toward a more publicly controlled governing structure. Thus, we believe the decision to shift to a truly public agency was the most momentous step forward thus far for public transit in the last several years and look forward to seeing the results of that decision in the coming years.

## RIDER PROFILE: JUDY STEVENS



“Now that the #39 Tulane has been extended to Ochsner it saves me both time and money and has made a huge difference in my life. Because I don’t have to transfer between agencies means I save \$1.50 per trip, \$3 every day, and \$60 a month. It also saves me time—at least 30 minutes each way, every day which means less stress having to get to work on time and I even get home in time to watch the 6 o’clock news now.”

*Judy Stevens is an employee at Ochsner Medical Center on Jefferson Highway and Ride New Orleans board member. She lives in New Orleans East and makes the commute via bus to and from work every day.*

## STEPS FORWARD ON REGIONAL TRANSIT

Regional transit connectivity and cooperation continue to be one of the areas most in need of improvement. Fortunately, there were important steps forward in both regional connectivity and coordination over the last year.

### #39 Tulane regional expansion

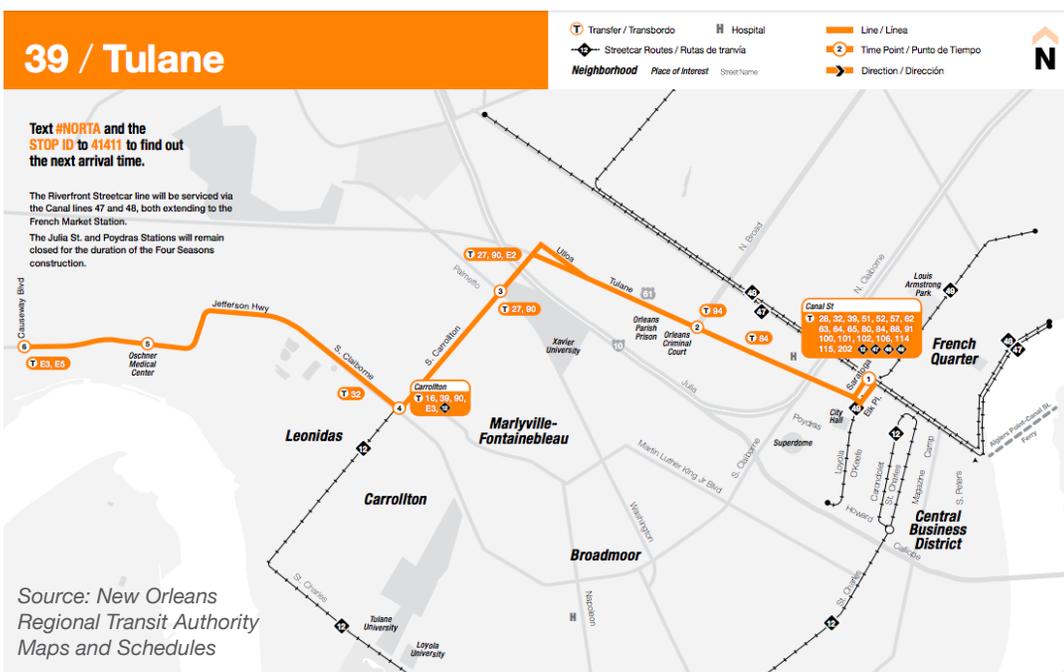
One of the biggest factors contributing to the poor access to jobs figures for transit-reliant residents is the lack of true regional transit options. Outside of some infrequent direct connections from the Jefferson Parish West Bank to the New Orleans CBD and the limited JeT Airport/New Orleans CBD connection, inter-parish trips generally require a transfer to an entirely different transit system.

There was progress last year, however, as Orleans and Jefferson parishes both agreed to extend the RTA’s #39 Tulane bus line to the Ochsner Medical Center on Jefferson Highway. The bus line previously stopped just inside the Orleans parish line and riders were forced to transfer to JeT’s E-3 Kenner Local at Claiborne and Carrollton.

The route was extended nearly a mile and half and was able to maintain its 30-minute headway schedule by simply adding an additional bus to service. The service change also corresponded with an extension of 24-hour service on the RTA’s #16 Claiborne line.

The #39 Tulane now directly connects the expanding Ochsner Medical Center – with an estimated \$360 million of investments and more than 3,000 new jobs anticipated in the next ten years – with the region’s largest jobs center. In addition, the change also saves riders time and money as they now do not have to pay an additional one-way fare. It also saves some riders more than 60 minutes in their total daily commute time.

Figure 2: #39 Tulane New Route





## Regional Ride

Connecting Our Region:  
Regional Transit Authority  
and Jefferson Transit



Ride RTA and JeT vehicles with one fare.

[www.norta.com](http://www.norta.com)  
[www.jeffersontransit.org](http://www.jeffersontransit.org)

## Regional ride pass

In September 2018, Jefferson Transit and the RTA launched a six-month pilot to test the return of a regional transit “day pass” good for 24 hours that allows unlimited trips and transfers between the New Orleans RTA and Jefferson Transit (JeT).

The two agencies offered a similar regional pass from 1999 to 2004 but it was discontinued after Hurricane Katrina. Since then, riders had to pay separate, full fares if transferring between RTA and JeT – with a \$1.25 and \$1.50 base fare respectively.

After several years of conversation, the agencies agreed to test a price of \$6, with each agency receiving \$3 from each sale. During the pilot, the agencies sold 16,000 Regional Ride passes, with 63,000 total trips taken on the passes.

Riders generally responded well to the Regional Ride pass and the

change generated positive media coverage. Traveling between the JeT and RTA systems previously required multiple fares or passes so the convenience of one 24-hour pass for unlimited trips between the two systems is very helpful. It also saves some riders money, as the Regional Ride pass costs six dollars while two day passes from the RTA (\$3) and JeT (\$4) combined would normally cost seven dollars.

In spring 2019, the RTA and JeT decided to make the pilot permanent – a small, but important step toward improved regional coordination and making day-to-day travel a little easier for riders who rely on both systems.

## Jefferson and Orleans councils jointly call for more regional transit routes

In August 2018 the Orleans and Jefferson parish councils both unanimously passed joint resolutions supporting and expanding regional transit connectivity with specific mention of the need for more regional routes

Resolutions are symbolic, but given the history of distrust between the two parishes – especially on transit issues – gestures of solidarity can be extremely helpful. It is encouraging that in the resolutions, both councils formally recognized that to ensure economic prosperity for the region and its residents, an effective, regionally interconnected transportation system is a must.

The resolutions are only one step on the way to tangible transit improvements. But with the regional transit network redesign – detailed in the next section – taking form over the next year, even symbolic nods to increased regional cooperation can take on larger meaning.



## MAKING BUS LINES MORE USEFUL TO RIDERS

### What is New Links?

New Links is a joint study and planning process by the RTA, Jefferson Transit, and St. Bernard Parish Urban Rapid Transit, managed by the Regional Planning Commission (RPC), the New Orleans region's designated metropolitan planning organization (MPO) (responsible for coordinating regional transportation planning).

The goal is to redesign the regional transit network. This likely will involve major and minor changes in where transit lines begin, end, and travel through. These changes can provide more reliable and frequent service that significantly increases access to jobs and other places people want and need to go.

The basic idea of a network redesign is to rethink where bus lines go, starting from a clean slate. Through extensive public dialogue and focused data-gathering, transit agencies propose comprehensive changes that create greater utility throughout a transit network to fulfill specific goals like increased ridership and greater access for marginalized communities. A network redesign redeploys existing resources to areas of greatest need or demand.

Peer regions that have tried a network redesign have seen impressive results:

- *Houston, Texas ridership grew by 6.8 percent in the year after an August 2015 network redesign was implemented<sup>2</sup>*
- *Richmond, Virginia implemented a network redesign in June 2018 and ridership grew by 17 percent over the following year<sup>3</sup>*
- *Ridership in Columbus, Ohio grew by three percent in 2018, after a May 2017 network redesign was implemented.<sup>4</sup>*

In New Orleans, a network redesign might provide more crosstown routes or propose specific new regional transit connections. It might redesign the transit network in specific areas like New Orleans East or Algiers to move riders from those areas to the New Orleans CBD or other important job centers more quickly and reliably. It could bring back and put more emphasis on many of the pre-Katrina express routes that used to whisk New Orleanians across town. It could ask current riders and community members to consider tradeoffs like transferring an additional time or walking a little further to stops – in return for more frequent and rapid service.

Most importantly, a network redesign should be able to increase connectivity and reliability for people who rely on transit.

### Why is this needed?

While forward progress on connectivity and regional cooperation is important, only a big-picture approach can provide benefits to all riders. As needed as the #39 Tulane extension was, it was an isolated decision. You cannot reform and improve an entire regional network like that. With only a finite amount of resources available for transit there would be a severe imbalance in results.

The RTA's Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP), approved in 2017, started a framework and road map for these big picture improvements. But fully implementing every recommendation in the SMP would more than double the average annual RTA operating cost – a huge practical hurdle and possibly a political impossibility.

There needs to be a way to prioritize improvements and ensure the region is spending limited transit dollars in the most effective way.

New Links can do this. New Links can recommend comprehensive changes that benefit the entire system – not just riders on one line – while setting the regional transit for continued improvements by prioritizing specific future service increases to be implemented as funding becomes available.

### Timeline

New Links will unfold in three phases:

- **Phase I (January – July 2019):** *Introduce the basis process; community engagement and education; rider origin/destination survey; internal data analysis*
- **Phase II (August – December 2019):** *Draft different network scenarios that show potential changes to the regional transit network; present and receive feedback during a second round of community engagement*
- **Phase III (Early 2020):** *Utilizing community feedback, data analysis, and transit agency priorities, propose specific changes to the regional transit network and present those to transit agencies*

After Phase III, the New Links process will formally be over, but there will be an unofficial fourth phase at the RTA and Jefferson Transit determine whether to actually implement the New Links recommendations.

Figure 3: Houston before network redesign

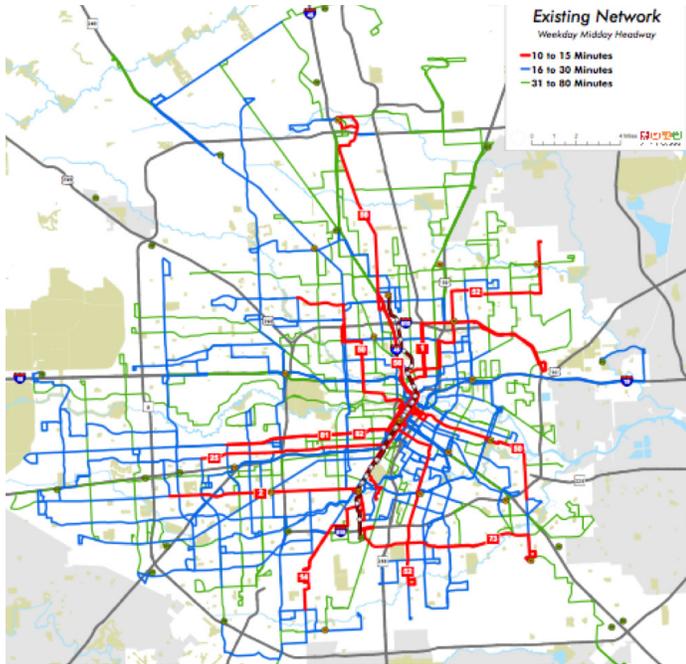
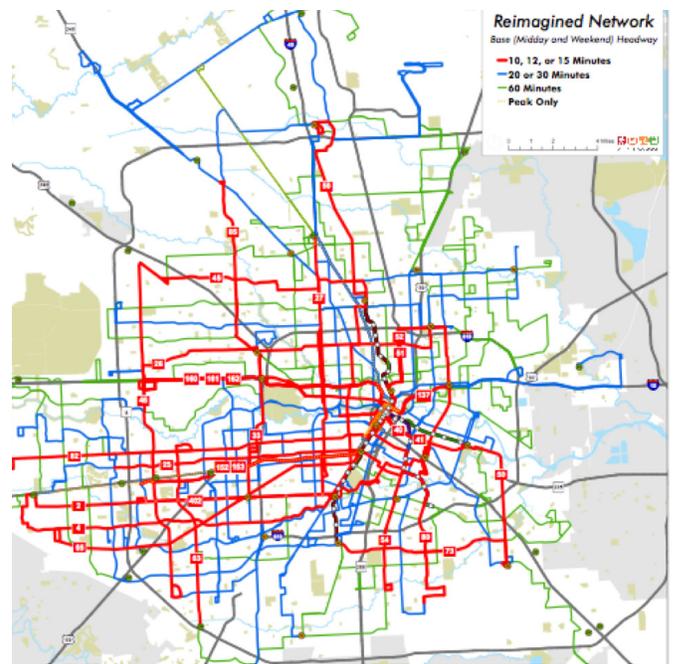


Figure 4: Houston after network redesign



Source: Metropolitan Transit of Harris County (Houston METRO)

Figure 5: Transfer Tradeoff Activity—Prefer faster trip plus a transfer or a longer one-seat ride?

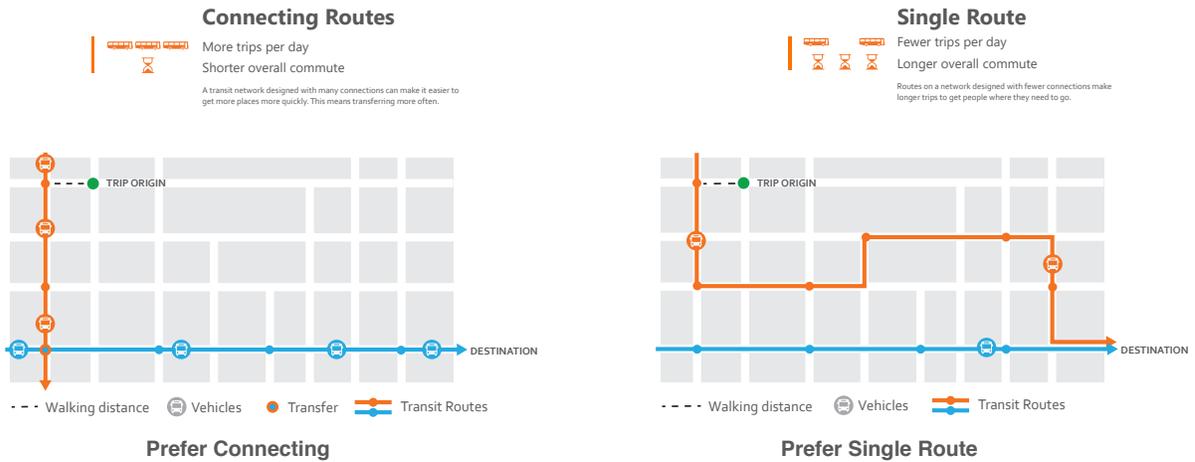
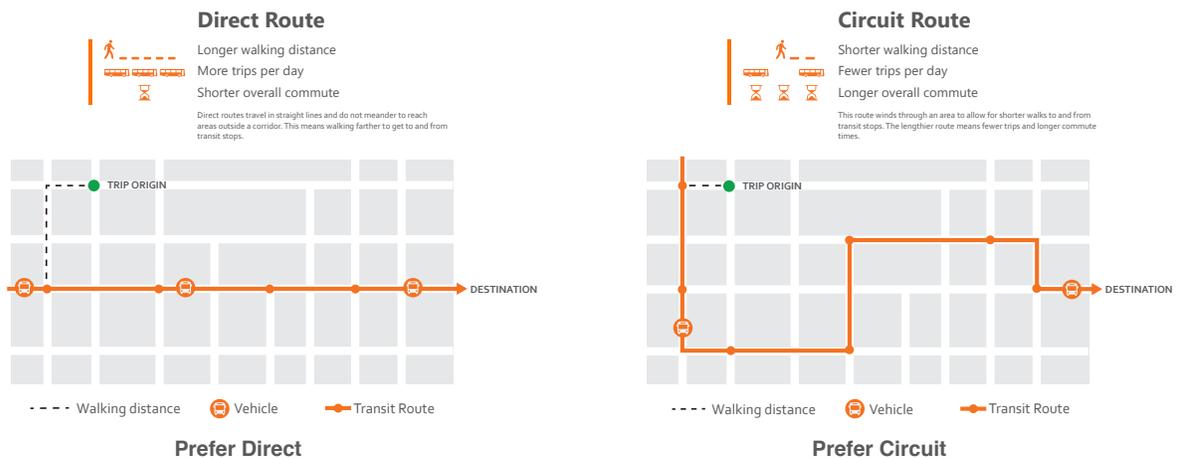


Figure 6: Walking Tradeoff Activity—Prefer faster trip but longer walk or longer trip but shorter walk?



Source: The New Orleans Regional Planning Commission

# Challenges to Overcome

## Methodology notes

Job Access Analysis: The methodology used for this study strongly reflects the cumulative opportunity metric that is utilized in the “Access Across America” report produced by the University of Minnesota’s Accessibility Observatory. Data is obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program 2015. The calculations are based on the travel times observed between every US Census Block Group (CBG) in Jefferson Parish, Orleans Parish, and St. Bernard parishes. To calculate the trip origin and destination for a particular CBG, the population- and job-weighted centroid was used. Travel time is calculated using OpenTripPlanner based on graphs composed of data from OpenStreetMap and published transit timetables. Driving times assume that the vehicles do not encounter any congestion and travel at the speed limit. The transit travel times operate on an assumption of perfect schedule adherence. The observed travel times further make the assumption that portions of a trip that are not on-board a transit vehicle take place by walking at a speed of 3 miles per hour along designated pedestrian facilities such as sidewalks, trails, etc. To reflect the influence of transit service frequency on accessibility, travel times are calculated repeatedly for each origin-destination pair every ten minutes between 7:00 and 8:59 AM as the departure time. Accessibility is averaged across the three parishes Orleans Parish, 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

While we’ve seen important steps forward over the last year, the average transit-reliant New Orleans region resident remains at a significant disadvantage compared to a resident who has access to a private car.

**That must be a fundamental concern to anyone interested in increasing social justice in our region.**

19.1 percent of New Orleans residents do not have access to a private vehicle – more than twice the national average. That means nearly 1/5 of the population has a significant disadvantage in accessing the services that many residents take for granted.

And, with the average cost of owning and maintaining a private vehicle at \$8,849<sup>5</sup>, simply buying a vehicle is not an option for many. 26 percent of Orleans Parish residents – more than twice the national average – are at or below the poverty line. The Jefferson Parish figure is lower at 17 percent, but still above the national average and creeping up in recent years.

This is also not just a social justice issue – it is a huge problem for our region’s economy. A noticeable percentage of the regional workforce cannot reliably access job opportunities, significantly reducing the potential workforce pool for New Orleans region businesses and hurting our overall competitiveness.

## ACCESS TO JOBS REMAINS STAGNANT AND POOR

Table 1: Average percent of jobs accessible, by mode

	30-Minute Commute	60-Minute Commute
via Transit	12%	42%
via Driving	89%	99%

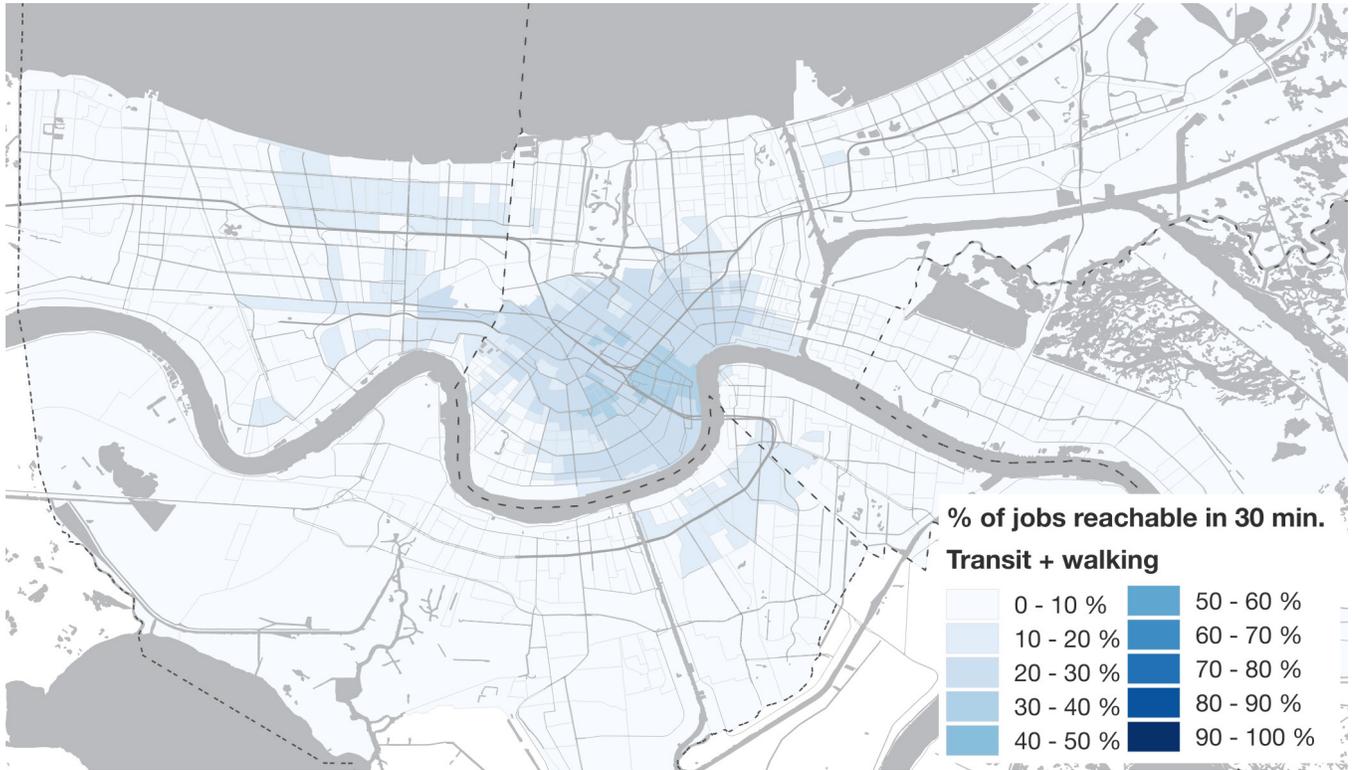
Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2019. LODES Data. Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program. <http://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/lodes/>; Ride New Orleans analysis

As we measure the usefulness of transit, it’s not enough to ask if it’s easy to get to a transit stop or even how often a transit vehicle comes to a given stop - though both are important.

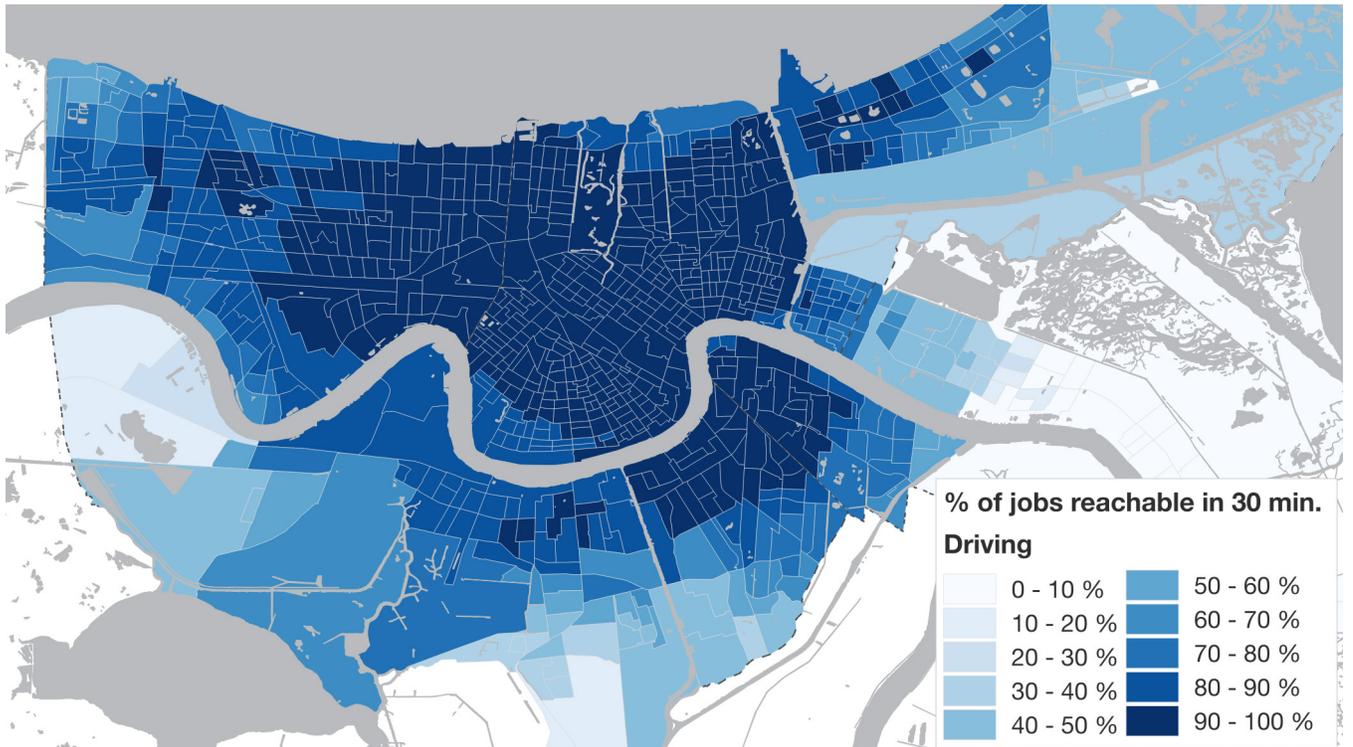
To truly measure effectiveness, we have to look at how helpful a particular bus stop, a specific transit line, and an overall transit network are at getting people to the places they may need to go – in a reasonable amount of time. Time is ultimately the most important commodity to a transit rider. If you can’t get to a destination – a job opportunity, community college class, doctor’s appointment, etc. – in a reasonable amount of time you either won’t go or you will have to sacrifice something else important. There are only so many hours in the day.

The best way to measure this is to look at how many jobs the average transit-reliant New Orleanian can reach in different intervals of time. To give those numbers greater context in an equity setting, it’s also important to compare access for the average car-owning New Orleanian.

**Figure 7: Percentage of jobs reachable in 30 minutes using public transit and walking, by Census Block Group**

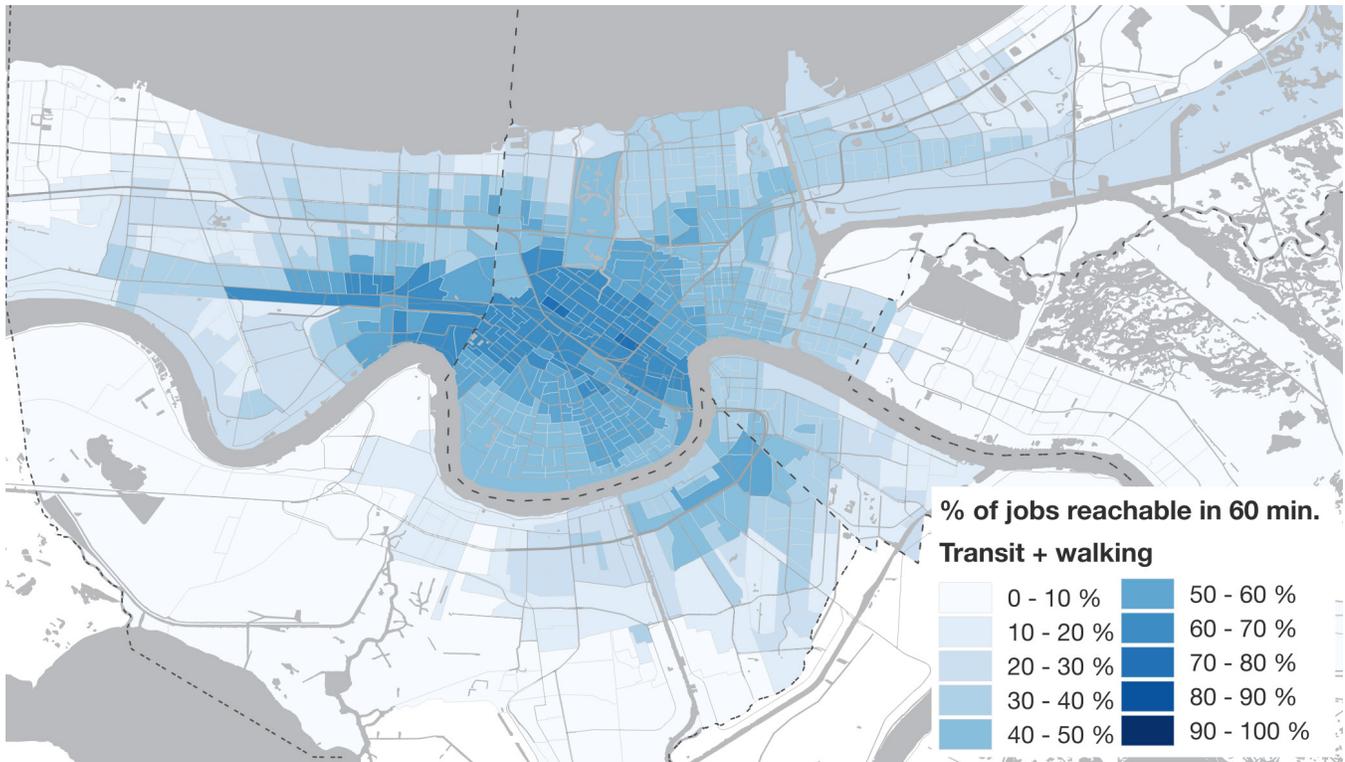


**Figure 8: Percentage of jobs reachable in 30 minutes driving, by Census Block Group**

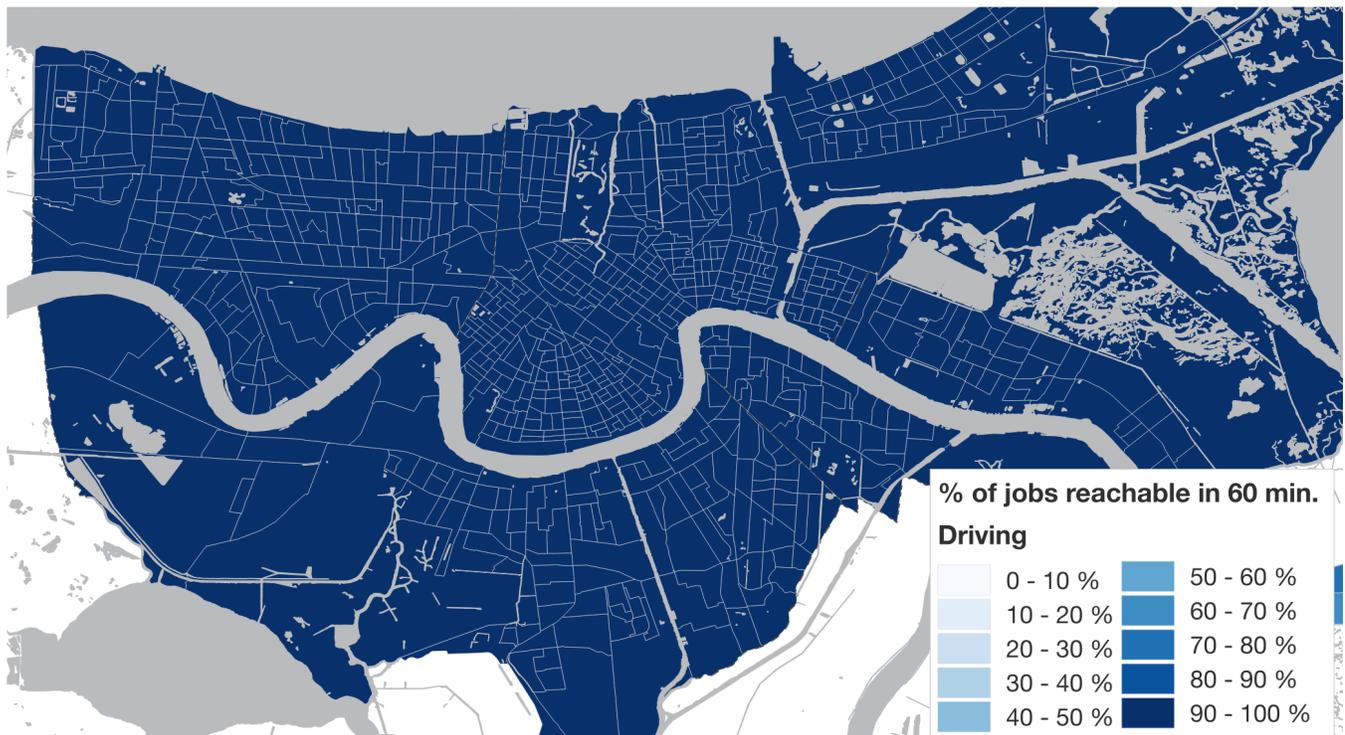


Source: RTA, Jefferson Transit, OpenStreetMap, US Census Bureau: LODES (2015). Map Data: US Census Bureau, OpenStreetMap Contributors

**Figure 9: Percentage of jobs reachable in 60 minutes using public transit and walking, by Census Block Group**



**Figure 10: Percentage of jobs reachable in 60 minutes driving, by Census Block Group**



Source: RTA, Jefferson Transit, OpenStreetMap, US Census Bureau: LODES (2015). Map Data: US Census Bureau, OpenStreetMap Contributors

Unfortunately, what we find is that the average transit-reliant New Orleanian operates at a severe disadvantage.

The average New Orleanian with a car can reach 89 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes-or-less and over 99 percent of the region's jobs in 60 minutes-or-less. But if that same New Orleanian is reliant on transit, they can only reach 12 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes-or-less and only 42 percent of those jobs in 60 minutes-or-less.

In Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes, transit riders fare even worse. In Jefferson Parish, transit riders can only reach 5 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes-or-less and only 23 percent in 60 minutes-or-less. In St. Bernard Parish transit riders can only reach one percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes-or-less and only three percent in 60 minutes or less. Residents who have access to a car obviously fare much better. Jefferson Parish residents can reach 78 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes-or-less by car and 99 percent of the region's jobs in 60 minutes-or-less. Geography limits even car-owning St. Bernard Parish residents – in 30 minutes-or-less they can only reach 23 percent of the region's jobs. But at the 60-minute mark, St. Bernard Parish residents can reach 96 percent of the region's jobs via car.

## Outlying communities fare worse

With many regional stakeholders rightly asking how to better support underserved communities – especially in New Orleans East and Algiers – we took a closer look at those two neighborhoods. Unfortunately, our analysis confirms that transit-reliant residents in both areas are at a disadvantage.

In New Orleans East the average resident can only access 2 percent of the region's jobs – less than 8,000 jobs – in 30 minutes-or-less and only 21 percent in 60 minutes-or-less.

Algiers residents don't fare much better, despite the closer proximity to the New Orleans CBD jobs center. The average Algiers resident can only reach 3 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes-or-less via transit and approximately ¼ of the region's jobs in less than an hour via transit.

This is especially noteworthy in New Orleans East, as New Orleans East riders make up a growing percentage of total ridership – at least 9 percent of the entire system in 2018\*.

Not only do New Orleans East riders make up a large percentage of riders, but ridership is growing in New Orleans East at a time when ridership is dropping system-wide. From 2015 to 2018, New Orleans East ridership grew by 5.1 percent, while system-wide ridership dropped by 4.1 percent in the same time period.

\*In fact, the number is likely even higher as our calculations do not include the #94 Broad, the highest ridership bus line in the city, that serves a variety of neighborhoods, including almost the entire length of Chef Menteur Highway.

**Table 2: Percentage of jobs accessible in 30 and 60 minutes using public transit and walking, by parish**

Transit + walking		Orleans		Jefferson		St. Bernard	
		#	%	#	%	#	%
2019	30 Min	48,306	12%	18,518	5%	2,474	1%
	60 Min	168,891	42%	91,081	23%	13,326	3%

Source: RTA, Jefferson Transit, OpenStreetMap, US Census Bureau: LODES (2015). Map Data: US Census Bureau, OpenStreetMap Contributors

**Table 3: Percentage of jobs accessible in 30 and 60 minutes using public transit and walking from New Orleans East and Algiers**

Transit + walking		New Orleans East		Algiers	
		#	%	#	%
2019	30 Min	7,103	2%	13,616	3%
	60 Min	85,195	21%	105,295	26%

Source: RTA, Jefferson Transit, OpenStreetMap, US Census Bureau: LODES (2015). Map Data: US Census Bureau, OpenStreetMap Contributors

## RIDER PROFILE: JERRY RUFFIN



“In the morning the bus is fine, but the evening commute is a different story. The bus is always packed, there's no place to sit, and it's just not comfortable for people. It will be even worse after summer and when all the kids go back to school. This and long wait times are a problem for the #114 / #115 General DeGaulle-Sullen and Tullis buses. I'd like to see more buses

on those two lines to better serve the West Bank, especially during peak hours.”

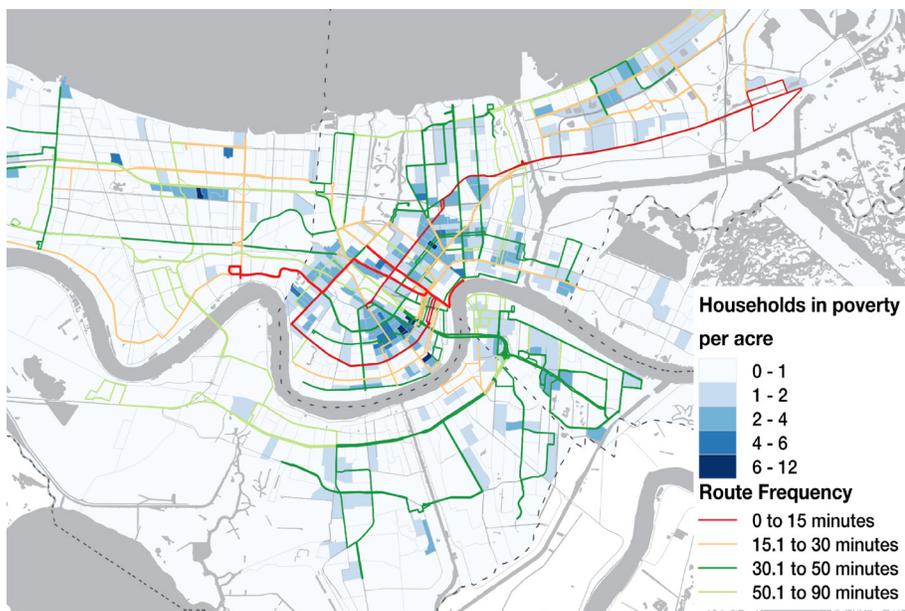
*Jerry Ruffin works in the Central Business District of New Orleans and commutes from his home in Algiers via bus to and from work every day.*

**Table 4: Number and percentage of jobs accessible to households in poverty within 60 minutes, by parish**

60-minute travel time	Orleans	Jefferson	Kenner	RTA Service Area*
Total Jobs	173,052	95,150	44,366	161,554
% Jobs Accessible	43%	24%	11%	40%
Poverty HH	38,149	25,641	3,743	41,892
Total HH	154,542	168,462	24,781	179,323

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2017 5-year estimate

**Figure 11: Households in poverty with regional transit line frequency overlay**



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2017 5-year estimate; Ride New Orleans analysis of RTA, JeT, SBURT maps and schedules in 2019.

## Access to major jobs centers

Another way to get a sense of transit access in the region is to look at how accessible two of the major jobs centers of our region are – the New Orleans CBD and Veterans corridor in Metairie (see Figure 9 and 10).

Both are more transit accessible than many places in the region, which is good – the more we cluster important destinations together, the easier it is for transit service to effectively serve the region.

But even the New Orleans CBD – the most transit-accessible place in the region – has problems. 15 percent of New Orleanians can't reach the New Orleans CBD in less than 45 minutes. Much worse, 66 percent of Jefferson Parish residents can't reach the New Orleans CBD in less than 60 minutes via transit and the vast majority of St. Bernard Parish residents can't reach the New Orleans CBD in less than 90 minutes.

New Orleans residents, meanwhile, have a hard time reaching job opportunities in Metairie. Over ¾ cannot reach the Veterans corridor in less than 60 minutes on transit. Even in Jefferson Parish, over 50 percent of residents cannot reach the Veterans corridor in less than 60 minutes on transit.

In most regions, there would be a direct transit connection between two jobs centers of comparative importance. But for transit riders to get from the Veterans corridor to the New Orleans CBD, riders have to take JeT's E1 Veterans bus to the Cemeteries Transfer Center and then take the very slow Cemeteries streetcar line to the New Orleans CBD, a trip that Google maps estimates at over 75 minutes of travel time.

## Low-income households have slightly better access, but need improvements

As low-income households are less likely to have access to a reliable vehicle, effective transit to connect low-income individuals to economic opportunity and other important destinations is especially important.

On this account, the results are mixed. On the one hand, the average access to jobs via transit for households below the poverty line is slightly better than the average access for all households in Orleans and Jefferson parishes. This may be due to the fact that even as overall housing prices accelerate past what many in New Orleans can afford, there are still concentrations of low-income housing in centrally located neighborhoods like Central City and the 7th Ward. This is a good reminder of how important land use decisions are when discussing the future location of low-income housing.

But on the other hand, the RTA's stated goal is that low-income households within its service area are able to access 65 percent of the region's jobs in 60 minutes-or-less via transit by 2027. With low-income households in the RTA service area (including Kenner) able to access only 40 percent of the region's jobs in 60 minutes-or-less currently, the RTA is still far from achieving this particular goal.

Figure 12: Transit access to New Orleans CBD

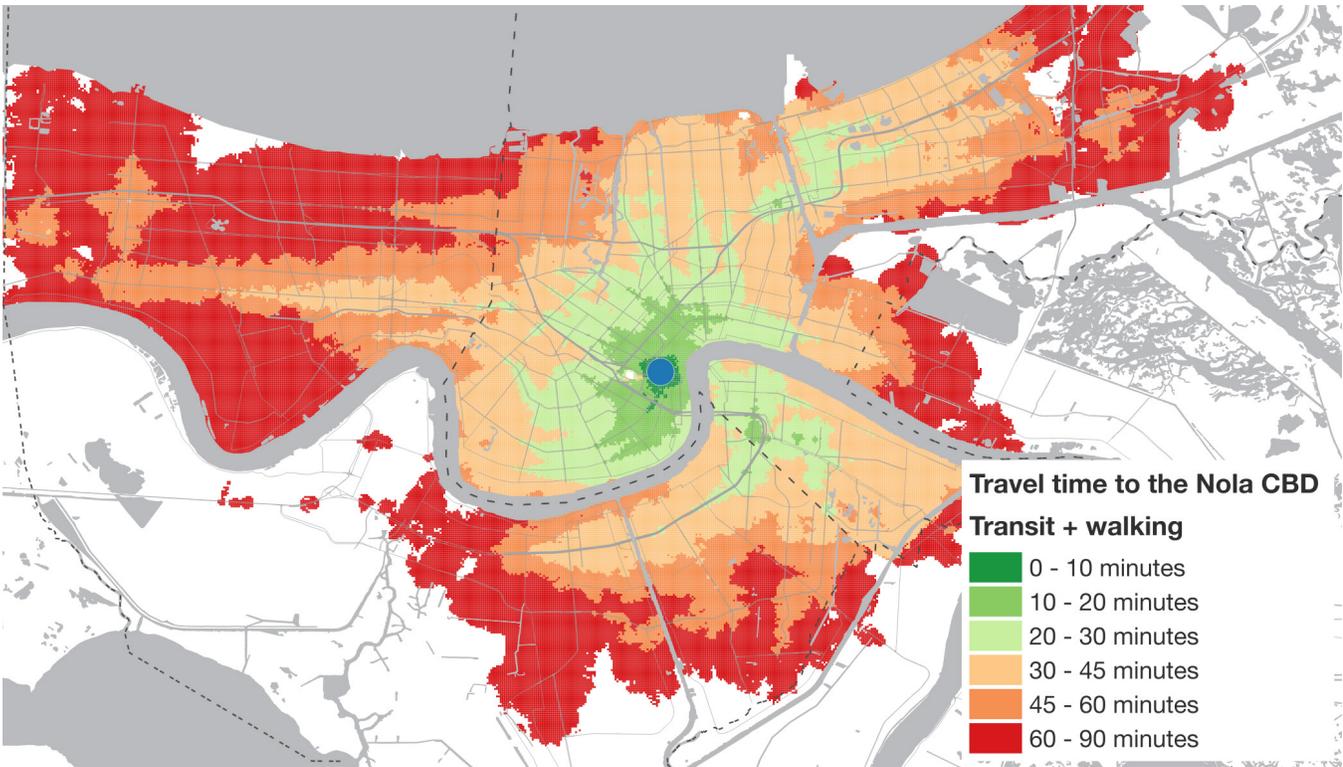
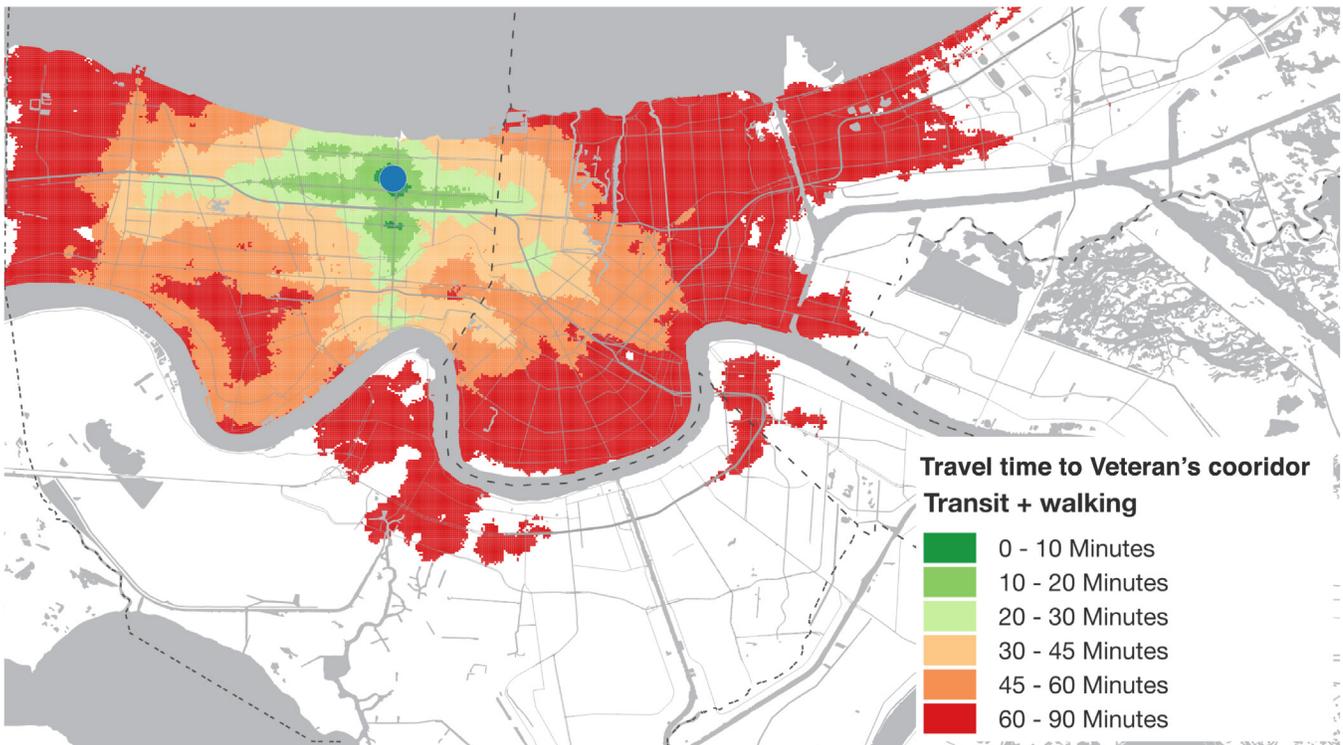


Figure 13: Transit access to Veteran's corridor



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2019. LODES Data. Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program. <http://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/lodes/>; Ride New Orleans analysis

### Methodology notes

Trips and Total Trip Volume: A “trip” is a single round trip made by a single vehicle, like a bus or streetcar, from the time it leaves its first station until it returns to that station at the end of its route. Ride New Orleans’ analysts relied on the RTA’s maps and schedules from 2005 and 2019 to count total weekly trips on each route. We added all the routes together to get the “weekly trip volume” or total number of weekly trips available in a normal week during 2005 and 2019. Our trip volume analysis does not include paratransit trips; it focuses on the scheduled service available to the majority of transit riders.

This year, we made a one-time alteration to our trip volume methodology to provide a fair snapshot of 2019 streetcar service. The RTA temporarily eliminated the #2 Riverfront Streetcar from its schedule due to construction at the Four Seasons Hotel, causing a drastic decrease in the total number of streetcar trips. The #47 Canal Cemeteries and #48 City Park lines’ service were also affected and extended to the French Market, serving parts of the Riverfront line. To account for these changes, we counted the #2 Riverfront equally to the adjusted service of the #47 Canal Cemeteries and #48 City Park so that each line accounted for 532 total weekly trips.

Route Frequency: To determine the frequency of the region’s 2005 and 2019 transit service, we calculated the headway – or number of minutes wait between transit trips – on each bus and streetcar route during weekday morning peak hours (from 6:30AM to 10:00AM) and weekday evening peak hours (from 3:30PM to 7:00PM), based on official RTA, JeT, and SBURT schedules. The total number of trips departing during these hours was divided by 420 minutes to calculate minutes per trip within the seven hours of peak periods. The results organized into the following categories: Headways of 15 minutes or less; 15.1 to 30 minutes; 30.1 to 50 minutes; and greater than 50 minutes.

## TRIP RECOVERY RATE DECLINES

RIDE annually counts total weekly RTA bus and streetcar trips and compares them to pre-Katrina 2005 weekly trips in order to compare pre-storm and post-storm service and gauge transit system recovery.

We also measure each route’s peak time frequency as another metric to determine the quality of that service. Generally, frequencies of 15-minutes-or-less are considered the cut off for the “high frequency” transit most riders say they want.

### Weekly trip count

There was a slight decrease in total weekly RTA trips recovered between 2018 (52.3 percent) and 2019 (50.8 percent). This is the first time the total number of trips has decreased since RIDE began tracking this benchmark.

The primary reason appears to be that the total number of streetcar trips dropped in 2019. The two factors that led to this decrease are the temporary incorporation of the Riverfront line – due to construction at the former World Trade Center building – into the #47/48 Canal Street lines, and a decrease in late night and early morning frequency for the Canal Street and St. Charles streetcar lines.

It is worth noting that, despite the decrease in trips this year, total post-Katrina streetcar service recovery is still higher than total bus service recovery because of previous years’ increases. Even with the drop, the RTA streetcar service has recovered 116 percent of the existing pre-storm service.

Weekly RTA bus trips decreased slightly. Currently, the RTA offers 40.4 percent of the existing total pre-Katrina bus trips, down from 40.6 percent in 2018. This appears to be due to minor route and service adjustments. Overall bus revenue hours – an important metric of overall service – slightly increased (see Page 21).

### Frequency

Frequent service, or transit vehicles arriving every 15 minutes-or-less, is one of the most important aspects of a quality transit system. Pre-Katrina, our region had 19 high frequency routes, with most of them within the RTA system. 14 years after the storm, the region has only three high frequency lines, all within the RTA system (see Figure 11).

In Figure 11 (frequency map), we indicated higher frequency among the Canal and St. Bernard corridors than the schedules for individual lines would suggest. That is because in those corridors, riders can rely on increased frequency because the RTA staggers service equally between two lines in each corridor (the Cemeteries and City Park streetcars on Canal and #51 and #52 bus lines on St. Bernard). Due to this interpretation, the map indicates there are four 15-minute-or-less, high-frequency corridors, when technically only three individual lines provide that frequency level. Similarly, there is an additional 15.1 to 30 minute corridor on the map, when technically only 15 individual lines provide that frequency level. This shows how the RTA and JeT could provide de facto higher frequency service along key corridors without increasing operational costs - something the New Links plans should look at carefully.

Figure 14: Total weekly trips, by mode



Source: Ride New Orleans analysis of Regional Transit Authority schedules

Table 5: Number of routes by frequency, 2005 & 2019

	Bus & Streetcar Routes			
	2005		2019	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
15 minutes or less	19	24%	3	6%
15.1 to 30 minutes	43	54%	15	30%
30.1 to 50 minutes	12	15%	20	40%
Greater than 50 minutes	6	7%	11	22%

Source: Ride New Orleans Analysis of RTA, JeT, and SBURT schedules in 2005 and 2019

## PLAN TO IMPROVE CANAL STREETCARS STALLS

The better use of existing resources is part of solving the region's fundamental transit challenge – clear deficiencies but finite funding to address them.

Thus, an internal RTA study this year looking at way to improve the reliability and efficiency of the Canal Street streetcar lines was encouraging. But it was worrying to see the idea quickly stall in the face of localized, but vocal opposition.

The RTA study that looked at reliability and travel time problems on the Canal Street streetcar lines. The study focused on the section of Canal Street from Carrollton to Harrah's Casino, where the Cemeteries and City Park streetcar lines overlap. The Canal lines are an important part of the transit network – they connect with almost every RTA line and 17 percent of all 2017 RTA boardings were on one of the two lines.

But while the lines are supposed to provide frequent service to major transfer points and downtown, they are unreliable. On paper, a streetcar comes every 7.5 minutes, but streetcar bunching leads to much longer waits and very slow travel times.

The RTA study concluded that current stop spacing – with stops every two blocks through most of Mid-City and every block through much of downtown – and unrestricted vehicle crossings led to slow trip times and frequent delays, hurting riders' ability to rely on the Canal lines.

RTA planners recommended consideration of a six-month pilot to close certain stops and vehicular crossings on Canal. Options ranged from slight variations from the status quo – closing just a handful of stops and u-turn crossings – to big changes, with stops spaced out every six to seven blocks and the closure of most non-signalized street crossings along Canal on the lake side of Claiborne. The pilot would be a real life and affordable way to test the effects on reliability and travel time, gauge rider reaction, and definitively determine any traffic impacts. Testing these structural changes on the route would give the RTA, the City, and the community a clear sense of the benefits and drawbacks. With the resulting data and lived experience, the community could then determine if the changes should be made permanent in the future. The concept has successfully helped the public weigh similar changes in other US cities – notably Boston, Massachusetts.

Unfortunately, the concept was not introduced to the public in an effective way.

Most community members first heard about the idea from a New Orleans Advocate front-page story in mid-February, rather than through direct outreach.<sup>6</sup> That resulted in a lot of confusion and consternation – especially in Mid-City. Many residents believing the specific changes were about to be implemented permanently. Other residents said they felt betrayed because the RTA had not introduced the project to the community directly before the Advocate story. Others just didn't like the concept – denying there was a need to improve streetcar service, or saying the closure of street crossings or certain stops would be too disruptive or harmful to riders with mobility impairments. A small, but vocal group of opponents began attending every RTA meeting in the spring of 2019.

The RTA scrambled to put together an actual outreach plan and, without ever really establishing a clear engagement process, pulled the plug on the idea in April. The door was left open to restart the discussion after the New Links process is complete.



### RIDER PROFILE: SARAH DAVIS



“For the most part I like the Canal streetcar but it can be a headache. Often, it’s overcrowded, running late, slow, and/or unreliable. I would like to see the streetcar run more often, making less stops between Harrah’s and the Claiborne which is the area I think causes most of the delays. I wouldn’t even mind losing a few stops close to my house and walking if it meant my travel time went down.”

*Sarah Davis is an employee at Harrah’s in downtown New Orleans on Canal Street. She lives in Mid-City and makes the commute via streetcar to and from work every day.*

With the mistrust the botched rollout engendered, it may have been impossible to move forward at the time. But the decision by the RTA board to halt the conversation was still disappointing. The conversation about how to make existing transit service better – through road priority or stop spacing or other tools – is a critically important one.

It will be hard to establish the level of frequency, on-time performance, and reduced travel time that transit riders repeatedly say they need without at least targeted prioritization of transit vehicles on public roads. And while the discussion around stop consolidation and the appropriate distance between transit stops can be an emotional conversation, it's an important conversation that can have a real effect on reliability, frequency, and travel time.

By retreating from the conversation in its initial phases, the RTA missed an important opportunity to address both of these issues.

## RTA OPERATIONAL ISSUES

The lack of major progress improving system-wide connectivity and frequency is exacerbated by lingering RTA operational issues that adversely affect daily riders' quality-of-life and ability to rely on transit.

### *Unreliable ferry service*

RTA ferry operations have been inconsistent and unreliable for riders, and have grown worse in recent months. Ferry service has been suspended twice for a full day or longer in the last two months for maintenance repairs.

In early June 2019, one of the two boats that usually service Algiers Point/ Canal Street was taken out of operations because of an expiring Coast Guard certification. The second boat had several mechanical issues that hindered its ability to provide service. RTA operations staff decided it would be better to take the boat completely out of service for several days to address all the issues at once.

The gravity of these issues led to the firing of the general manager of ferry operations. One month later, the boats were again out of service for an entire day due to maintenance issues.

Meanwhile, two new boats purchased by the RTA have been sitting in drydock for more than a year because of unresolved disputes with the contracted builder Metal Shark. This, combined with the day-to-day delays, has eroded the public's trust in the agency's ability to provide ferry service. It also creates doubt that the new boats, once in service, will avoid similar issues.

### *RTA bus stop shelters*

The City of New Orleans changed regulations in May 2018 to make it easier for the RTA to install bus shelters. But riders have yet to see progress where it actually matters – the installation of new bus stops.

As of publication, only 264 of the 2,222 total stops in the RTA system – or 11.9 percent – have shelters, according to RTA records.

The RTA board approved the purchase of 50 new shelters in September 2018, but as of June 2019 only seven of these new shelters have been installed.

Even with a streamlined process, permitting approvals can be slow, making some delay understandable. But a lack of proactive communication about the delays has left riders in the dark. A clear and transparent plan for future shelter purchases and location prioritization also does not exist, adding to rider frustration.



## Communication “delayed”

In transit operations, it’s inevitable that something will go wrong at some point – a bus will break down, construction will mandate a detour, etc. Riders understand and accept that, but need reliable and detailed information to make informed choices about what to do next. The RTA has improved its communication from previous years and the GoMobile app has made a difference. However, the RTA still needs to implement information-sharing improvements.

Typical RTA digital communications on delays merely note, “There is a delay” on a particular route (see photo), never giving information on whether riders should expect a delay of a few minutes or much longer. This is better than nothing but leaves a lot to be desired.

The RTA’s Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) also rightly indicates that digital communication alone is not sufficient. One action item specifically calls for unplanned disruptions to be communicated at the stop level within two hours by 2019. The RTA says that a process has been put in place to accomplish this, but riders still complain that information is slow to arrive – if it does at all – at the stop level.

## On-time performance

In 2018, RTA buses were on time only 74 percent of the time. Streetcars performed even worse, arriving on time only 65 percent of the time. The problem appears to be worsening as well – 18 out of 39 routes had a worse on-time performance in 2018 than in 2016.

Improving on-time performance typically competes with increased frequency for the top rider improvement priority, so riders definitely notice this problem. When the majority of routes have a frequency of 30 minutes or greater, on-time performance is essential – a bus that is too early or very late can lead to a long wait at the stop or, even worse, a missed transfer down the line and a cascading set of delays.

The RTA SMP rightly identifies better reliability as a top priority – setting agency goals of 80 percent on-time performance by 2020 and 85 percent by 2022. The RTA has significant ground to make up to hit the first performance goal by the end of next year.

## Downtown transfer center issues

The RTA has identified building a true downtown transfer center – with shelter from the weather, bathroom facilities, information booths, and other features – as an agency priority for a number of years. The transfer center would replace the sprawling and confusing area that currently serves as a de facto hub – the block bordered by Canal Street, S. Rampart, Common/Tulane, and Elk Place. Thousands of riders travel through that area daily.

While RIDE applauds the focus on a new transfer center, there has been little attention to the current transfer area. There are still only two formal shelters with protection from the elements for bus riders. There are no bathroom facilities, nor is there any wayfinding signage to help riders figure out where to find connections to different parts of the region. Many riders report cleanliness and safety concerns.

The current state of the transfer area makes current riders feel disrespected. It neither encourages riders to continue using RTA and JeT services in the future or makes potential riders feel welcome. Focusing on basic improvements to make the area more pleasant could make a big difference in day-to-day rider quality of life.

Figure 15: Common RTA communication on delays



## RIDER PROFILE: DAVID GREEN



“I take paratransit to and from work using the RTA Lift subscription program. Depending on how many passengers there are on my paratransit ride my trip time can range from 30 minutes to 90

minutes. I think paratransit has improved and it works but we need to see continued improvements to both paratransit and fixed route services. Especially for people with disabilities including implementing voice capabilities to the GoMobile app to improve accessibility and mobility for myself and for all riders.”

*David Green is an employee at Lighthouse for the Blind located Uptown near Audubon Park. He lives in Mid-City and makes the commute to and from work every day via paratransit or bus.*

## RTA BY THE NUMBERS UPDATE

### *Vehicle revenue hours*

Recent trends have seen vehicle revenue hours (VRH) slowly progressing upward on an annual basis. However, VRH in 2018 slightly decreased, as bus VRH decreased by 2.3 percent - the first time slight annual decline in bus VRH since 2010. All other modes held steady or slightly increased.

In July 2019, the RTA board approved small service changes that will add frequency to the #63 New Orleans East Owl (late night bus), #64 Lake Forest and #65 Read Crowder in New Orleans East, and the #114 and #115 General De Gaulle buses in Algiers. Those changes will start in September 2019 and should help the 2019 VRH totals to increase.

### *Operating budget*

For 2019, the agency's budgeted expenses for daily operating expenses are \$100.6M, an increase of \$5.8M over the 2018 (unaudited) actuals. The 2019 budgeted expenses for daily operating expenses are an increase of \$4.6M over the 2018 budgeted expenses for daily operating expenses.

In addition, to the daily operating expenses, the RTA also must factor in two additional expenses outside of capital costs:

- *Annual pension costs for employees from the prior contractor – Transit Management of Southeast Louisiana, Inc. (TMSEL) (\$3.5M budgeted in 2019)*
- *Annual debt service costs to pay off bond that were raised for past projects like the Loyola/Rampart/St. Claude streetcar (\$14.8M budgeted in 2019)*

Since those expenses are ultimately considered part of the overall operating costs for the RTA, the true budgeted operating costs for the RTA in 2019 are \$118.8M. That is \$6.2M over the 2018 unaudited actuals.

The increase in budgeted expenses is due to several factors, including the effects of a full year of the changes associated with the #39 Tulane extension, annual increases in salary for staff - including drivers and mechanics - and budgeting for the cost uncertainties associated with the first months of the new public staff.

### *Operating revenue*

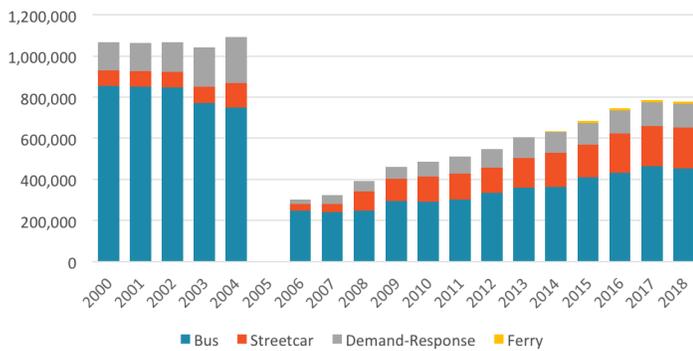
69 percent of the RTA's budgeted revenue comes from a city-collected sales tax. Farebox revenue makes up the next largest portion, followed by the RTA's portion of the Hotel/Motel tax (see Page 34), funding from the state motor vehicle sales tax, and assorted other small sources of revenue.

In addition, transit agencies typically receive "preventative maintenance" financial assistance via the federal government that can be used for maintenance that is typically associated with operational expenses. In 2019, the RTA budget assumes \$14.9M in this type of funding.

Overall, the operating budget is well below pre-Katrina spending. In 2004, total operating expenses were \$116.3M. When accounting for inflation using the Bureau of Labor and Statistics' CPI Inflation Calculator, the equivalent operating budget would be \$156.2M in 2019. That is a difference of \$39.9M.<sup>7</sup>

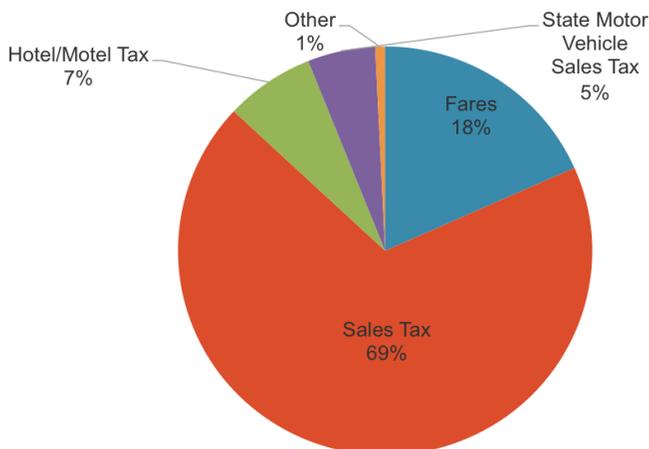


**Figure 16: VRH by mode**



Source: NTD 2000-2017 and Regional Transit Authority 2017 NTD Filings

**Figure 17: 2019 budgeted operating revenue sources**



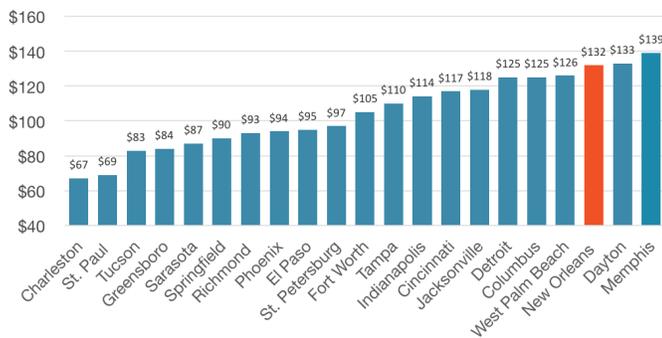
Source: RTA CY2019 Proposed Budget Statement of Revenue and Expenses

**Figure 18: Total operating expenses per VRH, 2017 - peer agencies**



Source: Urban Integrated National Transit Database and National Transit Database (NTD) 2017

**Figure 19: Bus operating expenses per VRH, 2017 - peer agencies**



Source: Urban Integrated National Transit Database and National Transit Database (NTD) 2017

**Table 6: Farebox recovery ratios, 2017**

Fare Recovery	RTA	US Average
Demand Response	2.9%	7.5%
Bus	18.0%	23.2%
Streetcar	22.1%	20.7%

Source: NTD 2017 and NTD 2017 National Transit Summary & Trends

## High cost of service

The high cost of service remains a concern. The RTA again ranks highest in total operating expenses per vehicle revenue hour among peer cities. Transit operations costs in New Orleans are still significantly more expensive than in comparable systems but the RTA has made attempts to reduce costs. The total operating expenses per VRH decreased to \$139 in 2017 from \$145 in 2016.

## Low farebox recovery

Among peer cities, the RTA's base fare - \$1.25 - is comparatively very low. Fares have not risen since 1999 and if keeping pace with inflation would be \$1.90 today.<sup>8</sup>

This is one reason for the RTA's low 'farebox recovery rate,' meaning passenger fares only supported 19.2% of the 2018 daily operating expense budget, just over half the national average of 35.0%.

In 2018, the RTA collected, on average, \$1.05 for every boarding. If fares had kept up with inflation, the RTA could have, hypothetically, collected as much as \$11.5M more to be used to for service increases. Collecting that revenue would of course be subject to many different variables in real-life, so the true number might be much lower. But there clearly would be more additional revenue, demonstrating one effect that lower-than-average fares have on local transit service.

However, those lower-than-average fares also have a positive effect on equity. In a city and region with high poverty rates, a low fare rate has enormous importance. Any fare increase could hurt equitable access for our most vulnerable residents. Therefore, before any consideration of a fare structure shift is seriously considered, decision makers must also present a plan to show how low-income residents would be protected. We can't fund service increases on the backs of low-income residents.

In considering future strategies, it's important to note that an RTA discounted fare program already exists to build upon. Currently, seniors and individuals with disabilities are able to buy individual rides for \$0.40 - a \$0.85 discount from the regular rates.

## Ridership drops

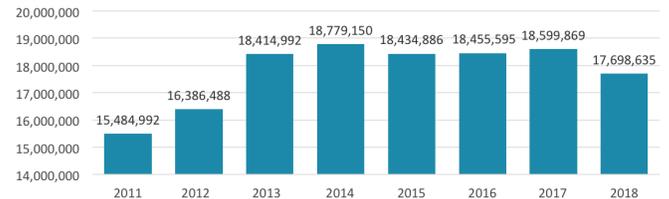
Downward national trends caught up with the RTA last year, with the first ridership losses since 2015. In 2018 ridership dropped by 901,234 boardings or a 4.8% decline. The total number of 17,698,635 boardings is the lowest since 2012.

Only four RTA routes that saw improved ridership in 2018:

- *The #15 Freret – continuing its strong performance after the RTA returned the route’s terminus at the major Canal Street transfer point – had 12,359 additional boardings, a 10.4 percent increase.*
- *The #114 Gen. De Gaulle - Sullen line had 14,007 additional boardings, a 3.9 percent increase.*
- *The #106 Aurora – serving Algiers during the AM and PM peak – had 1,179 additional boardings, a 2.8 percent increase.*
- *The #60 Haynes – running from New Orleans East to Delgado Community College – had 421 additional boardings, a 0.3 percent increase.*

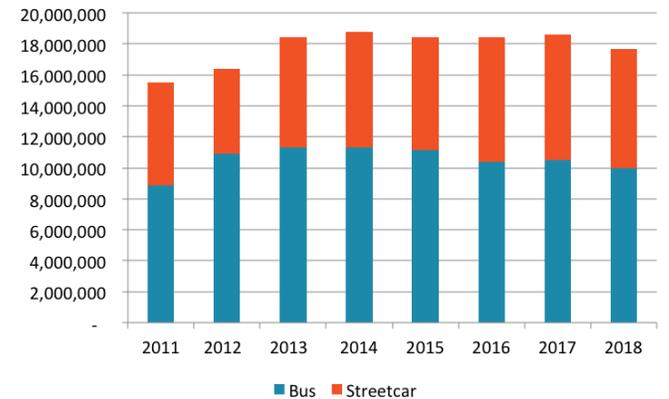
While the ridership decline is troubling, there is reason for optimism in the future. A number of factors including a tradition of transit usage, a high carless rate, walkable neighborhoods, and a higher propensity for transit usage in the general population provide a strong opportunity to grow ridership. Cities that have bucked the nationwide negative ridership trend have recently redesigned transit networks, have invested in additional service, or done both. The New Links network redesign gives the New Orleans region the opportunity to do the first and set up a plan for the second.

Figure 20: Total annual RTA boardings



Source: Regional Transit Authority

Figure 21: Total RTA boardings by mode



Source: Regional Transit Authority

### Transit and health care access

Reliable and affordable public transportation enables residents to access to a range of health-promoting destinations, including:

- Facilities that offer primary or specialty healthcare services
- Pharmacies
- Safe and welcoming spaces for physical activity, such as parks, recreation facilities, and other green space
- Businesses or organizations that offer healthy and affordable foods
- Employers, schools, churches, and other locations that contribute to economic opportunity and social cohesion

In both the health and transportation sectors, there is increasing awareness of the mutual benefits of having a transit system that considers the region’s health. The RTA Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) goal to “support a sustainable, healthy region” is an important acknowledgement of the need for both sectors to work closer together.

Since lower-income residents are more likely to rely on public transportation to get around, our transit system can play an important role in tackling health inequities and ensuring that all New Orleanians have the opportunity to be healthy.

The Greater New Orleans region continues to exhibit poor health outcomes, such as high rates of heart disease and obesity, in spite of 89% of households in Orleans Parish residing within 30 minutes of transit access to community health centers. This may be partially explained by the well-established fact that much of what affects an individual’s health happens outside of a doctor’s office. Additionally, while the number of community health centers greatly increased in the years following Hurricane Katrina, and these centers provide access to much-needed primary care, many of the chronic conditions prevalent in the region also require engagement with specialty care. With much of the region’s specialty care provided by hospitals, enhancing access to hospitals via transit could help meet riders’ health needs.

## TRANSIT CAN BUILD A HEALTHIER REGION

Two of the more innovative metrics in the RTA’s 2017 Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) are intended to measure and plan improvements to New Orleans region residents’ access to health care. Those two metrics are:

- Percentage of households in the RTA service area within 30 minutes by transit of a major hospital during typical office hours. This target is important because it measures equitable access to specialists that often cluster at major hospitals. The target in the SMP is 80% by 2022.
- Percentage of households in the RTA service area within 30 minutes by transit of a community health center by 2022

**Table 7: Households transit access to healthcare facilities within 30 minutes or less**

Parish	Total Households	Able to reach a healthcare facility in 30 minutes			
		Hospital		Clinic	
		#	%	#	%
Jefferson Parish	168,786	58,747	35%	97,235	58%
Orleans Parish	154,895	99,401	64%	135,994	88%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>323,681</b>	<b>158,148</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>233,229</b>	<b>72%</b>

Source: RTA, Jefferson Transit, OpenStreetMap, US Census Bureau: LODS (2015). Map Data: US Census Bureau, OpenStreetMap Contributors; Ride New Orleans Analysis

The community health center goal has already been met – 89 percent of households within the RTA’s service area are within 30 minutes of a health center by transit. However, only 65 percent of households within the RTA’s service area can access a major hospital and its associated specialists in 30 minutes-or-less.

The map on the opposite page (Figure 22) shows where many of the gaps exist. Pre-existing equity issues – like the lack of major hospitals on the downriver side of Canal Street – play a role in creating the gaps, but the New Links network redesign process can help by rethinking the transit network in the following areas:

- New Orleans East neighborhoods like Little Woods where residents can drive to New Orleans East Hospital in relatively little time but can’t access it in 30 minutes-or-less on transit
- Multiple areas of Gentilly that lack frequent service to the New Orleans CBD and other key destinations
- Most areas of the Lower Ninth Ward and Holy Cross neighborhoods
- Most of Algiers.

In addition, the New Links plan should look at how to increase access to healthcare facilities for transit-reliant Jefferson Parish residents. While the Jefferson Transit strategic plan does not specifically reference this, JeT riders—particularly those without other transportation alternatives—would benefit from better access to healthcare facilities. Currently, only 35 percent of Jefferson Parish residents can reach a major hospital in 30 minutes-or-less via transit.

Figure 22: Travel time to nearest hospital on public transit and walking

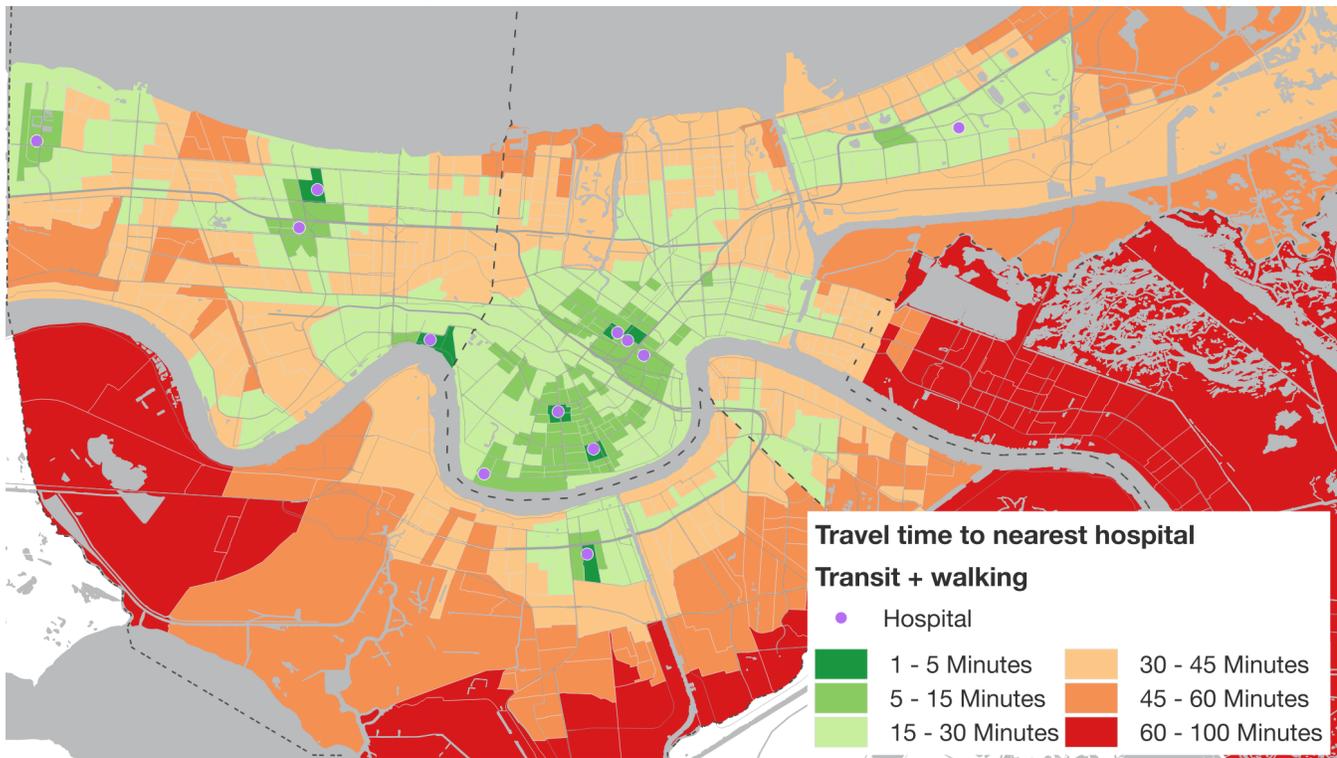
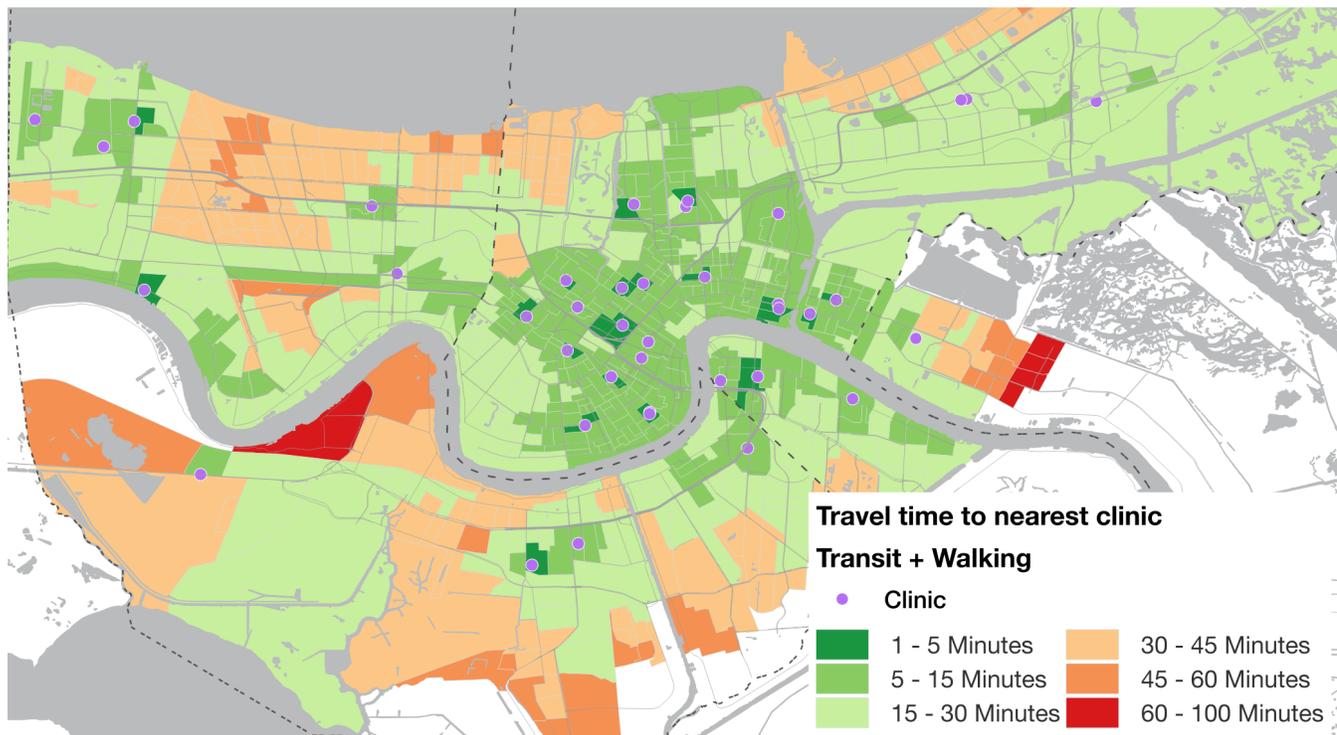


Figure 23: Travel time to nearest community clinic on public transit and walking



Source: RTA, Jefferson Transit, OpenStreetMap, US Census Bureau: LODES (2015). Map Data: US Census Bureau, OpenStreetMap Contributors; Ride New Orleans Analysis

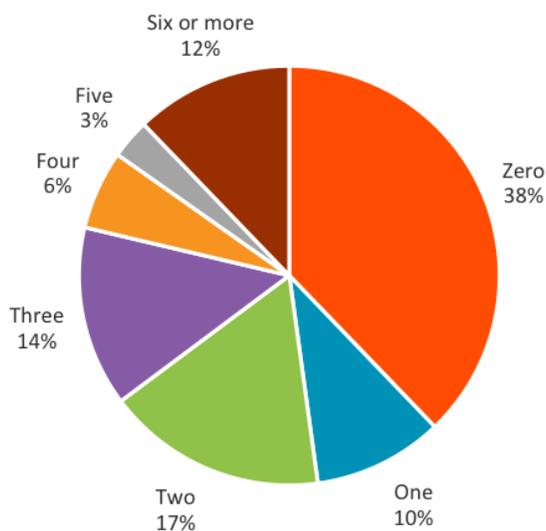
# DOWNTOWN HOTEL WORKER SPOTLIGHT

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Greater New Orleans  
Hotel & Lodging  
Association

Figure 24: Number of times hotel workers late, within previous month



Source: Ride New Orleans Hotel Worker Survey 2019

## Transit challenges for hotel workers

In 2019, Ride New Orleans partnered with the Greater New Orleans Hotel and Lodging Association to survey the transportation needs and experiences of the hotel industry workforce. Over 500 hotel workers from 32 different hotels in the French Quarter and New Orleans CBD took the survey. 48 percent of the survey takers said they regularly commuted to work via public transit – demonstrating how important effective transit service is for the industry.

The New Orleans hospitality and tourism industry is an important driver of the local economy, and employs over 72,000 people – 12% of the area’s total workforce. Unfortunately, the report findings show that, similar to other industries, unreliable transit service greatly impacts workforce reliability:

- 62% percent of transit riders were late to work at least once within the previous month because of unreliable transit.
- More than 1/3 of transit riders were late three times or more.
- 12% of transit riders were late six times or more within the previous month.

Like transit-reliant riders in general, the transit-reliant hotel industry workforce is at a disadvantage when compared to employees with access to a personal vehicle.

- The average “door to door” commute time for transit riders is 46-minutes - twice the average New Orleans commute time
- Nearly one of every three transit riders has a one-way commute of 60-minutes-or-longer
- 76% of employees who are reliant on public transit are “time-burdened” – defined as having a one-way commute time of 30-minutes-or-more.

## Importance of Elk Place/Canal transfer area

During their daily trips, two out of three transit-reliant hospitality workers travel through the main transfer site at Elk Place at Canal. This is where the majority of buses from New Orleans East and the West Bank unload passengers.

While there are transit options from the Elk Place transfer point to the French Quarter and CBD (primarily the Canal Street streetcar lines), 68 percent of these riders say they walk from the transfer site.

In recent years, various RTA and City stakeholders have discussed building a more traditional transit center to better serve regional transit riders. The high number of riders who walk to work from the current transfer point illustrates the importance of location in the discussion. Any decision to move the location of the transit center needs to take that into account and not inadvertently make life harder for transit riders and add time to their commute by making it more difficult or impossible to walk to work.

## Hotel workforce improvement priorities

At the end of the survey, we asked all hospitality workers to prioritize their most important transit improvements. Their top priorities are ranked below in descending order of importance:

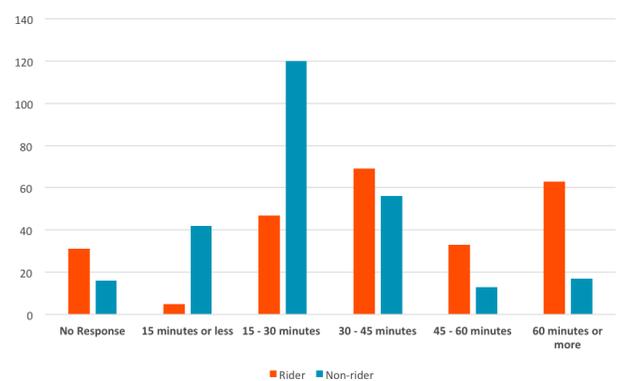
1. More frequent transit service
2. More reliable, on-time service, including better coordinated transfers
3. Better early morning, late-night, and weekend service
4. Better customer service and an improved overall rider experience

Table 8: Mode transit riders use to and from Elk Place transfer hub

Mode	Count	Percent
Walk	100	67.57
Bus	24	16.22
Streetcar	20	13.51
Bike	1	0.68
Ferry	1	0.68
Lyft or Uber	1	0.68
Multiple modes	1	0.68

Source: Ride New Orleans Hotel Worker Survey 2019

Figure 25: Hotel worker commute times, transit riders and non-transit riders



Source: Ride New Orleans Hotel Worker Survey 2019

# Getting It Right

## New Links regional transit network redesign timeline:

- **Phase I (January – July 2019):** Introduce the basis process; community engagement and education; rider origin/destination survey; internal data analysis
- **Phase II (August – December 2019):** Draft different network scenarios that show potential changes to the regional transit network; present and receive feedback during a second round of community engagement
- **Phase III (First Quarter 2020):** Utilizing community feedback, data analysis, and transit agency priorities, propose specific changes to the regional transit network and present those to transit agencies for approval

The RTA and Jefferson Transit have made important steps forward on addressing governance and long-term planning issues and have implemented an important regional connection – the extension of the #39 Tulane across parish lines.

But in too many cases key elements of a thriving regional transit system – connectivity and reasonable travel time, high frequency and reliable on-time performance, and consistent day-to-day quality amenities – are still lacking.

With the expected completion of the New Links planning process in early 2020, regional decision makers have an important opportunity to fulfill promises they have made during recent planning efforts.

No one should be under the illusion that it will be easy – it will take focus, determination, and concentrated political support. But decision makers have the chance in the next year to secure a legacy as champions for equitable transit.

When we look back one year from now, Ride New Orleans will be focused on whether decision makers have been able to:

- *Start implementation of a redesign of the regional transit network to increase equitable access to jobs and opportunity*
- *Leverage the New Links process to forge regional agreement on new regional transit routes and increased cooperation and coordination*
- *Make continued steps forward on basic rider experience/quality-of-life issues*
- *Leverage the New Links process to craft a vision to increase revenue to pay for enhanced service in the next five years.*

## IMPLEMENT A NETWORK REDESIGN

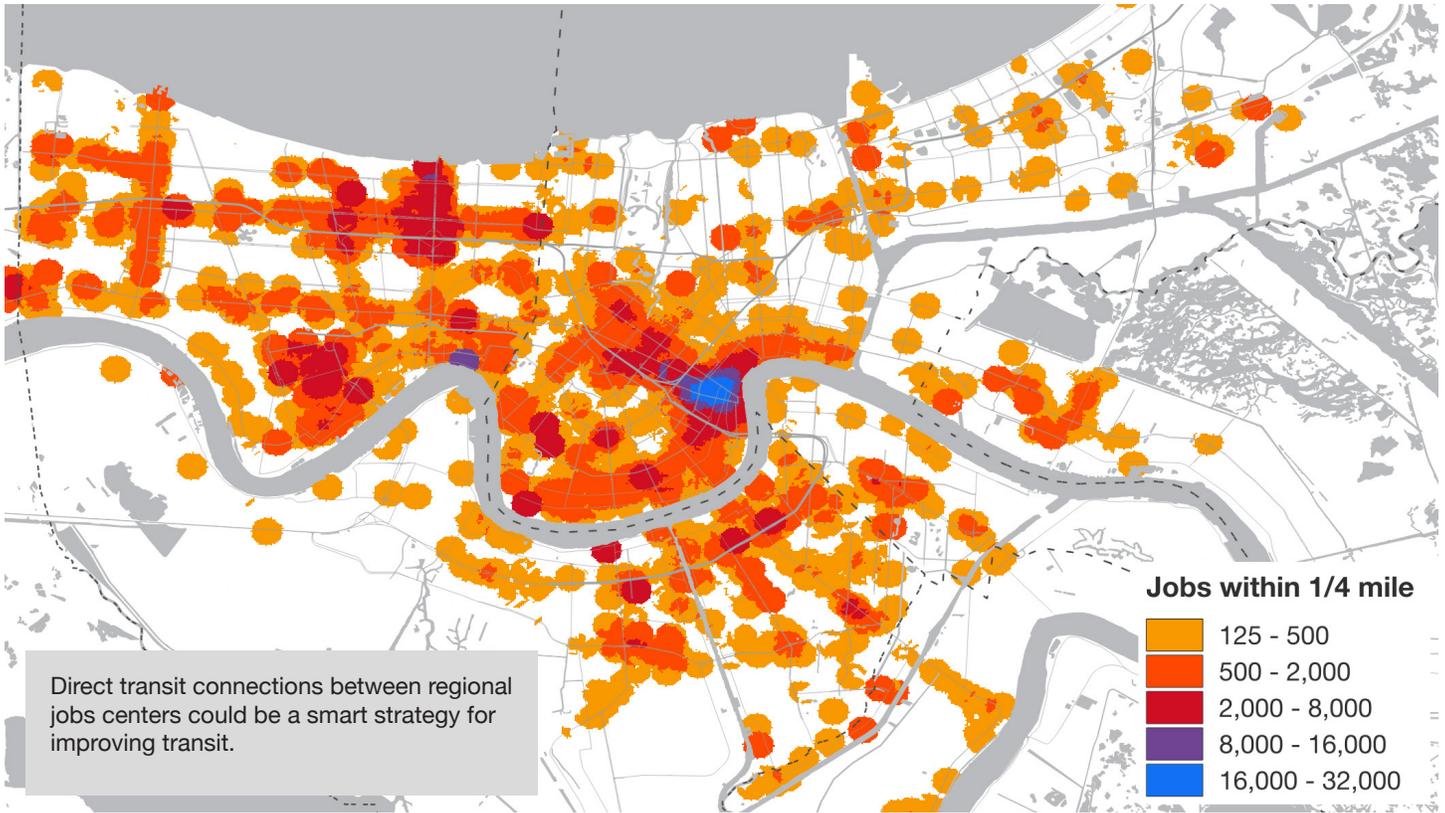
The basic concept of a network redesign is for a transit agency, a city, or a region to rethink where bus lines go and how to prioritize resources, starting from a clean slate. It's premised on the acknowledgement that the current transit system is not adequately meeting the goals of the system. Those goals could be access to destinations, travel time, frequency, reliability, better serving marginalized communities, or a combination therein.

Furthermore, a network redesign process acknowledges that due to finite resources, an agency needs to rethink how to spend available dollars in order to accomplish its goals.

As Ride New Orleans has consistently detailed – and the RTA's Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) confirms – our transit network does not provide the reliable, widespread access to jobs and opportunities that the region's residents and businesses need. Raising additional operating revenue is an important priority but unlikely in the short-term. Thus, there is a clear need to better allocate existing resources through a network redesign process.

While the need for a network redesign is clear, regional decision makers need to understand that implementation will not be simple. As the Canal Street pilot concept showed earlier this year, discussions around changing transit service or priorities on public streets can be controversial. Some may view new ideas with skepticism or suspicion. That is especially true in the local context where many in the community do not trust transit officials – especially at the RTA.

**Figure 26: Regional job centers and employment density**



Source: New Orleans Regional Planning Commission (RPC)

The need for transit improvements is great enough that Ride New Orleans believes the network redesign could be one of the most important decisions to be made on regional transit this decade. To ensure that it moves forward with community support and is not watered down to the point of ineffectiveness, we urge decision makers to maintain a focus on the following important items:

- 1. Consider scenarios that make transit more frequent, reliable, and less time-burdened, even if it means moving bus stops, changing where transit lines go, or creating additional transfers.**

Transit planners and regional decision makers should be open to all ideas and not dismiss anything out of hand based on their own assumptions of what is politically feasible. Many other regions have shown that implementing big changes to transit networks can yield significant benefits. Planners must be encouraged to keep all options on the table as New Links moves into its second phase this fall. That’s not to say that all of these changes ultimately have to be implemented, but riders and the public need to have the full range of options on the table as New Links planners ask the community to consider tangible changes.

## RIDER PROFILE: SEBRINA HILLARD



“I think transit in the east needs to improve—there’s no connectivity. All the buses from the east have to go to Elk and Canal and must transfer. I work in the Marigny and there are no connections to or through the Ninth Ward. We need to rethink how our bus lines connect to different neighborhoods. If

we redesign our transit lines it could greatly decrease my overall travel time—that would be ideal because what we have now is convoluted and infrequent.”

*Sebrina Hillard works in the Marigny and commutes from her home in New Orleans East via bus to and from work every day. She is a RIDE board member.*

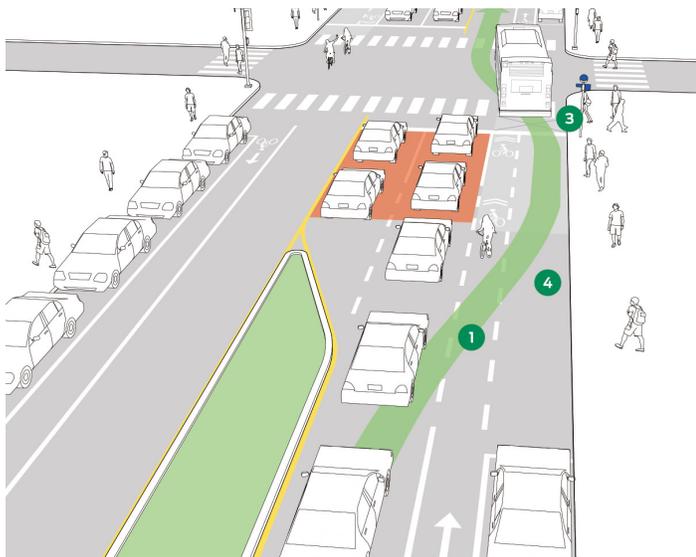
## 2. Determine where transit priority on roads can have the most effect

Identifying specific areas where transit vehicles are constantly delayed by traffic and implementing solutions to reduce transit delays in those areas could pay big dividends for riders with very little cost. Solutions like traffic signal priority for buses and streetcars, bus-priority lanes on the highway, or bus only lanes at busy intersections can result in service improvements and time savings for riders. However, it will require a serious coordination between agencies and careful work with neighborhoods. The Canal Street pilot shows that discussions around priority on public streets must be deliberate and well-planned.

## 3. Send help where help is needed the most

RIDE data shows that Algiers and New Orleans East residents can only reach 26 and 21 percent of the region's jobs in 60 minutes-or-less, respectively. 66 percent of Jefferson Parish residents can't reach the New Orleans CBD in less than an hour via transit. Areas with high ridership and high need for transit but where riders are particularly time-burdened are the areas that a transit network redesign can help the most. Planners must present options that imagine big network changes – and big improvements – for transit-reliant residents in these areas.

Figure 27: Transit priority on the roadway



Giving transit vehicles priority in certain areas – for example at congested intersections with bus queue jumps – can increase reliability and frequency.

Source: National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO)

## 4. Use New Links to determine future spending priorities

While a network redesign should be revenue-neutral, the JeT and RTA strategic plans both made it clear that more operational revenue is needed. New Links can help set this up in two ways. First, it can ensure taxpayers that both agencies are using existing resources as cost-effectively as possible. Second, it can help prioritize what service enhancements will be the priority when new revenue is identified. Planners should consider both the natural growth of existing revenue sources like the RTA's sales tax as well as envisioning a larger package of enhancements to be at the core of a future push for new revenue sources.

## 5. Use New Links to push for increased regional connectivity

See the next section for elaboration.

## 6. Continued strong public engagement and outreach around New Links

Change is a political impossibility without extensive community engagement that builds trust and belief in the process. Transit riders are willing to accept change, but need to understand why the change is happening and how it's going to benefit them. Outreach that clearly explains the benefits of significant change is essential for community buy in for a significant network redesign.

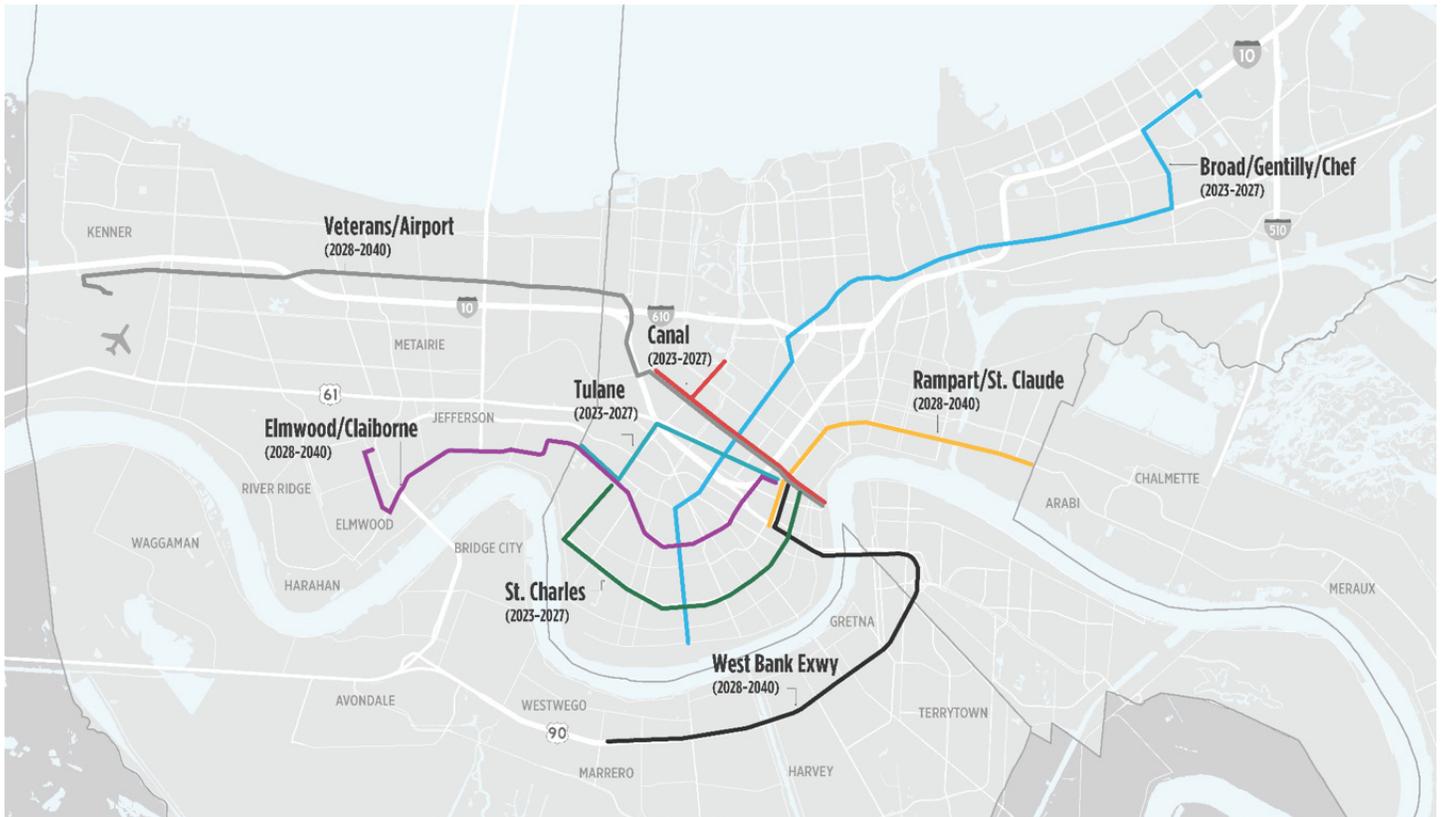
# INCREASE REGIONAL COORDINATION

Big jumps in access to economic opportunity via transit requires moving beyond our current balkanized regional public transportation system. The region must provide seamless transit options between Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard parishes. A regional economy demands true regional transit connectivity.

With each parish effectively operating its own, separate system, current riders must deal with inefficiencies and inconveniences that add significant time and cost. Routes frequently end at jurisdictional boundaries instead of major destinations or logical transfer points. Even with the Regional Ride pass, riders going between parishes still often pay the equivalent of two full fares for what might be a simple 15-minute trip in a car. Branding, marketing, and communication are completely separate, leading to inconvenience for existing riders and confusion for new riders.

The New Links process can start to put an end to this by proposing the direct regional connections transit riders need. With each agency constrained by limited funding, New Links can also make proactive suggestions on how to share responsibilities and resources for regional lines to provide the greatest improvements in access and service.

**Figure 28: The RTA SMP identified needed regional and high-capacity transit corridors**



Source: Regional Transit Authority “Strategic Mobility Plan: Mobility Options and Corridors”

The RTA SMP used regional travel data and travel-demand modeling to highlight the need for several high frequency routes. The New Links team may have additional suggestions, but, based on the SMP, it’s clear that better regional connectivity is needed in at least the following corridors:

- *Veterans/Canal/Tulane (connecting the Veterans corridor and New Orleans CBD)*
- *West Bank Expressway (connecting both parishes on the West Bank and providing rapid access to the New Orleans CBD)*
- *Jefferson Highway/S Claiborne/Tulane (where the #39 Tulane was recently extended and where we could create a direct transit connection from Elmwood with over 20,000 jobs to New Orleans CBD)*
- *Airport to New Orleans CBD*
- *Chalmette to New Orleans CBD.*

Even with strong proposals from New Links, political will and leadership will be key. New Links will only be a proposal – the transit agencies and parish governments will have to formally implement it.

True regional integration may also be worth discussing. Certainly, there is a case to be made that integration can save significant money for both Jefferson and Orleans parishes. Even if that is not feasible in the short-term, there are plenty of intermediate steps - unified branding, joint operation of lines, and further technological and mechanical integration - that could make service cheaper overall and easier for riders to use.



Riders wait for the bus at the main downtown transfer area in July 2019.

## RIDER QUALITY-OF-LIFE IMPROVEMENTS

New Links and comprehensive improvements are critical, but it's important to remember that riders need to see quality-of-life improvements as well. Few and ineffective bus shelters, poorly marked bus stops, unsafe conditions, and poor communication with riders are among the many complaints the region's transit riders regularly voice – especially those using RTA services.

Riders deserve a dignified and respectful experience when they take transit – that's reason enough to prioritize improvements. But making transit easier to take and more pleasant can also attract new riders. That's a necessity for continued growth and further development of a strong regional constituency for transit.

Additionally, quality-of-life improvements can build up a reservoir of good faith and trust from current riders. That will be important for the RTA in the next few years as they ask riders to support potential changes to the transit network and as the region looks for new revenue to support transit.

A few selected quality-of-life focus areas that would make a difference include:

- **Communication with riders:** Better communication around unexpected and expected delays – both via digital methods like the RTA's GoMobile app and physically at stops – would go a long way toward reducing rider frustration and making it easier to navigate the system when things don't go as planned. Jefferson Transit will soon have real-time tracking technology similar to the RTA so there is also an opportunity to provide more unified regional transit information digitally.
- **More bus stop shelters:** As noted in the previous section, riders are frustrated by the slow pace of putting up new bus stop shelters. While many of the delays are due to policies outside the direct control of the RTA, the RTA can make a big difference by creating a clear policy around future bus stop shelter installation. Communicating the priority list for shelter installation, how that list is put together, annual targets for new shelter installation, and recent progress are all smart ideas that will improve the day-to-day rider experience.
- **Downtown transfer hub improvements:** While RTA and City officials have often talked in recent years about building a state-of-the-art transfer hub facility, the existing downtown transfer area (the area bounded by Canal and Common/Tulane and Elk Place and S Rampart) has been neglected. While any decision on major infrastructure investments will have to come in coordination with the New Links network redesign process, a short-term focused effort to put up more shelters, wayfinding signage, and improve perceptions of cleanliness and safety in the area would improve the daily rider experience.

## INCREASE REVENUE FOR REGIONAL TRANSIT

Finally, our region must find new revenue for expanded operations. The RTA SMP called for more than doubling the annual operations budget to achieve its ambitious goals. That level of revenue increase may not be politically feasible – at least in one referendum or appropriation – but it shows that more revenue is a necessity.

### *Hotel tax*

While the RTA is supposed to get one penny of sales tax for every dollar spent in New Orleans, the original 1985 referendum to establish that sales tax excluded hotels, due to an interpretation of state law at the time. In the 1990s, the RTA argued that the 1974 Louisiana State Constitution permitted the collection of sales tax from hotels and went to court to try and secure the additional revenue.<sup>9</sup> Many observers believed the RTA was in position to win that case, but, before it was decided, then-New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial brokered an agreement between the RTA and the local tourism industry. The two sides agreed that the RTA would get approximately ½ of the hotel/motel sales tax\* and the New Orleans Tourism and Marketing Corporation (NOTMC) and the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center would split the other half. NOTMC agreed to use its share to promote RTA service and the Convention Center's share was intended to support Phase IV of Convention Center expansion.

This year RTA announced that they believed the agreement violated the original intent of the 1985 referendum and that the other agencies weren't living up to the agreement that money would be spent promoting transit and toward Phase IV of Convention Center (which was put on hold in 2007).<sup>10</sup> Based on that interpretation, the RTA said they would no longer pass along money as part of the agreement. (The formal mechanism for revenue distribution is that the sales tax revenue comes from the City to the RTA. Per the Morial-era agreement, the RTA is then supposed to pass along the tourism industry portion.)

The issue had not been resolved as of the press time for this report. Tourism officials say the agreement is still valid and that they are owed the money. As part of the May 2019 infrastructure agreement forged with the state legislature, NOTMC would be dissolved and its functions and staff would be absorbed by New Orleans and Company (formally the Convention and Visitor's Bureau (CVB), the umbrella group for New Orleans tourism promotion), so it's also unclear what would happen to the ¼ cent that had been earmarked for NOTMC if that plan is implemented.

Current estimates are that the additional ½ cent in sales tax could mean as much as \$6 million in additional annual revenue for the RTA.

### *Next five years*

The additional hotel sales tax revenue is important. It could be critical for the RTA and regional transit – especially if it can be deployed as part of an increase in service associated with the rollout of a network redesign. That can help to maximize the potential of the network redesign and potentially ease the transition for some low-ridership lines.

But that increased revenue by itself won't be enough. And while a network redesign will mean a significant increase in transit utility for riders and a stronger base to build on, it won't be enough by itself to build the kind of transit service that can close our equity gap and provide the workforce access to opportunity that can make a difference for our regional economy.

Both the RTA and JeT strategic plans make the case for the need to expand services – and both acknowledge that will require increased revenue.

The RTA board as well as elected officials in Jefferson and Orleans parishes must make this a priority to accomplish in the next five years. New Links should be used to not only redesign the regional transit network, but set a clear list of priorities for future expansion. Following the completion of New Links, transit decision makers should use that document to put together a strategy to go to voters with a request for new transit revenue to implement expanded service.

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\*The agreement states that the RTA receives 60 percent of the hotel sales tax up to \$7.2 million and 40 percent of revenue after that.

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