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Ride New Orleans New Links post-Phase II recommendations

Executive Summary

In a time when racial and social inequalities have become ever more glaring, the New Links regional transit network redesign can secure important local progress on transportation equity. Done right, New Links will offer greatly improved transit to a majority African American regional ridership that continues to fight significant economic and social struggles.

By changing where bus lines go and how and when they come, New Links will make our regional bus system – currently beset by a number of flaws – significantly more usable for existing and future transit riders. This can be done within the confines of the existing budget. But to make sure that happens, the right changes need to be implemented and the right tradeoffs must be carefully considered and chosen.

As the New Links team prepares a formal proposal to be released later this year to the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) and Jefferson Transit (JeT), Ride New Orleans offers the following recommendations intended to ensure both the right policy choices and the strong coalition need to get those policies implemented. Our recommendations are broken down into two sections: First, a list of four “must-haves” for any network redesign, followed by a second tier of recommendations that would greatly enhance the quality of the network redesign and public faith in the process.

Our four essential recommendations are:

1. Maximize the amount of jobs and lower-income households within ½ mile of frequent transit.
 - Buses that come every 15 minutes-or-less, seven days a week mean more flexibility and options for the riders who need it most. The New Links network redesign must, above all, prioritize increasing the number of lower-income households within a 10-minute walk of high frequency transit, while preserving, where possible, existing entry points into the system.
 2. Ratify and implement tangible and significant steps toward much greater regional connectivity and coordination.
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- The region can't provide equitable access via transit to jobs and services without real regional transit. To be considered a success, New Links at a minimum must bring clear improvements to regional transit connectivity and coordination.
3. Ratify and implement big steps in access to high frequency transit and reduced travel time for West Bank and New Orleans East riders
 - New Orleans East and the West Bank have both growing transit needs and outdated and inefficient route designs. That means New Links could bring proportionally much bigger benefits for both regions. This is an important opportunity our region cannot miss.
 4. Propose a tiered approach to the New Links redesign
 - The COVID 19 emergency means that transit budgets – especially the RTA's – might be smaller for the next few years. That means a tiered New Links proposal, with options for phased-in improvements is necessary to ensure that we have a clear path for an improved transit system over the next few years.

Our five additional suggestions to maximize the network redesign are:

- Consider a policy of transit stops every three to four blocks for high frequency routes, but make sure there's flexibility where needed
- A redesigned network with shorter routes and more transfers could be the key to success – if the New Links team can effectively demonstrate to riders that transfer wait times would be shorter than they currently are
- The New Links team, the RTA, and Jefferson Transit should all release a clear timeline for next steps so the public understands the path forward after the release of the formal proposal
- Fix the remaining connectivity gaps downtown – especially between uptown buses and the main transfer area – which were not addressed in the concepts phase of New Links.
- Only reduce frequency to achieve better on-time performance as a last resort.

A detailed discussion of each of these recommendations follows in the attached report.

New Links Background

After over a year of community conversation, the New Links regional transit network redesign is nearing completion. Started in early 2019, New Links is an incredibly important process for the future of our transit system and was a key recommendation of the RTA's 2017 Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP). The redesign is intended to make transit work better for today's riders through changes to the regional transit network in the next few years.

The second phase of the New Links process – lasting from February 2020 through June 2020 – introduced three different conceptual redesigns of the region's transit networks. The concepts were intended to show the public and stakeholders what a redesigned network would look like if we focused on three different priorities. Those three different priorities were better on-time performance, increased frequency on multiple routes, and greatly improved regional connectivity.

After gathering community input on each concept, the New Links team is now utilizing that feedback to create a formal proposal, scheduled to be delivered to the RTA and JeT later this year.

To ensure the strongest proposal with the greatest possibility of successful implementation, Ride New Orleans offers the following recommendations to the New Links team and regional decision makers. These recommendations are based on our internal analysis of the concepts, feedback from RIDE's monthly transit rider meetings, input from members of RIDE's Policy Committee, and conversations with other allies and stakeholders throughout the region.

Three important general concepts frame our recommendations:

1. *There is not enough revenue to do everything we want to do right now.* In an ideal world we might not have to consider tradeoffs, but as 2020 has reminded us all repeatedly, we do not live in an ideal world. Every decision we can make – even sticking with the status quo because we are concerned about change – is a tradeoff. We do not think the status quo is acceptable for the vast majority of transit riders so we continue to be outspoken in support of the need for a community-driven network redesign process that finishes with a clear and implementable plan.
2. *Instead of focusing on specific route changes in this report, we are more interested in establishing the principles to guide decisions on route changes.* While RIDE and the entire community should take a detailed look at the formal proposal, right now we think it's important to allow the New Links planners to utilize their professional expertise in transit planning. But that expertise should be guided by clear expectations and principles.
3. *While there are many goals that we want to see achieved, the most important goal is to reliably decrease travel time for transit riders – especially lower-*

incomes riders and historically marginalized communities. A 2015 Harvard study called commute time the single most important factor in helping families to escape poverty¹. RIDE’s 2019 analysis shows that the average New Orleans transit rider can only reach 12 percent of the region’s jobs in 30 minutes-or-less, while the average New Orleanian with a car can reach 89 percent of the region’s jobs in that same 30-minute time period. With that stark disparity clear in our thoughts, our recommendations are first and foremost based on what we think will be most effective in achieving reductions in average commute times across the board for the largest number of transit riders in need.

We have divided the following recommendations into two sections.

First, we go over the “must-haves,” the items that any redesign absolutely must have:

- Maximize the amount of jobs and lower-income households within ½ mile of frequent transit
- Tangible and implementable steps toward much greater regional connectivity
- Big steps in access to high frequency transit and reduced travel time for West Bank and New Orleans East riders
- A tiered approach to the New Links redesign.

Following those “must-haves” we offer additional suggestions for consideration that we believe will make the redesign more likely to succeed.

Must-haves in a network redesign

1. Maximize the amount of jobs, lower-income households, and communities of color within ½ mile of frequent transit

From an equity perspective, simply having a bus stop is not good enough if the bus serving that line is not reliable for large portions of the day or week.

The average New Orleanian with a car can reach 89 percent of the region’s jobs in 30 minutes-or-less, but the average New Orleanian who is reliant on transit can only reach 12 percent of the jobs in the same 30-minute time period. With the majority of current transit riders coming from lower-income communities and communities of color, this is a clearly inequitable situation.

One of the big reasons for the discrepancy is that while the regional transit system generally has some level of coverage in most neighborhoods, the majority of those bus lines do not come very often – especially outside of the AM or PM peak period. That

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/07/upshot/transportation-emerges-as-crucial-to-escaping-poverty.html>

means while it is *technically* possible to take transit to get to many destinations, *practically* it is impossible to get to most of those destinations in a reasonable amount of time. That means transit-reliant individuals – mostly African American and coming from lower-income communities – in effect cannot reach many employment and educational opportunities. This is especially true for riders in areas like New Orleans East and the West Bank that are further from major jobs centers.

The way to solve this problem is to maximize the number of high frequency (every 15 minutes-or-less, 18-24 hours a day, seven days a week) transit lines within a reasonable walk of the greatest number of lower-income households, with an equitable spread throughout the region. Those lines should also then be within a reasonable walk of the greatest number of jobs, with a top tier focus on the biggest jobs centers of the region (the New Orleans CBD, Metairie, Elmwood, for starters).

New Links Phase II defined the ideal walk to high frequency transit as $\frac{1}{4}$ miles – a five-minute walk for the average person. RIDE appreciates that definition and agrees that it is the ideal, but we worry that at this point the region lacks the resources to do the ideal. So, in the interest of making sure we reach as many households in need as possible, we suggest changing the measurement to also measure lower-income households within $\frac{1}{2}$ mile - a 10-minute walk for the average person.

Preserving existing levels of access, where possible

An often-discussed tradeoff is the idea of some riders walking a little further in return for more frequent service. This is a necessary tradeoff to consider: if you can move buses from lower-ridership lines to nearby lines on major corridors that are used by more riders, you will be able to increase frequency for riders overall, which will directly benefit lower-income riders by reducing their commute time.

But the devil is in the details. You can increase the walking distance to a point that it becomes impossible for individuals with mobility challenges to walk to a transit stop. At another point, it becomes impossible even for individuals with no mobility challenges to walk to a transit stop.

Additionally, even if few people use a particular bus stop and another bus stop is only several blocks away, some people may feel they are losing something if the bus stop is moved. That can lead to complaints and growing political pressure against a redesign implementation.

We recommend trying to minimize these potential issues through the following areas:

- First, wherever possible, try to preserve existing bus stops, even if the service levels at those bus stops needs to be reduced because relatively nearby lines are seeing frequency increases. That will preserve the lifeline function of transit for those who may not be able to walk further and reduce hyper-local

conversations about individual bus stops that could detract from the redesign as a whole. The well-known Houston Metro network redesign which brought major changes to Houston's entire system was still able to boast that 94 percent of riders could still access bus at same spot. The closer a New Links proposal gets to a similar figure, the more likely success is.

- Second, where elimination of lines or stops are necessary in order to create critical high frequency lines that will benefit larger communities or the entire network, don't shy away from recommending elimination. But ensure that stops where service is being eliminated are still within a ½ mile walking distance of existing transit. Again, we look to the successful Houston Metro network redesign that was able to promise that all but 0.05 percent of existing stop locations would still be within a ½ mile of stops in the redesigned network.
- Finally, the New Links team should make it clear that they are not taking a one-size-fits-all approach but rather will take into account areas of higher concentration of individuals with mobility challenges or areas with particularly subpar pedestrian conditions. If a particular line or stop has lower ridership, but services locations with higher concentrations of individuals with mobility challenges, then that line should score higher on any rubric (formal or informal) being used to make decisions.

2. Make strong strides toward much greater regional connectivity, with easy connections between the New Orleans CBD and other major regional jobs centers and better inter-parish connectivity on the West Bank

As we noted, one of our guiding definitions of transportation equity is commute time reductions for lower-income communities and communities of color.

But in a regional economy, we can't see that without better regional connections. The current balkanized regional transit system – with our two biggest jurisdictions basically running separate systems – ensures that.

Consider that in the current system, Google maps indicates it would take more than three hours to get via transit from a location just off of Bullard in New Orleans East to Elmwood during rush hour. On a Sunday the trip would basically be impossible. But the trip would take an average of just under 30 minutes via car.

This glaring inequity in access for New Orleans East residents to the region's third largest jobs center is because we don't have real regional routes and adequate regional connectivity. New Links must provide tangible recommendations to improve this situation.

The New Links team has already floated different ideas - each of the three concepts include a range of regional connectivity improvements. These improvements ranged

from just a simple extension of the RTA's #39 Tulane to Elmwood (creating a direct connection between the New Orleans CBD and Elmwood) to the ambitious suggestions of greatly enhanced regional express routes to connect New Orleans East directly to the Airport/Kenner or Algiers directly to Metairie.

RIDE's preference is to go as big as possible. Regional express routes could be a game-changer for transit-reliant workers – especially with a completely redesigned network that helps to get riders seamlessly to those regional express routes from neighborhoods and destinations throughout the region.

Ultimately, though the New Links planners will have to weigh exactly how far we can go toward seamless regional connections while still ensuring other priorities.

But we want to make it clear that, at the very least, we expect the New Links process to provide new, direct connections between major jobs centers on either side of the parish line. Missing that means New Links would be, if not a complete failure, forever known as an enormous missed opportunity.

Regional cooperation

It's also important to note that there's only so much the New Links teams can do without the active support of regional politicians and leaders as well. The New Links team could produce a seamless, sensible regional network, but if there is not the political will to forge much greater coordination and cooperation between the RTA and JeT and Orleans and Jefferson parishes in general, it will be hard to see anything implemented.

In the weeks leading up to the release of the New Links final plan in the months of consideration and discussion after the release, regional leaders should start clear discussions around:

- Revenue sharing on particular lines
- Joint fare policies and cheaper transfers between systems
- Reviving regular quarterly meetings between the two transit agencies
- Coordination on schedules to minimize transfer times

3. Big steps forward for West Bank and New Orleans East transit riders with reduced overall travel time, more flexibility for easy travel at different points of the day and days of the week, and better on-time performance

Ridership in New Orleans East and the West Bank has been consistent, sometimes even growing in recent years even as other lines have lost significant ridership. More and more riders in both areas need and rely on transit service.

But both areas present some of the biggest challenges for reliable service. That means riders there face some of the longest commutes and most unreliable service. For instance, the average New Orleans East transit rider can only reach two percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes-or-less, while the average Algiers transit rider can only reach three percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes-or-less.

Geography certainly plays a role in this. But it doesn't help that both areas currently have a very inefficient route structure.

Lines in New Orleans East and Algiers often serve the entire length of a major corridor as a local bus throughout each neighborhood – like the #62 Morrison in New Orleans East or the #102 General Myers in Algiers, before entering the highway to become an “express” and head downtown before turning around to do the entire route again.

Riders along these routes have benefit of one-seat ride to downtown New Orleans. But this system brings two big negatives:

- Long routes combined with limited RTA resources to add buses to individual lines means buses can't run very often. That means riders have long waits between buses. Even in peak time, no “express” bus comes more often than once every 30 minutes in New Orleans East or Algiers.
- Reliability becomes almost impossible to manage at certain points of day. Because each bus has to traverse several areas where traffic flares up significantly and unpredictably – downtown, I-10, and the Crescent City Connection bridge –almost every single bus in these neighborhoods will be thrown off schedule on a regular basis. That makes it even harder for riders to reliably predict how long a trip will take, further reducing the destinations they can reach. It also makes travel within each neighborhood via transit unpredictable as well.

With existing resources, it will be almost impossible to improve transit reliability and decrease transit travel time for New Orleans East and West Bank riders without some adjustment to the status quo.

The New Links team offered variations on a particular theme to address this problem:

For the West Bank, in all three concepts, they explored having more RTA West Bank buses routed through the Wilty Terminal under the Westbank Expressway – currently a Jefferson Transit facility serviced by only one RTA bus. More of those buses would only service West Bank destinations – retracing their West Bank route after they stop at Wilty Terminal. Some riders would lose a one-seat ride and would have to transfer to the lines that still went across the river. But those lines would be much more frequent, as the RTA could use fewer buses on the local routes since the trips would be shorter and those buses instead could be added to the major routes that still service downtown. Riders would have a generally more reliable trip and would likely see a

reduction in overall travel time – even though many would have to transfer once to leave the West Bank.

This is an intriguing idea to RIDE. We want to hear more direct feedback from the West Bank community since giving up a one-seat ride would be a major shift. But this idea has a lot of potential to increase on-time performance and access to very frequent transit service – two of transit riders’ most important priorities. We urge decision makers to strongly consider it.

The New Links team explored similar ideas in New Orleans East. They asked the community to consider having more buses stay within the East, circulating through neighborhoods and connecting riders to more frequent limited-stop express buses that whisk New Orleans East riders to downtown and other regional destinations. The New Links team believes they could create a much more reliable, functional system for New Orleans East riders if all buses don’t go downtown, but rather some become local circulator or become express buses to other parts of the region.

Similar to the Algiers example, RIDE thinks this is an idea that should be strongly considered.

4. Break New Links proposals into tiers

There is still uncertainty regarding New Links. There is no clear publicly known process for how the RTA board and Jefferson Parish leadership will consider, tweak, and adopt the final New Links proposal.

More importantly, the COVID-19 emergency has created another issue as it is likely that RTA annual operating budgets – heavily dependent on local sales tax – will shrink in the short-term, creating a dilemma for New Links planners who designed the concepts of Phase II to match the assumed 2020 budget of more than \$100 million in operating funds.

That means a final proposal with too optimistic a revenue estimate for the next few years could be hard to implement. Conversely, aiming too low on revenue estimates might mean that some of the transformative ideas presented in the concepts phase might never see the light of day as formal proposals.

To anticipate and address these potential problems, RIDE recommends that the New Links team ensure any final plan is broken up into tiers:

- A first tier should look at how to keep effective, reliable transit service over the next several years, in the face of significantly reduced revenue.
 - This could be a big boost to the RTA which does not currently have a comprehensive publicly available plan to make large-scale service

adjustments if it becomes necessary due to reduced revenue. Reduced RTA service as currently deployed simply means moving every route to a Saturday-level schedule. That might be sufficient during a time of greatly decreased ridership, but as residents start to travel more over the next year, that would be an ineffective and inequitable way of maintaining service. But a basic New Links plan could show where the areas of greatest need and promise are and help to restructure the RTA around those routes and destinations and give the agency a much stronger foundation upon which to come back from the COVID-19 emergency.

- A second tier should include all service under the assumption of a 2020 budget
 - This would be the formal New Links proposal under a “business-as-usual” scenario; the budget we would expect to see when the local economy has turned around and sales tax revenues and fare collection are back to what was predicted pre-COVID. If there is a quicker recovery than anticipated or the RTA New Links deliberation process takes longer than expected, this would be the basis for the final implemented plan.

- A third tier should include additional routes or frequency levels that might not be feasible, even with the existing budget, but would be a clear guideway for how regional transit should expand in the coming years
 - This is where the New Links team can clearly note what priorities should be for expansion during the coming years. There were a number of great ideas presented in the concepts phase, but it’s clear that there won’t be room to implement everything – especially since the need to maintain some level of low-ridership coverage will remain. The third tier can help to enshrine these ideas as a priority for our regional transit system, giving the RTA and Jefferson Transit something they haven’t had since Katrina – a transparent priority list of where to spend additional money as it becomes available. This can also be used to develop a more coherent grant-seeking strategy.

Secondary recommendations

In addition to RIDE’s must-haves, we ask that the New Links team as well as RTA and JeT decisionmakers consider the following items:

1. A policy of bus stops every three to four blocks for high frequency lines makes sense – if there’s flexibility

Having a bus stop every block or two means an easier walk to transit but a bus line that takes longer to get to its destination and is less predictable. Spacing stops every 5-6 blocks means a slightly longer walk to transit but faster trips and a more

predictable schedule. The New Links team specifically asked riders and community members if they preferred stops every 1-2 blocks, 3-4 blocks, or 5-6 blocks, after making clear the benefits and drawbacks of each.

While we would adjust our recommendations if it's clear the community is strongly in favor of another option, based on conversations with riders who work directly with Ride New Orleans, we recommend that New Links call for stops **on high frequency routes** being spaced every three to four blocks. This doubles the average spacing for most current RTA routes which would lead to better on-time performance and travel time for critical high frequency routes, but still means most riders would either see no change to where they catch the bus or, at most, have an additional block or two walk. It also means local routes could continue to have closer stop spacing as needed.

One corollary is that the New Links team should make it clear that, before implementation, the agencies should not use a one-size-fits-all approach and but instead identify areas where there are likely to be higher numbers of transit riders with mobility challenges and plan for closer stop spacing in those areas or ensure that stops are located at easily accessible locations for those riders

2. More transfers could be the key to success – if riders believe they won't have to wait long

During the concepts phase, the New Links team asked riders if they would be willing to transfer an additional time if it meant more reliable and frequent service. Concept C – the concept with greatly increased regional connections – relied heavily on this idea, with more local neighborhood circulator service to connect riders to the higher frequency regional lines that could get them to an expanded number of destinations around the region.

As we noted in the specific examples of Algiers and New Orleans East above, RIDE likes this idea in general:

- It can help more bus lines avoid bottlenecks that add unpredictability to routes.
- Shorter, more compact routes are easier to schedule consistently.
- Fewer buses are needed on a short route to provide increases in frequency
- It could leave more existing bus stops in place, minimizing disruptions that would come with eliminations, while still shifting resources to better design the system around the needs of today's rider.

However, for the expanded transfer concept to work it needs to be clear to riders that they will not have to wait long. In the current system, riders often wait for long, unpredictable periods of time for a transfer. For riders to agree to more transfers in the system, they would have to believe that they wouldn't be waiting longer than 10 minutes on average, and ideally much less. The New Links team needs to be able to “show their work” and prove to the public that relying on transfers in an updated

system will not be like the patience-trying experience of relying on transfers in the current system.

3. There needs to be a clear timeline for next steps

The New Links recommendations cannot just be put on a shelf never to see the light of the day. To avoid that there needs to be a clear plan and timeline moving forward for how, when, and at what speed the agencies will evaluate New Links and then make a final decision. We recognize that is out of the direct control of the New Links team, but they should work closely with the agencies in the months before the release of the final plan to understand the agencies process and make public a realistic timeline for next steps.

This is also a challenge that the RTA, Jefferson Parish, and City of New Orleans are responsible for as they are the ultimate deciders for final New Links implementation.

4. Fix the connectivity gaps downtown

The New Links concepts offer a variety of impressive ideas for improved transit connectivity across the region, but don't offer much on how to better connect the RTA and JeT routes that currently terminate at the main downtown transfer area with the main Uptown routes – the St. Charles streetcar, the #10 Tchoupitoulas, and #11 Magazine – as well as the Algiers Point ferry. Currently riders either walk up to 10 blocks or first transfer to the inefficient and often tourist-clogged Canal Street streetcar to make the connection. Neither of those solutions are ideal for a smoothly functioning system. While the New Links team presented some ideas for better crosstown connectivity – like the extension of the #94 Broad to Tchoupitoulas – many riders, especially West Bank riders, still don't have easy ways to transfer to Uptown routes. This is an important oversight that should be addressed while we are looking at the system comprehensively.

5. Trade frequency for on-time performance only as a last resort

Riders have been clear throughout the New Links plan that fixing the sometimes woeful on-time performance rate has to be a top priority.

The New Links team proposed one simple way of ensuring on-time performance – reduce headways so buses come less often but it's easier to keep them on schedule.

RIDE is wary of that tradeoff and urges the New Links team to avoid diminishing scheduled service unless there is no other way to guarantee on-time performance. It would be better to address it like Concept C does – with shorter local routes to avoid bottlenecks and reduced stop regional and high frequency routes that are easier to keep on schedule. Dedicated transit lanes through high traffic areas – especially downtown New Orleans – should also play a central role in increasing reliability.