

State of Transit 2020

(RE)DESIGNING OUR TRANSIT FUTURE



WORLD CLASS TRANSIT FOR NEW ORLEANS

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.

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Executive Summary

The beginning of 2020 looked hopeful for the beleaguered RTA rider.

- *A new, publicly-accountable leadership team was empowered at the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA), promising improved service and transparency.*
- *September 2019 service enhancements increased RTA service hours by 7.5 percent, with increases centered in neighborhoods with the most pressing transit challenges like New Orleans East and Algiers.*
- *While the Hard Rock Hotel collapse had created havoc on the RTA's schedule during the fall, by January, there was some semblance of routine at the Duncan Plaza temporary transfer center. And the RTA committed to finding a location for a permanent downtown transfer center, addressing years of growing rider complaints.*
- *Most importantly, the New Links network redesign process, launched in the spring of 2019, was about to release three different service concepts of a redesigned network for riders to consider. That feedback would be used to draft a formal proposal for real change, to be released in the fall.*

And then COVID-19 made its ugly appearance in the region.

By the end of March, RTA ridership and service both had dropped by more than half and the regional economy – especially the tourism industry that buttresses much of the RTA's funding – had crashed.

Black residents in New Orleans – including many RTA riders – were disproportionately infected and affected by COVID-19. The toll on RTA personnel was devastating as well. By mid-April one in eight employees had been infected, including RTA CEO Alex Wiggins. Ultimately, three RTA staff passed away from complications of COVID-19.¹ They lost their lives in the course of public service, a quiet heroism that we can never sufficiently memorialize.

By late spring, the region faced a much-changed transit situation, with massive short-term budget shortfalls, diminished ridership, and only federal relief funding via the CARES Act keeping the RTA from massive layoffs and service cuts. That optimism of January looked like something from a different world.

Measured hope

We acknowledge these challenges and mourn for those we have lost. But even in the face of these challenges we remain cautiously optimistic for several reasons, including, most importantly, the New Links regional transit network redesign.

A network redesign is the only strategy that can comprehensively address the regional transit system's structural shortcomings and deliver improved frequency, reliability, and connectivity to riders – in months, not decades. And with New Links, we finally have a focused and implementable plan to do that.

Every year since 2016, we have analyzed the average resident's access to jobs via transit. Each year, we have found it frustratingly low. In 2016, the average transit-reliant New Orleanian could reach 11 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes or less. In 2020, that number is basically the same – 12 percent.

We pushed for a network redesign process because this number signifies discrimination against transit-dependent residents – the majority of them in communities of color. It has to change.

Efforts to make that change through small improvements at the margins since Katrina or misguided capital projects like the Rampart/St. Claude streetcar have not worked. We need big, structural change to reorient our priorities toward the reliable, frequent transit service that riders need to be economically sustainable. Just as important, we need to deliver those changes to the riders who need it the most – riders from communities of color, low-income communities, and households without regular access to a private vehicle.

That is what the New Links proposal will deliver if implemented. In the pages to come, we detail what the New Links plan would accomplish if implemented. The most important things to remember are:

- **It's equitable:** The New Links plan entails big steps for equitable transportation. Communities of color, low-income households, and households without access to a private car will see significant increases in access to transit that comes frequently and reliably seven days a week.
- **It's regional:** New Links implementation would signal the end of our inefficient, balkanized regional transit system that leaves many transit-reliant riders behind. In place of that will be frequent and direct transit connections between Elmwood and Metairie and the New Orleans CBD – the three biggest jobs centers in the region – and improved interparish options on the West Bank.
- **It delivers for neighborhoods in need:** High-need neighborhoods like New Orleans East, Algiers, Central City, and others will gain the most from the New Links proposal, with significant increases in seven-day-a-week frequency along key corridors, and expanded connectivity to destinations throughout the region.

The big “if”

The question remains whether we will see these benefits. As this report went to press, the New Links proposal had just been released. While transit officials were positive, they were ultimately noncommittal about the next steps.

New Links won't be without controversy – change can be hard, especially when we are talking about changing something as familiar as a transit system designed decades ago. And with COVID-19 throwing funding, ridership projections, and the very economy into short-term upheaval, there is certainly an available excuse for scaling back expectations.

But an unacceptable status quo isn't suddenly acceptable just because there's a pandemic. The problems of our inefficient transit network will still be here when COVID-19 has faded to a bad memory. But the opportunity to change that network might not be.

In the pages to come, we show why we must take the opportunity offered by New Links.

We begin by detailing the last year's promising improvements in transit governance and planning, as well as the extensive New Links outreach process. In the next section, we show that, despite those steps forward, the regional transit system still must overcome steep challenges to provide the equitable, reliable access to jobs and educational opportunities that are the hallmark of any effective transit system. Finally, we dive into how the New Links proposal can comprehensively address those weaknesses and put our regional transit system on the fast track to success.

As we start the final part of the New Links planning process, we are optimistic. But we are also realistic and know that big changes in public policy don't happen automatically. They require leadership. To this point, our transit leadership has gotten us much further than might have seemed possible just five years ago. In the pages to come, we will show why it's critical for that leadership to take the next steps and make the New Links proposal a reality for the region's transit riders.

EFFORTS TO MAKE THAT CHANGE THROUGH SMALL

IMPROVEMENTS AT THE MARGINS HAVE NOT

WORKED. A NETWORK REDESIGN IS THE ONLY

STRATEGY THAT CAN COMPREHENSIVELY ADDRESS

THE REGIONAL TRANSIT SYSTEM'S STRUCTURAL

SHORTCOMINGS AND DELIVER IMPROVED

FREQUENCY, RELIABILITY, AND CONNECTIVITY

TO RIDERS – IN MONTHS, NOT DECADES.

The year in **NOLA TRANSIT**

September 2019

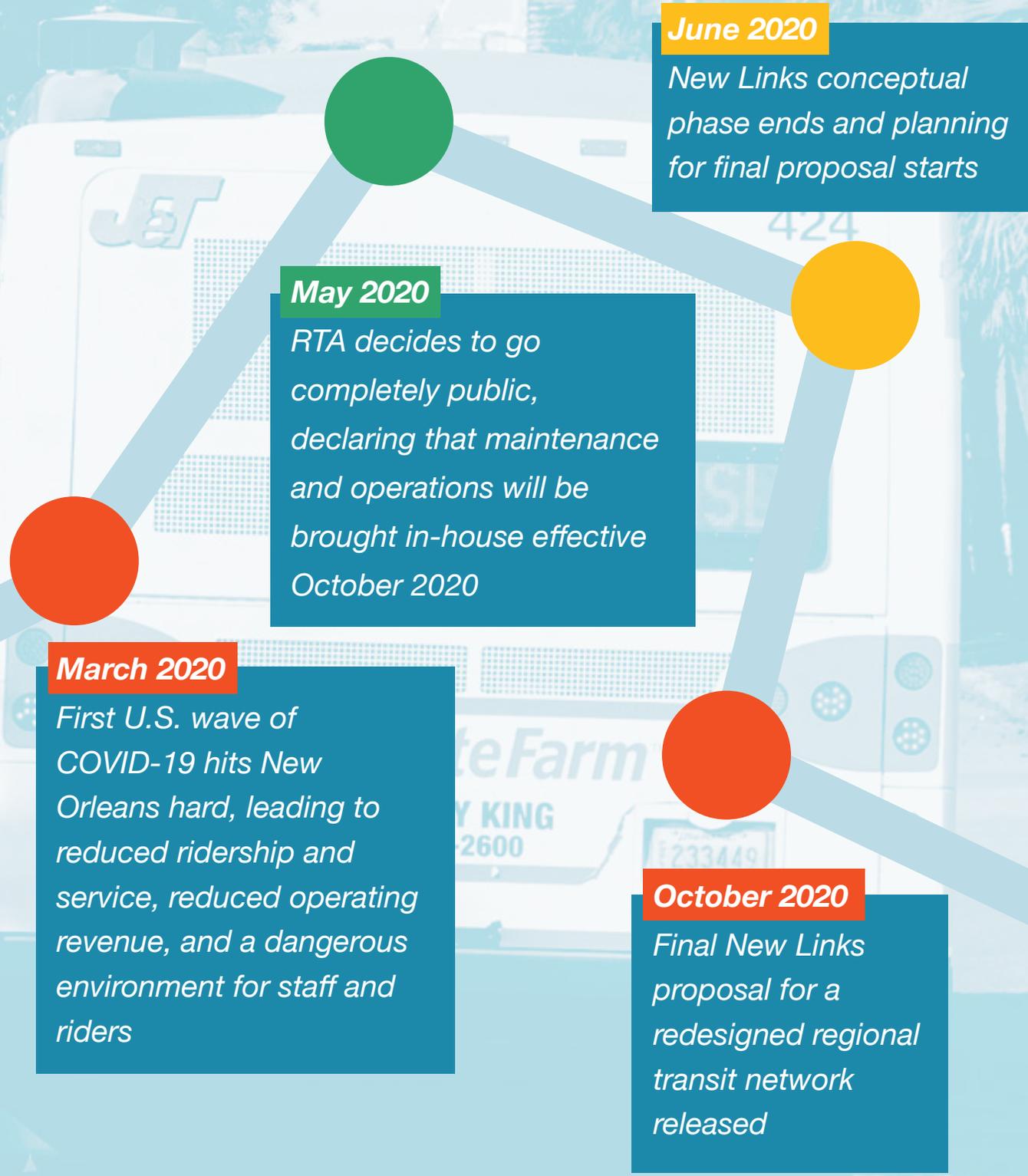
Public control returns to RTA, with an all public senior leadership and planning team brought in-house; maintenance and operations are still to be contracted

February 2020

New Links team releases concepts of redesigned regional transit network to accelerate discussion on the regional transit network redesign throughout the spring

October 2019

Hard Rock Hotel collapse create huge disruptions for transit service when downtown transfer hub and streets leading to hub are closed



June 2020
New Links conceptual phase ends and planning for final proposal starts

May 2020
RTA decides to go completely public, declaring that maintenance and operations will be brought in-house effective October 2020

March 2020
First U.S. wave of COVID-19 hits New Orleans hard, leading to reduced ridership and service, reduced operating revenue, and a dangerous environment for staff and riders

October 2020
Final New Links proposal for a redesigned regional transit network released

What's Working



A new day with New Links

The regional transit network redesign process closes with a formal proposal that promises big strides for transit service – especially for low-to-moderate income communities of color

pg. 7



The public is in control

The RTA implements the transition to a publicly-controlled agency that had been in process since 2018

pg. 9



A downtown transfer center

A study is finalized and potential locations are identified for a true downtown transfer center

pg. 10



Incremental steps toward better service

The RTA's 2019 service enhancements add more bus service for riders, especially in New Orleans East and Algiers.

pg. 12



A precedent for better bus stops

The RTA commits to funding at least 25 new bus stops shelters in 2021.

pg. 13

A NEW DAY WITH NEW LINKS

As of press time, the New Links regional transit network redesign planners had just completed a formal proposal to comprehensively redesign the system to increase reliability and frequency, reduce travel time, and facilitate currently impractical regional connections. See page 33 for our analysis of the network.

Words cannot overstate how important this could be for the regional transit network. With limited resources in the short-term for major improvements, a comprehensive network redesign is required to improve reliability, frequency, and travel time to important destinations. This critical success was not guaranteed, and the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA), Jefferson Transit (JET), and the Regional Planning Commission (RPC) deserve kudos for advancing the conversation.

New Links outreach

Phase I of New Links in 2019 introduced the process, the need for tradeoffs, and asked riders to identify overall priorities for an improved network. From those meetings, the New Links team learned that the top priorities for riders were more reliable buses, more frequent buses, and better access to regional destinations. The New Links team also gathered ridership and ridership trend data, including an origin-destination survey of five percent of current weekday riders on every bus and streetcar line.

In Winter/Spring 2020, the New Links team used the data and community feedback from the first phase to construct different concepts for a regional transit network. The goal was to help the community envision change and understand the tradeoffs and benefits of different priorities. This would allow community members to offer a more informed opinion about next steps. The team developed three separate concepts, each with benefits and tradeoffs:

- **Concept A:** Concept A maximized reliability. The tradeoff is slower schedules, making it easier for operators to maintain the schedule. The result is buses that previously came every 40 minutes might come once an hour – meaning less overall service for riders, but more on-time service.
- **Concept B:** Concept B maximized frequency on the most used bus routes. It asked riders to imagine a network with several bus lines that come every 15 minutes-or-less, meaning much less wait and easy transfers for most riders. The tradeoff was that lower ridership routes lose buses or cease to exist, meaning some riders would have to walk further to access the system at the beginning or end of their trip.
- **Concept C:** Concept C maximized regional connectivity. Planners proposed limited-stop regional express lines to rapidly connect riders to far flung destinations that currently are inaccessible on transit. The tradeoff was that many riders would have to transfer from newly designed local neighborhood lines to access the limited-stop regional express routes.



What is the New Links network redesign?

The New Links regional transit network redesign is a joint study and planning process by the RPC, RTA, JET, and St. Bernard Parish Urban Rapid Transit (SBURT). New Links started in early 2019 and the final phase began with the October 2020 release of a proposed redesign of the regional transit network.

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

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

Figure 1: A key finding from New Links Phase II outreach

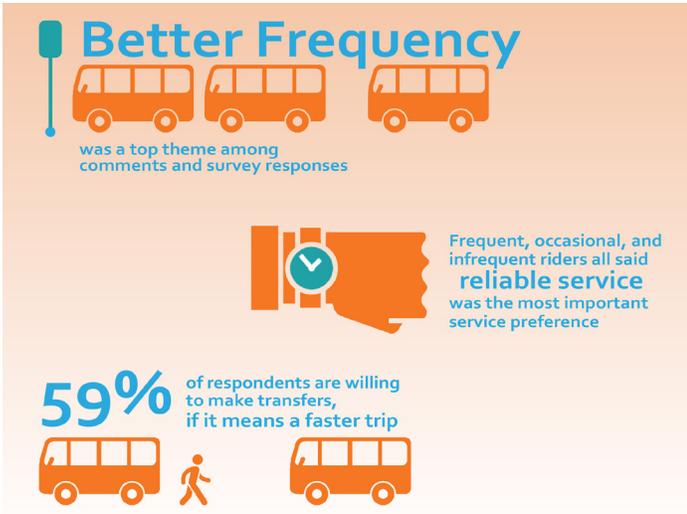


Figure 2: The New Links Transit Propensity Index

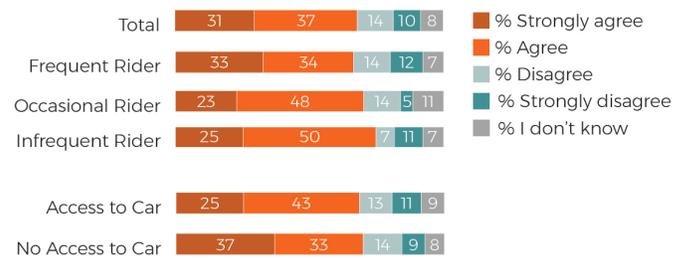
Demographic group	Transit index factor
Race and Ethnicity	
White (Not Hispanic or Latino)	0.29
Black or African American (Not Hispanic or Latino)	2.31
Hispanic or Latino	1.33
Asian (Not Hispanic or Latino)	0.57
Multiracial or other (Not Hispanic or Latino)	1.38
Vehicle ownership	
No car	9.95
One or more cars	0.55
Disability	
With a disability	1.27
Without a disability	0.98
Annual income	
Less than \$10,000	2.37
\$10,000 - \$15,000	1.69
\$15,000 - \$25,000	1.59
\$25,000 - \$35,000	0.78
\$35,000 - \$50,000	0.55
\$50,000 or higher	0.3
Jobs	
< \$1,250 per month	3.87
\$1,250 - \$3,333 per month	2.00
> \$3,333 per month	0.72

In Phase II, the New Links team unveiled these concepts in February 2020 and started an aggressive schedule of outreach at busy transfer stops and presentations to neighborhood associations and other organized groups. Outreach aimed to introduce riders and the community-at-large to these concepts and gather feedback about people’s preferences.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak interrupted outreach, which moved to an all-digital format in April 2020. While the shift wasn’t ideal, the New Links team still reached hundreds of community members during the spring. RIDE played a role as well, organizing weekly digital town halls focused on what the concepts would mean for targeted neighborhoods throughout the region. By the June 2020 conclusion of Phase II, the team had important insights that informed the final plan:

- While all three concepts were seen as improvements, both regular transit riders and non-riders more strongly supported Concepts B and C
- Most riders said they would be willing to walk a little further to catch the bus.
- Most riders said they would be willing to make a transfer if it meant an overall faster or more reliable trip

Figure 3: Result of New Links survey question asking participants if Concept B would make their transit trip better.



Source: The New Orleans Regional Planning Commission (for all figures on this page)

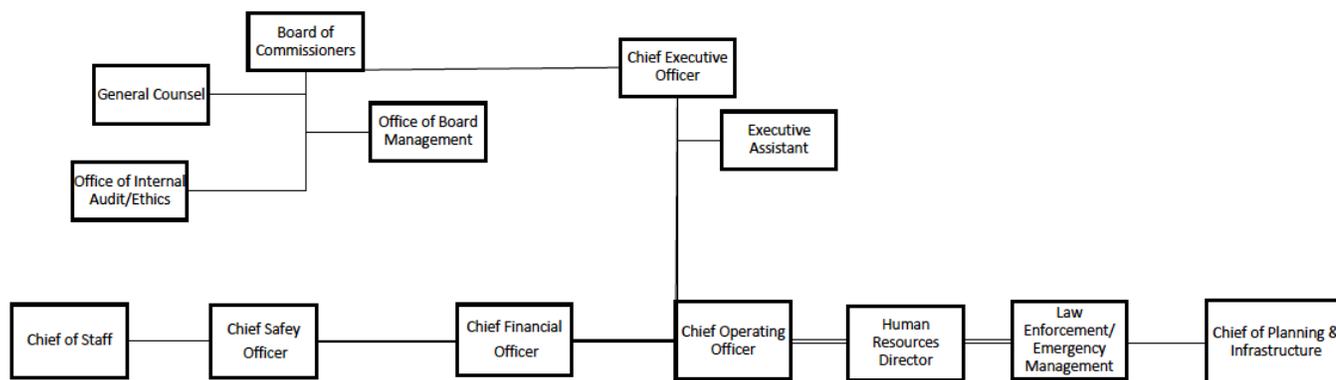
Drafting the formal proposal

In October 2020, the New Links team released the formal proposal for a redesigned network. Page 33 outlines key parts of the proposal and why RIDE wholeheartedly endorses New Links, but it’s important to highlight a key foundation of the new network here.

The proposed network is based more clearly on equity metrics than anything local transit agencies have ever done before. The New Links proposal directs service to lower-income communities and especially communities of color. The network redesign achieves this through its Transit Propensity Index – basically a weighting system that assigns higher priority to neighborhoods with more carless households, Black and minority households, lower-income households, and jobs that are typically filled by low-to-moderate income workers.

If approved, this huge reset for the RTA would align with other announced equity policies of the new leadership regime. For an agency whose only major capital expense since Katrina was a streetcar line that only served wealthy and rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods, this would be a big step forward.

Figure 4: RTA Organizational Chart 2019-2020



Source: The New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA)

THE PUBLIC IS IN CONTROL

When RIDE published the 2019 State of Transit in New Orleans report, the RTA board had already approved the shift from a delegated management model to a publicly controlled agency, with only operations and maintenance still contracted. They had just hired Alex Wiggins, a New Orleans native and long-time transit professional to take over as CEO. But everything else was still to be decided.

During the last year, the RTA completed important behind-the-scenes work of hiring employees, moving from only two employees at the beginning of 2019 to establishing a full employee roster and robust and new organizational culture. This isn't something that the average rider will notice in the short-term, but it sets the agency up for comprehensive improvements in the coming years.

The delegated management mode had been a real problem for New Orleans transit riders. Delegated management is a form of transit contracting where every aspect of a transit agency's duties – including planning, management, communications, and operations – are contracted to a single private company. The model is rare in the United States – where agencies typically only contract out operations or maintenance - but not unheard of in Europe.

From 2009 to 2019, the New Orleans RTA operated under a delegated management model, with only one employee for much of that time. Everyone else was an employee of Transdev, the global transit service provider company. Supporters of the model said it was necessary to bring in outside expertise to boost service after Katrina in a cost-effective way.

Ride New Orleans and others were critical of the model through much of the 10-year contract, identifying problems with transparency and accountability, and deficiencies in continuity and long-range planning for improvements. Those issues made the model an increasingly problematic one for New Orleans transit riders and made major improvements less likely.

In 2018, the board decided to move toward a “hybrid” model, where management, planning, and communications would be brought in-house, but operations and maintenance would remain contracted services. In 2019, at the conclusion of the 10-year Transdev contract, this new arrangement went into effect.

Good-bye to the “hybrid model”

The RTA took this even further than expected with the May 2020 decision to end its brief experiment contracting out operations and maintenance in favor of becoming “completely” public, bringing operations and maintenance in-house, effective October 2020.

In the original move toward public control, the RTA board settled on a “hybrid model” with contracted operations and maintenance and public employees filling all other positions.

The incumbent operator, Transdev, had won the reduced contract in Spring 2019 over just one other bidder. Negotiations to finalize the contract were contentious from all accounts, setting the tone for continued conflict.

RTA sources say that the new management team quickly grew frustrated with Transdev’s performance under the new contract, blaming them for continued on-time performance and overall reliability issues (see Page 24). The new management team was especially frustrated with communication, as their directives did not seem to reach rank and file operators in a reasonable amount of time or at all. The October 2019 collapse of the Hard Rock Hotel, which necessitated closing Elk Place, where a majority of current RTA lines meet, made things worse (see Page 22).

The result is that the RTA senior staff determined that operations and maintenance would not function effectively unless brought under their direct control. In May 2020, RTA CEO Alex Wiggins made the formal decision to terminate the contract, effective October 1, 2020.

In general, RIDE supports this move. Contracting may have its virtues, but the execution in New Orleans was poor and appeared to lead to a widespread lack of accountability for poor service. Bringing everything in-house should, at the very least, allow problem areas to be identified more easily and then, nominally, addressed. But it’s important to note that a fully public model is not a panacea and poor decisions are just as possible from a public agency as a privatized one.

A TRUE DOWNTOWN TRANSFER CENTER?

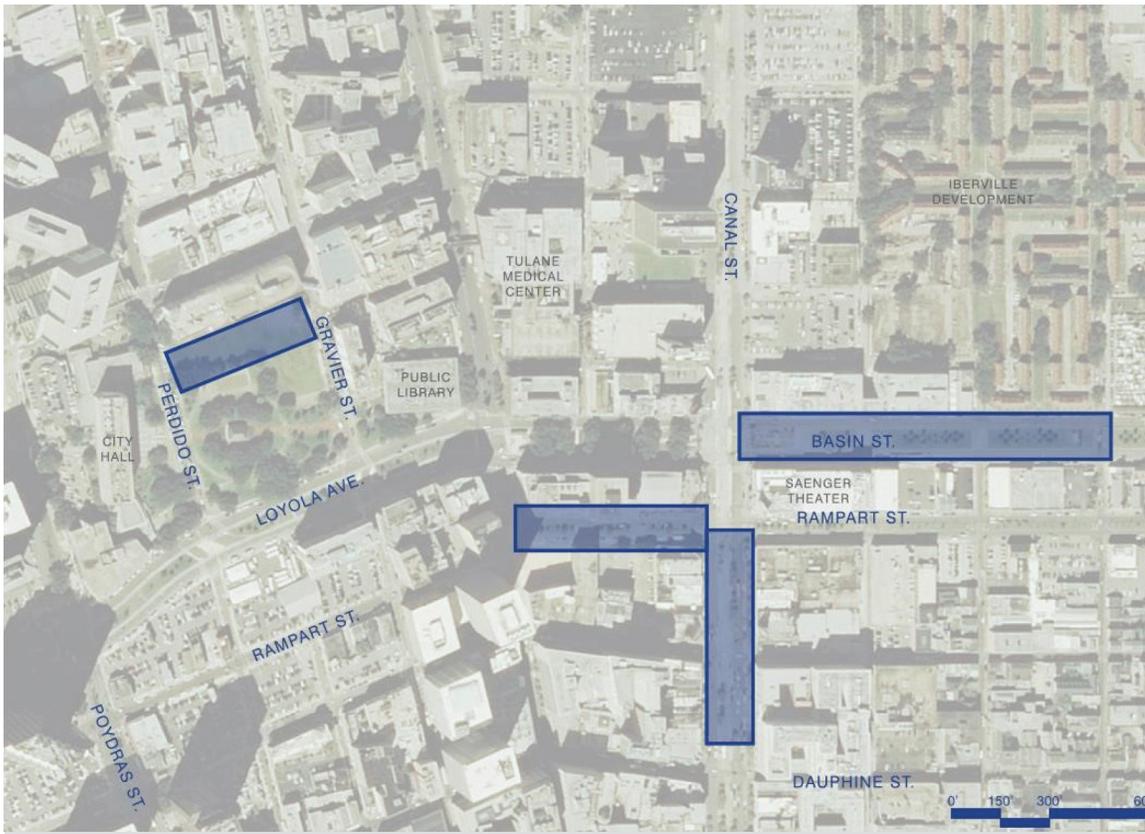
Set on the sprawling superblock bordered by Elk Place, Canal, S Rampart, and Common, with overflow RTA and Jefferson Transit stops as much as a block away, the main transfer area has extremely limited shelter and seating, no wayfinding signage, and long distances between some buses, making for extremely inefficient transfers. Though the Hard Rock Hotel collapse necessitated the temporary move of the transfer center to Duncan Plaza, a lack of facilities and organization there means the situation is not any better.

This situation has festered for a number of years. The RTA first started a conversation about a true downtown transfer center in 2014 with a study of different potential sites downtown that was intended to select a preferred location, and create a plan for construction and operations. The study had narrowed the choices to four potential locations (see Figure 5) when it was inexplicably halted in 2015.

After a long pause, the new RTA management completed the study in 2019 and formally released it in January 2020. There was no final recommendation for a location, but the study included a scoring rubric that rated the four potential locations. The area at Canal and Basin scored the highest and, based on feedback from transit riders, RIDE supports that location. It provides easy transfer access to the Canal Street streetcar, New Orleans East and West Bank buses can reach it relatively hassle-free, and there is space available to build an indoor waiting facility, allowing riders to escape the heat or cold or use the bathroom while they wait for the bus.

The RTA applied for a federal grant to pay for 80 percent of the costs of construction this year. Unfortunately, the agency did not get the grant this year, but the transfer center should remain a top priority over the next year.

Figure 5: Transfer Center Locations



The four potential locations for a new downtown transfer center

Source: New Orleans Regional Transit Authority's "New Orleans Downtown Transfer Center: Alternatives Analysis, February 2020

Transit riders top transfer center location choice is Basin Street @ Canal, with easy transfer access to the Canal Street streetcars



IN NEW ORLEANS EAST, THE #64 LAKE FOREST

AND #65 READ CROWDER BUSES

THAT CONNECT NEW ORLEANS EAST RIDERS

WITH DOWNTOWN NEW ORLEANS INCREASED

FREQUENCY TO EVERY 30 MINUTES ALL DAY.



RIDER PROFILE

Kaila Maurice, Gentilly



"I'm a commuter student in my 4th year of undergrad, and having multiple bus lines, specifically the #57 Franklin, #94 Broad, and #90 Carrollton, run through my neighborhood has saved me countless amounts of times while traveling to and from school and work.

If I ever noticed one bus line was moving faster or slower than the other, I could easily reroute my schedule since each line is in a manageable walking distance for me. Having multiple plans to arrive at school is ideal, as I'm able to prevent myself from being late to class and work on campus. Because of this, I'm less stressed out about how I'll make it to school on time, and I don't have to leave my home hours earlier than my usual time, so I'm able to catch up on sleep and have more energy to be as self-productive as possible each week."

Kaila Maurice attends and works at Xavier University. They live in the Gentilly area and commute via bus to and from school every day.

MORE SCHEDULED BUS SERVICE

Another incremental, but important step for transit riders was the RTA's September 2019 service enhancements, made after improved sales tax forecasts led to a small surplus in the RTA's annual operating budget. The service enhancements added a 7.5 percent increase in total weekly service hours. While the COVID-19 situation has led to temporary service cutbacks, last year's enhancements were especially helpful for some riders in New Orleans East and Algiers. Service enhancements included:

- *In New Orleans East, the #64 Lake Forest and #65 Read Crowder buses that connect New Orleans East riders with downtown New Orleans increased frequency to every 30 minutes all day. Previously they had run every 30 minutes during peak, but every hour during the rest of the day until the evening. The late night New Orleans East OWL bus, also got a frequency raise, to every 30 minutes between 2 and 5 a.m.*
- *The #94 Broad bus - the highest ridership RTA bus line - increased frequency to every 15 minutes all day, not just at peak time.*
- *In Algiers, the #114 and #115 General DeGaulle buses that connect riders in the neighborhoods on either side of General DeGaulle with downtown New Orleans increased their frequency during peak time to every 30 minutes. Previously they each ran every 45 minutes during the peak period.*
- *The #84 Galvez bus, connecting the 9th Ward to the CBD, increased frequency to every 30 minutes.*
- *The Canal/Algiers ferry started running at 6 a.m. on weekends instead of the 10 a.m. previous start time, matching the Monday through Friday start time.*

Algiers residents saw small but noticeable improvements in access to jobs during peak periods compared to 2019 that we attribute to this change. The average Algiers transit rider saw an increase of 5,000 potential jobs in 60 minutes-or-less, or a 2 percent increase.

It is worth noting, however, that the decision-making process, while well-intentioned, left a lot to be desired. The big changes to the #64/#65 and #114/#115 were not picked according to the RTA's Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) or via any analysis showing that they would help move the RTA toward a particular goal.

Rather, staff working for the then-delegated management operator Transdev offered the RTA board a menu list of potential service enhancements. After a limited outreach process that primarily consisted of a poorly attended Riders' Advisory Committee (RAC) meeting, the RTA board selected the enhancements to be implemented in the summer of 2019.

This is not to be unnecessarily critical of the process. Improvements to frequency in New Orleans East and Algiers were objectively needed based on growing or steady ridership in each neighborhood at a time of declines in the rest of the system. And limited outreach is better than no outreach.

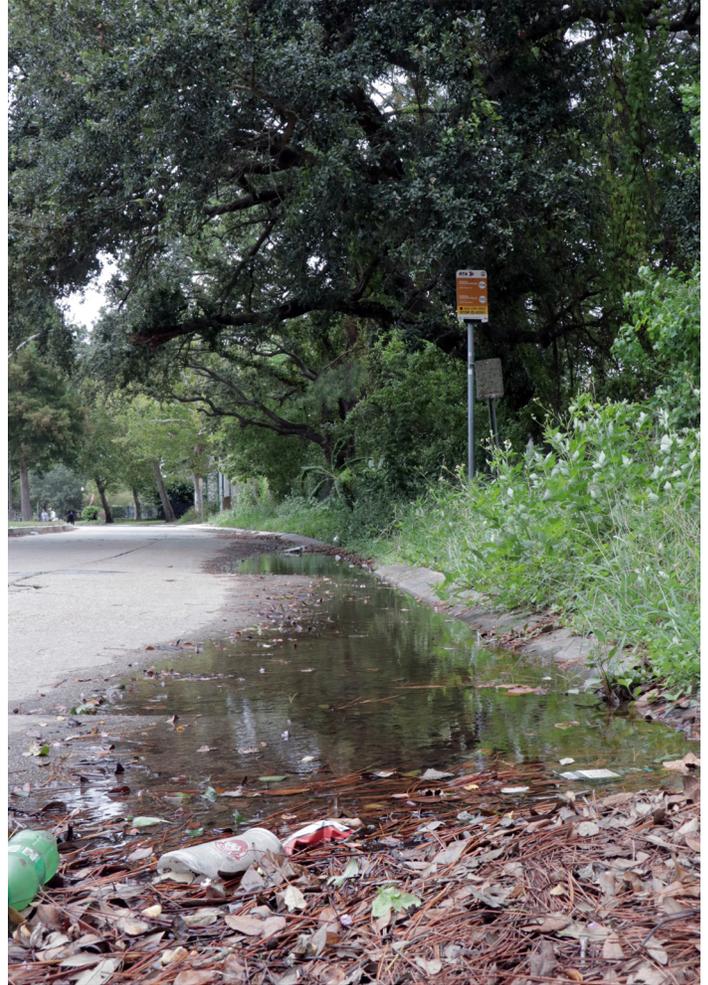
But it does underscore the importance of New Links comprehensive process that uses data and significant public and stakeholder feedback to determine service priorities and levels and sets clear and transparent standards for future investments. Without a guiding process, transit officials are, at best, using their intuition to determine how to invest new revenue, which is not ideal.

A PRECEDENT FOR BETTER BUS STOPS

The lack of bus stop shelters has been and remains a recurring issue for RTA riders. RTA staff report that as of October 2020 there are 349 total shelters installed in the system, including streetcar shelters. There are 2,220 total bus stops in the RTA system. The RTA's 2017 Strategic Mobility Plan includes improving the rider experience as a key objective and sets an aggressive goal for bus stop shelter implementation, calling for 90 percent of stops with 15 boardings or more to have shelters or benches by 2027.

Riders got some relief in August 2020 when RTA CEO Alex Wiggins and RTA Board Finance Chair Mark Raymond Jr. committed to including funds for at least 25 new bus stop shelters in the 2021 budget.

Hopefully, this will help accelerate bus shelter implementation. More importantly, it can set a precedent that bus stop shelter implementation – typically paid for with federal government grants in the past – will be a priority with or without federal grant funds.



RTA SHELTERS/RTA BUS STOPS

349/2,220

What's Not Working



Transit doesn't connect to economic opportunity

Access to jobs via transit remains stagnant and RIDE's updated analysis finds an additional gap in reliable transit access between Black and white households

pg. 15



Outside factors weigh transit down

Factors outside local transit agency control like COVID-19 and the Hard Rock Hotel collapse create big problems for transit riders

pg. 21



Where's the bus?

Reliability metrics continue to look bad for the RTA, meaning riders are at even more of a disadvantage

pg. 24



Unreliable ferries

Two years after new ferryboats were delivered, they're still not in service and ferry riders have a rough year (though there may be light on the horizon)

pg. 26



The regional divide still looms

While New Links introduces tangible ideas for regional connections, the reality remains balkanized and difficult for riders

pg. 26

TRANSIT DOESN'T CONNECT TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Despite a 7.5 percent increase in RTA weekly service hours in September 2019, transit-reliant residents continue to have incredibly poor access to a wide range of economic opportunity. The average transit-reliant New Orleanian can reach only 12 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes or less. But the average New Orleanian with a car can reach 89 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes or less. That wide disparity is a problem from a range of perspectives.

It's worth taking a moment to review why this metric is so important.

Consider how it works when you own a car. The point of having that car is that you nominally can go where you want, when you want. But if that car started to only work from 7-9 am and not at all on weekends, you would suddenly find your mobility significantly constrained. Suddenly that car doesn't do you very much good.

This is a good way to understand why frequency and effective connectivity are so important for transit. A bus stop where a bus only comes once an hour is like that hypothetical car that only works sporadically – maybe better than nothing but not very much good.

The access to jobs analysis helps RIDE to analyze how useful the transit system is by shining a light on where riders can (and can't) expect to get to a wide range of destinations in a reasonable amount of time.

This metric is especially important for New Orleans because of the high number of low-to-moderate income residents who rely on transit to get to work.

- *New Orleans has a high poverty rate with 24 percent of residents in poverty, more than 10 percentage points higher than the national average.² The childhood poverty rate is even higher at 33 percent.*
- *Keeping a car is expensive. The most recent AAA figures estimate that the annual cost of owning and maintaining a car is \$9,282.³ Simply parking downtown for a full-time job can add an extra \$1,500 a year in parking expenses.⁴*
- *New Orleans has a high rate of households without access to a car – 19 percent, almost twice the national average.²*

Reliable transit access is critical to provide these low-to-moderate income communities with the tools to access economic opportunity. But on this fundamental metric our region is failing.

Figure 6: Average percent of jobs accessible by mode, Orleans Parish

	30-minute commute	60-minute commute
via transit	12%	43%
via driving	89%	99%

Figure 7: Average percent of jobs accessible by mode, by parish

		30-minute commute	60-minute commute
Orleans Parish	via transit	12%	43%
	via driving	89%	99%
Jefferson Parish	via transit	4%	22%
	via driving	78%	99%
St. Bernard Parish	via transit	1%	4%
	via driving	23%	96%

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

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 2017. 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:

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

w = workers residing in CBG
a = all workers residing in Orleans Parish
j = jobs accessible from CBG
n = Each CBG in Orleans Parish

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

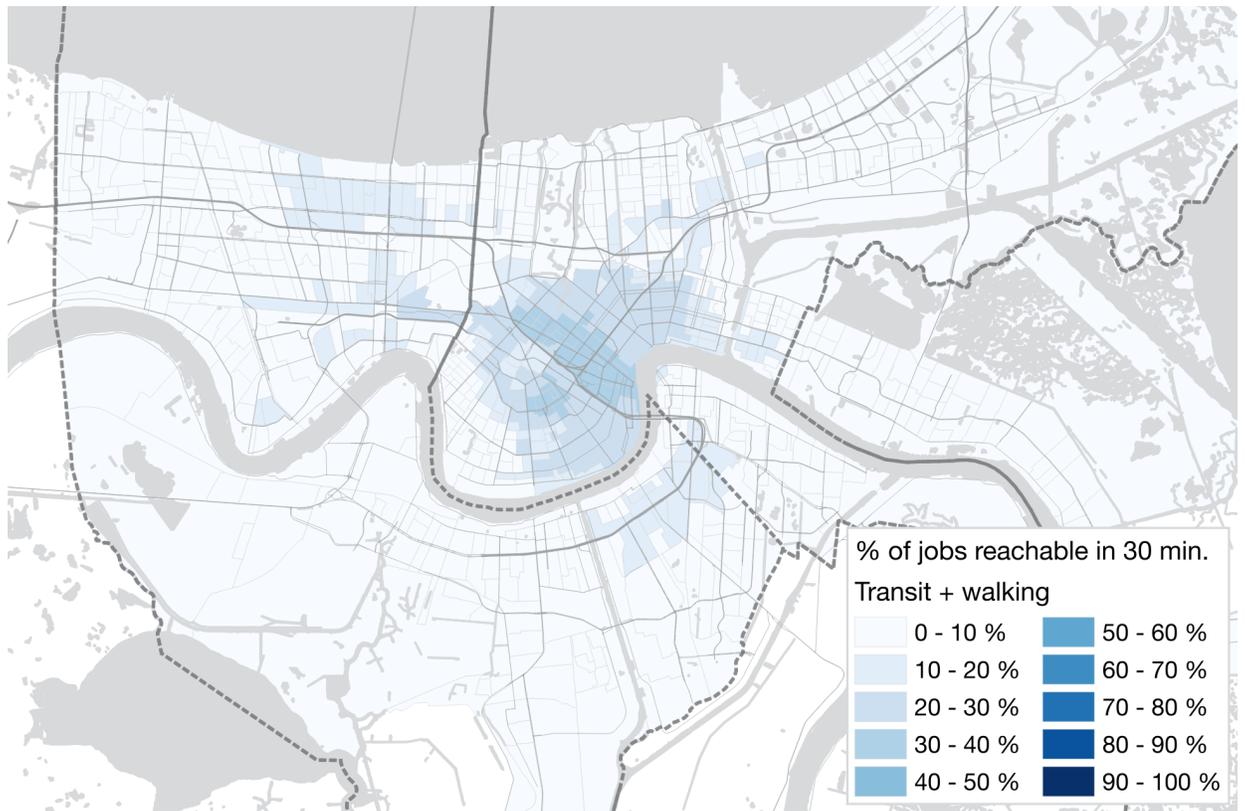
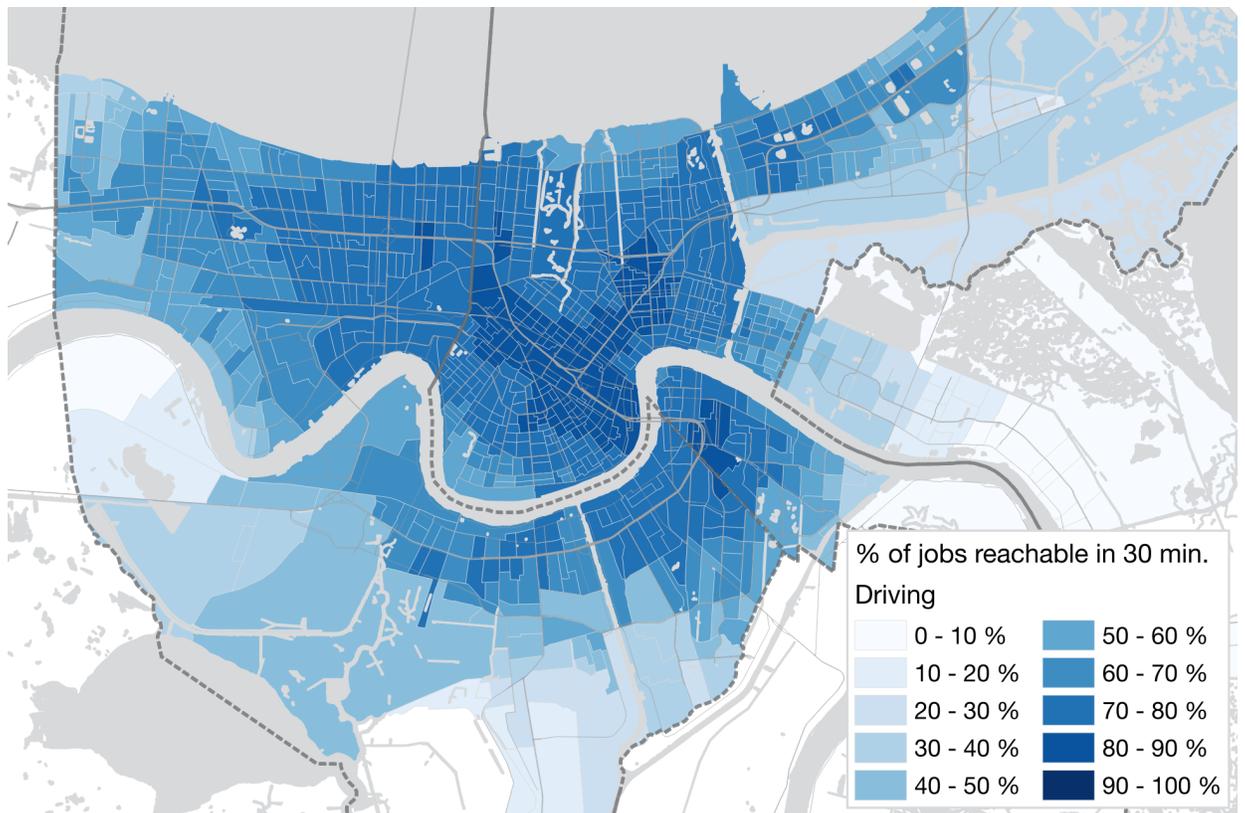


Figure 9: Percentage of jobs reachable in 30 minutes driving, by Census Block Group



Source: RTA, Jefferson Transit, OpenStreetMap, US Census Bureau: LODES (2017). Map Data: US Census Bureau, OpenStreetMap Contributors

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

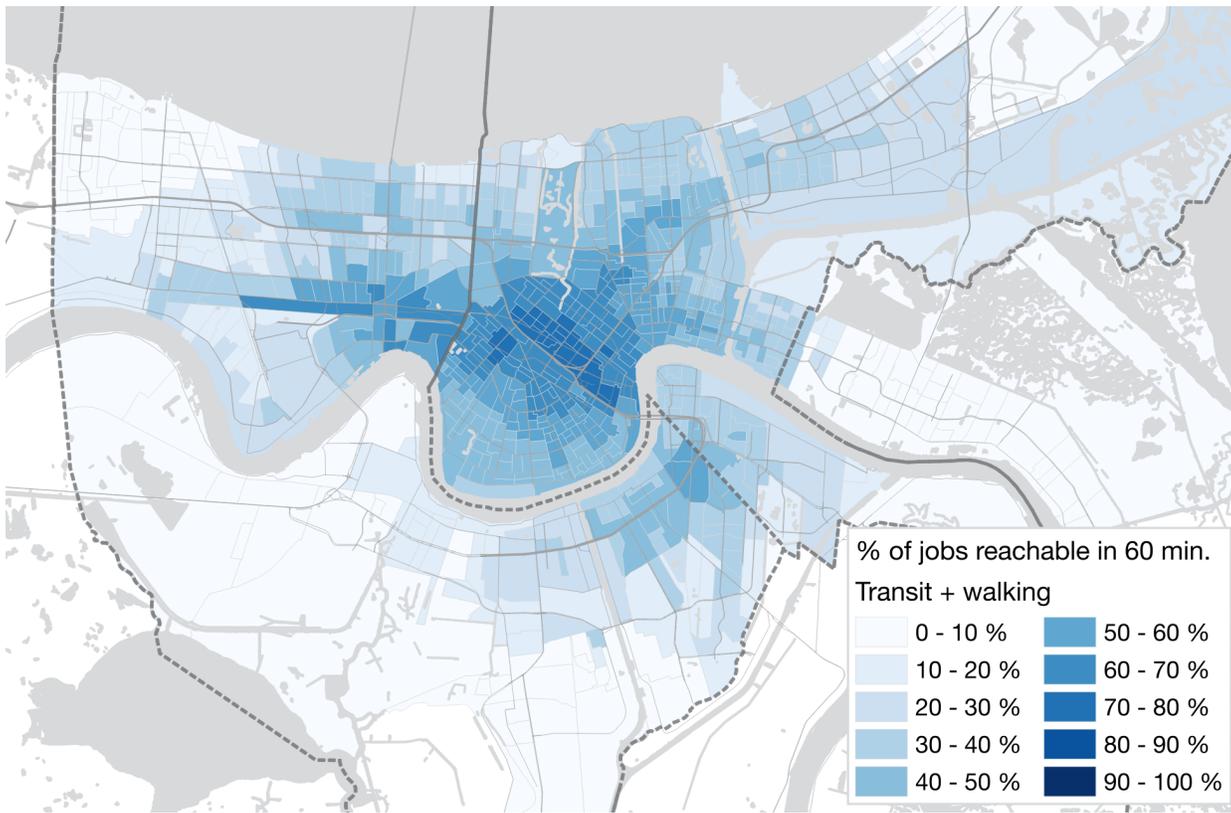
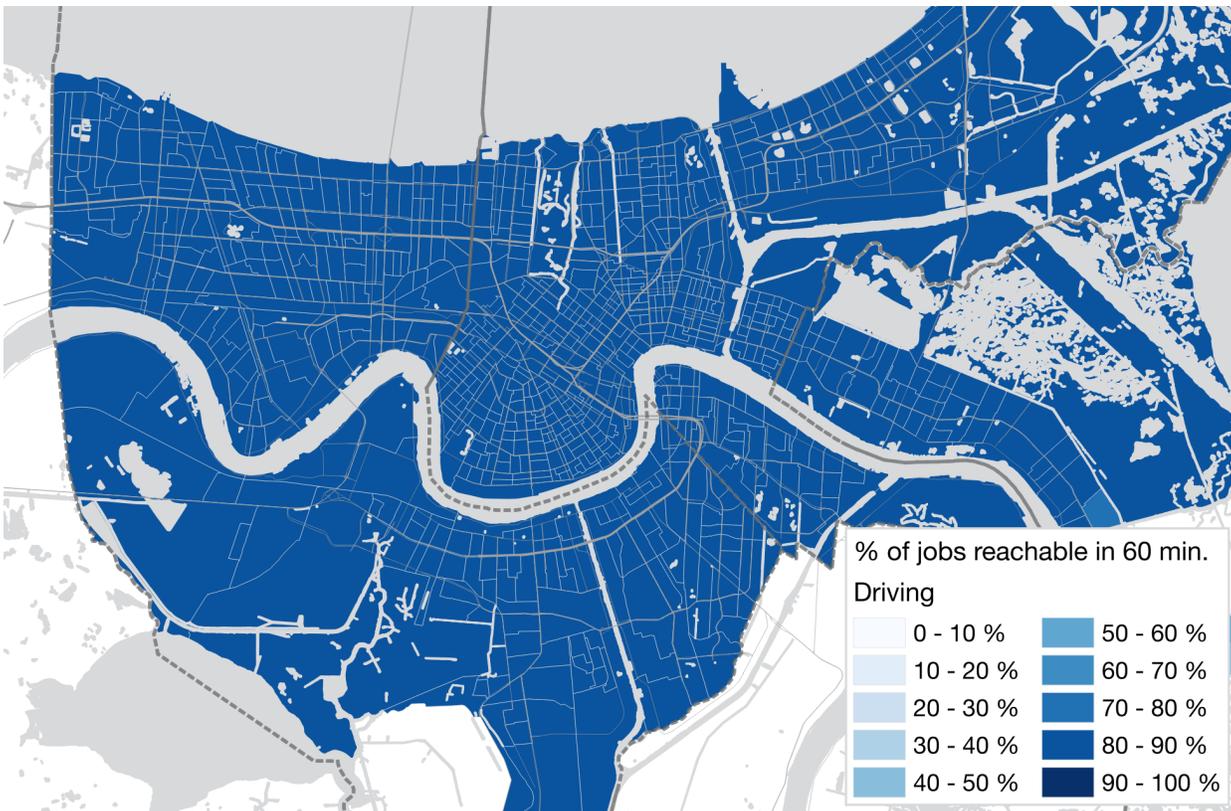


Figure 11: Percentage of jobs reachable in 60 minutes driving, by Census Block Group



Source: RTA, Jefferson Transit, OpenStreetMap, US Census Bureau: LODES (2017). Map Data: US Census Bureau, OpenStreetMap Contributors

Figure 12:
New Orleans East Transit Access Shed

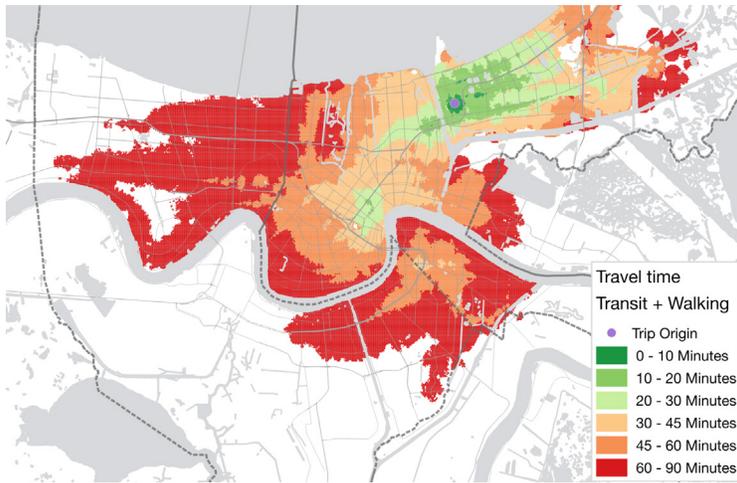


Figure 13:
Woodmere Transit Access Shed

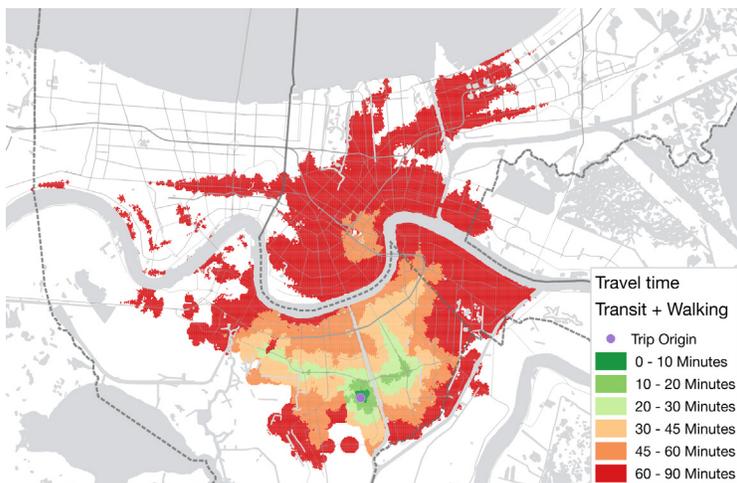
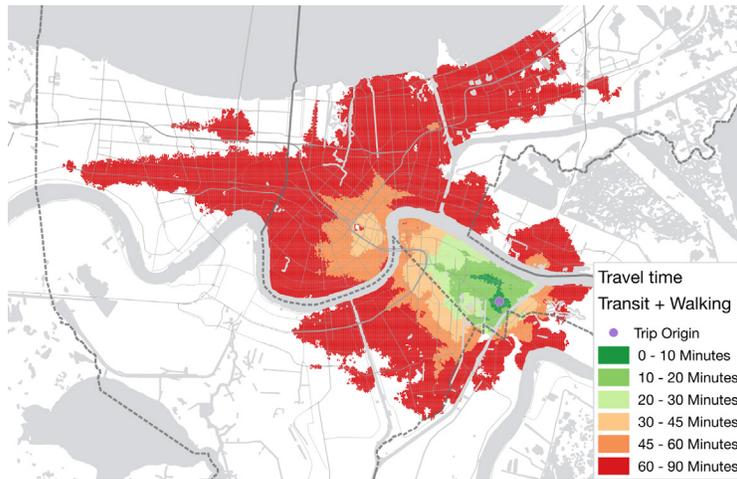


Figure 14:
Algiers Transit Access Shed



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

Racial equity and geographic divides

The numbers look worse when you look into specific groups or geographic areas.

This year RIDE analyzed the differences in access to jobs via transit between white and Black households in Orleans Parish and found a small but definite gap in access.

The average white Orleans Parish household can reach 14 percent of the region's jobs via transit in 30 minutes or less, slightly above the overall average. But the average Black household could only reach 10 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes or less via transit. Extend the time period to 60 minutes and the average white household could reach 47 percent but the average Black household could only reach 40 percent – or 27,884 fewer potential job opportunities than the average white household.

Digging deeper, 51 percent of Orleans Parish Black residents had the worst transit access – defined as only able to reach 20,000 or fewer jobs in 30 minutes or less via transit. Only 26 percent of white residents had a similarly poor level of access.

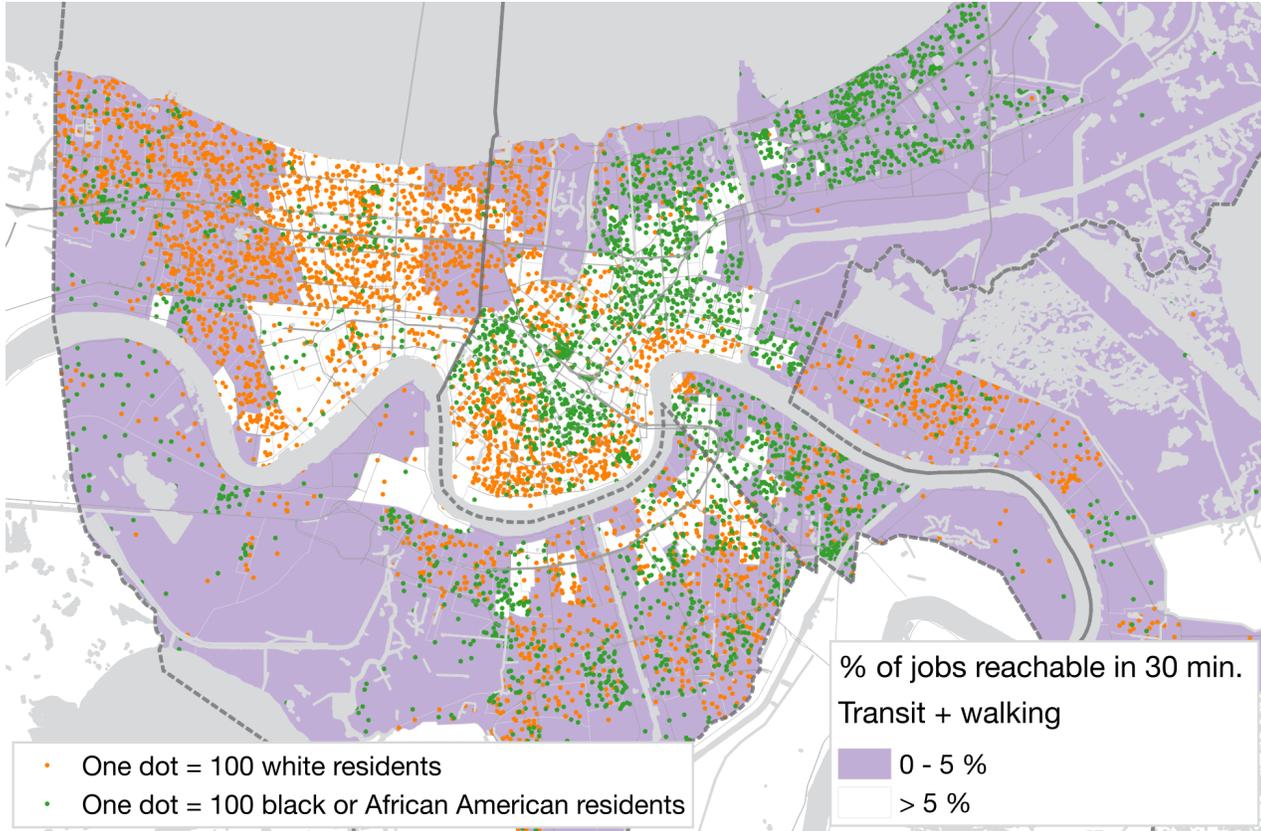
68% of non-tourist RTA weekday riders are Black, according to the 2019 New Links survey of regional transit ridership.

This divide is also evident when you look at specific neighborhoods with higher transit-reliant populations. Riders in New Orleans East, Woodmere, and Algiers, for example, all have to contend with significantly worse access than other parts of the region:

- The average New Orleans East rider can reach only 2 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes or less via transit and only 22 percent in 60 minutes or less via transit
- The average Woodmere rider can reach only 2 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes or less via transit and only 18 percent in 60 minutes or less via transit
- The average Algiers rider can reach only 2 percent of the region's jobs in 30 minutes or less via transit and only 28 percent in 60 minutes or less via transit*

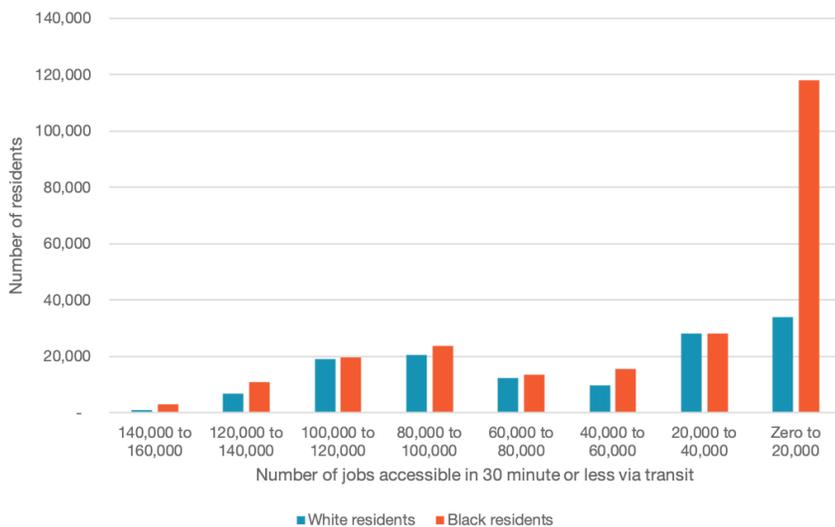
*Algiers riders saw a two percent gain in access to jobs in 60 minutes or less, likely because of the September 2019 service enhancements. See Page 12 for more.

Figure 15: Access threshold to jobs via transit by race



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

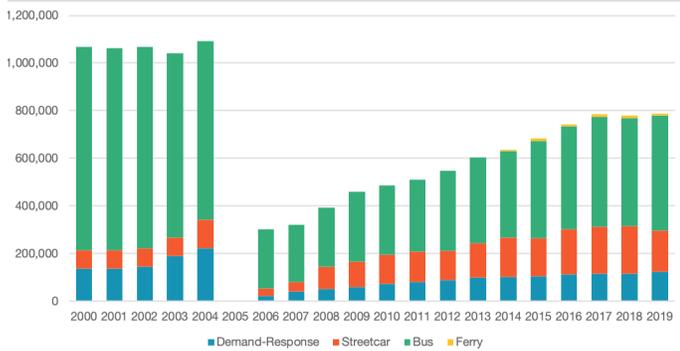
Figure 16: Jobs accessible via transit for Black and white Orleans Parish residents



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



Figure 17: RTA Annual Vehicle Revenue Hours (VRH) by mode



Source: National Transit Database (NTD) 2000-2018 and Regional Transit Authority 2019 NTD filing

Figure 18: Number of routes by frequency, 2005 and 2020*

	2005		2020	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
15 minutes or less	19	24%	3	6%
15.1 to 30 minutes	43	54%	13	27%
30.1 to 50 minutes	12	15%	18	37%
Greater than 50 minutes	6	7%	15	31%

Source: Ride New Orleans analysis of RTA, JeT, and SBURT schedules in 2005 and 2020

*To determine the frequency of the region's 2005 and 2020 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 6:30 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.) and weekday evening peak hours (from 3:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.), based on official RTA, JeT, and SBURT schedules.

Post-Katrina declines

Long-time New Orleanians will tell you that poor access to destinations is especially galling because transit service before the Katrina flooding was much more effective for riders.

The numbers bear that out. For example, in 2019 the RTA operated the highest number of total vehicle revenue hours (VRH) since the year before Katrina. Even so, it was still a 28 percent decline from 2004. Broken down by mode, bus VRH declined 35 percent from 2004, while streetcar VRH increased 43 percent thanks to the addition of the Loyola/Rampart/St. Claude streetcar line and added frequency on the Canal Street lines.

RIDE also annually counts total weekly RTA bus and streetcar trips and compares them to pre-Katrina 2005 weekly trips to get another understanding of what the service declines look like numerically. In 2020 – before the COVID-19 service reductions – the RTA only ran 49.7 percent of the weekly total transit trips it ran in 2005 pre-Katrina. Bus service lags much further behind, with only 41.3 percent of weekly pre-Katrina bus trips recovered.

The difference in the amount of high frequency lines – lines where a transit vehicle comes every 15 minutes or less – is also stark. Pre-Katrina, our region had 19 such lines. In 2020, our region only had three bus or streetcar lines that come every 15 minutes or less. High frequency lines are the key building block to a reliable, quality transit network, so this difference is especially telling.

Importance of New Links

It's especially important to recognize that these access disparities and post-Katrina reduced service levels are systemic problems. They can't be fixed just by adding a little service to one area or bringing back one particular line. To make a big dent in fixing these problems we need to see comprehensive solutions that are implemented in coordination and ideally in a small window of time.

The New Links regional transit network redesign process is the only potential comprehensive solution out there. Not implementing New Links likely means at least another decade of watching these problems fester with all of the associated damage to communities and our region as a whole.



OUTSIDE FACTORS WEIGH TRANSIT DOWN

On top of these systematic problems facing transit riders, transit agencies and riders also had to deal with two large issues outside of their control this year – the collapse of the Hard Rock Hotel and the COVID-19 crisis.

COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 crisis has upended daily life across the country and transit is unfortunately no exception. When COVID-19 began spreading locally, both RTA riders and operators were faced with a terrifying new problem with little known except that the disease seemed to thrive indoors and in close quarters, which describes many RTA peak-time transit trips.

As the first local wave of COVID-19 took aim at many of our transit-reliant communities of color, many RTA employees also began to get sick. At one point this spring, one in eight RTA employees had been infected. CEO Alex Wiggins battled the disease himself in March and recovered. As of this writing, three RTA employees have passed away due to COVID-19.

In addition to that terrible human toll COVID-19 has taken on the RTA, the pandemic also caused major financial and operational issues for the RTA.

The financial effect of COVID-19

81 percent of the RTA’s anticipated 2020 operating revenues were based on sales tax revenue – 69 percent from local general use sales tax, 7 percent from hotel/motel sales tax, and 5 percent from vehicle sales tax. 17 percent was anticipated to come from passenger fares. COVID-19’s effect on the regional tourist economy means big drops in all of those projections.

Through June 30 – halfway through the RTA’s fiscal year – general use sales tax collection was down 26 percent, hotel tax was down 56 percent, and vehicle sales tax was down 11 percent. Passenger fare collection was down 57 percent with ridership that has declined 50 percent most months since the start of the pandemic.⁵

RIDER PROFILE

Judy Stevens, Michoud



“I ride the #39 Tulane to Ochsner every day to work and since the extension I’ve saved both time and money. Unfortunately, since COVID19 my line has seen a decrease in service. Right now riders catching the #39 Tulane are receiving Saturday service even on weekdays and it’s increased our transit time a lot.

I’m having to get up earlier and now I get home well past my normal time. What once was an hour plus ride now can take as long as an hour and forty five minutes. My 15-minute transfers now take 30 minutes, sometimes longer. After being interviewed by NOLA.COM a good samaritan offered to give me a ride in the mornings to not just save time but also protect me from COVID19. The decrease in service means riders can’t always socially distance and while there are some precautionary measures, it’s really not enough.”

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.



COVID-19 Effects on JeT

Jefferson Transit's (JeT) main source of revenue is a millage that is better protected from immediate economic shifts than sales tax, so COVID-19 did not have the same immediate effect. But JeT did see ridership drops and temporarily waived fares, so they will see some drop in revenue as well. With JeT already in some financial difficulty (see Page 29), this could be problematic over the next several years.



This sting was temporarily eased by the March 2020 passage of the CARES Act by the US Congress, which included emergency relief for transit agencies. The RTA received approximately \$43 million to go toward operating expenses.

As of September 2020, the RTA was projecting a gap of \$43.2 million in 2020 expenses and revenues – basically what the CARES Act funding will cover. But what happens in 2021 is a very different story. If the COVID situation remains static and revenue collection is off in coming months from the original budget by the same percentages as it was in July 2020, the RTA would see an approximately \$38 million gap in expected revenue from 2020 to 2021 – a 35 percent drop.⁶ If true, that would lead to extremely damaging cuts if more federal funding were not available.

The operational effects of COVID

With staffing in disarray from an unprecedented situation, the RTA went through several rounds of service cuts, first going to a Saturday service schedule level, then making further cuts with some lines temporarily eliminated, and then moving back to the Saturday service schedule in May when the City of New Orleans entered Phase I of reopening. At first these cuts were justified as necessary because of the uncertain RTA staffing situation. As the COVID situation continued, RTA leadership said they had to remain at Saturday service levels to save operating funds in an uncertain situation, pointing to ridership levels well below 50 percent. As of press time, they are also considering reducing streetcar service levels.

While many usual riders are not working, many others are or are starting to. That means going to Saturday level service – which means across the board, one size fits all cuts - is starting to be problematic on some lines, bringing long waits and dangerous overcrowding, while other lines see virtually no passengers.

The RTA says that it is monitoring all buses in real time to ensure that regular 40-foot buses don't get above 15 passengers at one time and the articulated 60-foot buses don't get above 24 passengers at one time. When any bus reaches that threshold, the RTA says the dispatch team sends out another bus to the line immediately. Riders are more skeptical and report regular crowding on bus lines like the #39 Tulane, #88 St. Claude, #94 Broad, and #114 General DeGaulle, without any signs of relief.

Hard Rock Hotel collapse

Even before COVID-19 became an issue, the RTA and transit riders were dealing with the fallout of a more localized disaster – the October 2019 collapse of the under-construction Hard Rock Hotel at Canal and N. Rampart. The collapse hit the transit systems especially hard because it blocked off access to the main transfer areas and created significant traffic problems in accessing downtown.

Practically speaking, this meant confusion for riders and a huge uptick in reliability problems.

The initial transit agency response in the days immediately after the collapse was firm. RTA leadership decided that all transfers previously made at Elk Place would instead be made temporarily at RTA headquarters on Canal near Broad. They deemed all areas close to the collapse site – including most of the area surrounding the Elk Place transfer area – to be unsafe for waiting passengers. But this added a huge unreliability and travel time factor, as bus lines would still come through downtown, but then would make an approximately 1.5 mile detour to the RTA building. According to RTA on-time performance data, RTA buses as a whole went from 69 percent on time in September to only 57 percent in October.

Poor communication and a disintegrating chain of command added confusion to the mix. Supposedly without direction from the leadership at Transdev, the company responsible for operations and maintenance, operators began independently letting riders on and off at the intersection of Canal and Claiborne. This made a certain amount of operational sense as it was an open area closer to the usual transfer center, but it was not announced publicly since it was not a formal decision until after it was a fait accompli.

In November 2019, with the Elk Place transfer site still blocked off, the RTA moved the downtown transfer center to Duncan Plaza and across the street at Loyola and Perdido. While having a more permanent, centralized hub was an improvement on the confusion of the first few weeks, many operational inconsistencies remained. Bus lines were not assigned to specific locations along the new transfer area for weeks, leading to inconsistent pick up locations, confusion, and frustration for riders. This also contributed to the growing divide between the new RTA staff and the contractor (see Page 10).

Picking up Canal Street streetcar service has been another challenge as the hotel collapse has blocked the lines at N Rampart to this day. The Canal lines were rerouted to go down Loyola and end at the UPT in order to connect with the new transfer area. But there is no streetcar stop in front of Duncan Plaza so riders who want to connect have to walk to Poydras or Tulane for the transfer, an inconvenience that adds more time to already long trips.

Meanwhile, almost one year after the initial collapse, Algiers transit riders are still forced to wait on the edge of a parking lot without shelter from the sun or rain. Riders on the Duncan Plaza side at least have the benefit of the shade from the live oak trees.

The RTA has added some amenities, including porta-potties and some coverings on top of the bare ground between the sidewalk and street that riders have to step on to reach the bus door and which often gets muddy during rain.

The long-term status of the transfer center is unclear. CEO Alex Wiggins has indicated that he doesn't want riders to return to the Elk Place transfer area. In Spring 2020, the RTA submitted a federal grant application for funds to build a new transfer center at Basin and Canal (see Page 10) but was not successful.

Figure 19: Downtown transit service map after the move to Duncan Plaza



Source: New Orleans Regional Planning Commission



Riders waiting to go back to Algiers at the corner of Loyola and Perdido

RIDER PROFILE

Ernest Johnson, Broadmoor



“I rely on the #28 M.L.King bus every day to get to and from work. When the bus is on schedule it saves me time and I can usually arrive at work 10 minutes early but when it’s not, that’s a different story. As an active member of my community, I attend several organizations and neighborhood association meetings after work and in the evenings, I need the bus to be reliable and on time to make those meetings. But it’s not just about work, on Sunday’s I take the #16 S. Claiborne to participate in the drum circle in Congo Square. The bus, in short, is a part of my daily life, and when it’s working as it should, saves me time and money.”

Ernest Johnson works at the New Orleans Mission, is a board member for Us Helping Us New Orleans, and is the president of The Broadmoor Improvement Association Board of Commissioners.

WHERE’S THE BUS?

The deficiencies shown in “access-to-jobs via transit” are only part of the problem. The time estimates in that analysis assume transit vehicles maintain the schedule. But, as most riders know, the system’s on-time performance leaves a lot to be desired. Consequently, the on-the-ground situation often is much worse as riders face long waits for the next bus and cascading effects on transfers later in their trip.

As the chart below shows, the median monthly On Time Performance (OTP)* has dropped slightly over the last few years and is far from the goal set by the RTA’s own 2017 Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP).

Figure 20: RTA OTP Goals V Actuals

	Median Monthly OTP 10/2017 to 9/2018	Median Monthly OTP 10/2018 to 9/2019	RTA OTP Goal for all fixed route transit by 2020	RTA OTP Goal for all fixed route transit by 2022
RTA Bus	73.10%	71.8%	80.0%	85.0%
RTA Streetcar	67.40%	65.0%	80.0%	85.0%

Source: New Orleans Regional Transit Authority; Ride New Orleans Analysis

The numbers are worse for particular lines.

- The #114 General DeGaulle-Sullen, the highest ridership Algiers bus, is the worst of the all-day buses, with a median monthly OTP of only 54% between October 2018 and September 2019.
- Several other lines register OTP barely above 60 percent, including the #64 Lake Forest (61%) serving New Orleans East, the #57 Franklin (63%) serving Gentilly, and the #115 General DeGaulle-Tullis (63%) serving Algiers.
- All three major streetcar lines – the St. Charles, Canal-Cemeteries, and Canal-City Park, had median monthly OTPs under 70 percent, at 64.3%, 66.0%, and 63.6%, respectively.

Another way to examine OTP is to group transit lines by neighborhood, which exposes more inequities in the system. Riders in New Orleans East and Algiers, for example, have more unreliable transit than other parts of the city as can be seen in Figure 21.

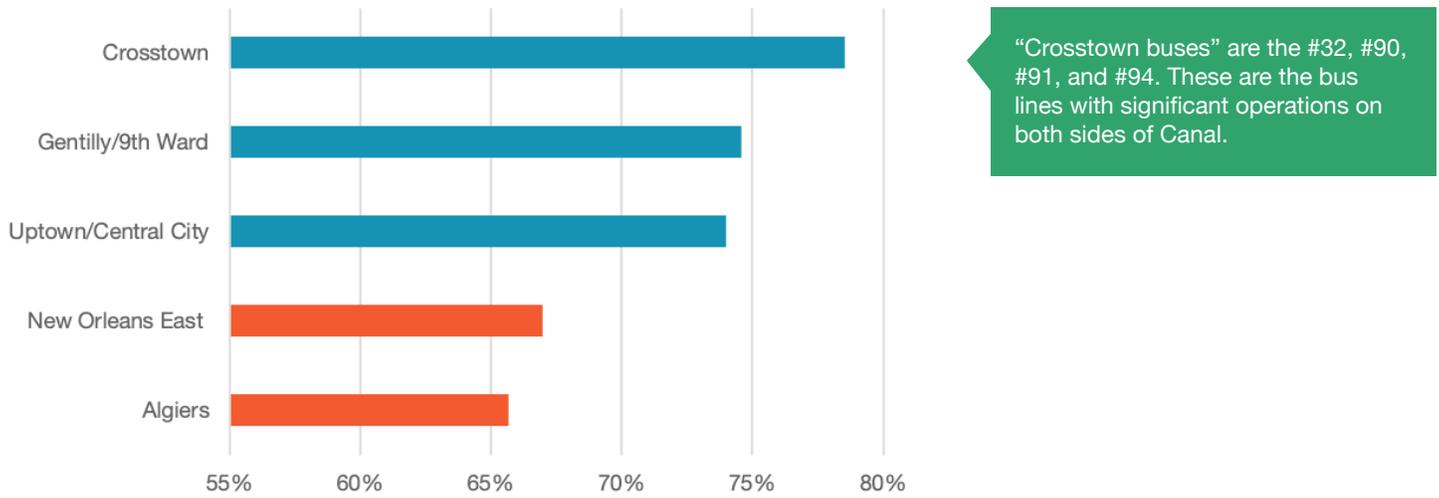
Fixing OTP

OTP issues should not be surprising. The RTA formally admitted the problem by making improving OTP a key metric in the 2017 SMP. But what is the RTA actively doing to improve OTP?

RTA officials say that they are improving timetables for each line so they are easier to follow – with a special focus on

* The RTA defines “on-time” as between one minute early and five minutes late.

Figure 21: Average bus line OTP by neighborhood from October 2018 to September 2019



Source: New Orleans Regional Transit Authority; Ride New Orleans analysis

different times of day (see Page 31). They also say that much of the incentive to sever ties with Transdev (see Page 10) is due to problems with OTP, including scheduled trips that were completely dropped.⁷ The RTA says public control will give them more direct control over issues like OTP – especially around individual operator performance.

Those two fixes may help, but there are several other areas that the RTA needs to prioritize as well:

- Dedicated lanes downtown:** In our analysis of OTP by neighborhood, the crosstown buses had the best OTP performance. An important contributing factor is that those buses, with the exception of the #91 Jackson-Esplanade, don't enter the New Orleans CBD. Regular rush hour and special event traffic in the CBD is unpredictable and often negatively impacts the OTP of any line that goes downtown. Dedicated transit lanes on key downtown transit corridors like Loyola, Basin, and O'Keefe would ease this problem by creating predictability. But with the City of New Orleans – not the RTA – controlling street space, the RTA will need to make a forceful case for implementation of dedicated transit lanes. This has not happened yet and it will be hard to make much progress on OTP without it.
- Fix the streetcars:** Too often streetcars are seen as an aesthetic choice for New Orleans visitors and occasional riders and not real transit that needs to be efficient and effective. Poor OTP, overcrowded cars, and dismal travel times are written off as charming foibles, not critical transit shortcomings. But thousands of local riders rely on the streetcars every day – especially the Canal lines. The RTA is long overdue for a campaign to modernize and optimize streetcar performance. This could be a bold initiative like last year's streetcar pilot proposal to optimize stops and eliminate vehicular crossings of the neutral ground. Or it could be just a series of smaller changes like changing boarding practices or implementing signal priority. But some effort needs to be made.
- Implement New Links recommendations:** especially in New Orleans East and Algiers: Under the current system, almost all New Orleans East and Algiers routes go directly to the New Orleans CBD. This benefits riders who catch the bus at just the right time and have a one-seat ride downtown. But it means less frequency and long waits between buses. It also means a consistently dismal OTP performance for most buses in each neighborhood as regular periods of heavy traffic downtown or on the highways throw every bus in the respective neighborhood off schedule. The New Links team calls for a rethinking of transit in New Orleans East and Algiers with more circulators that stay local and connect riders to express buses that go downtown. Implementing this idea would greatly improve reliability for long suffering riders in each neighborhood.

UNRELIABLE FERRIES

Ferry service has been an awkward fit at the RTA since the agency assumed responsibility from the State of Louisiana in 2014. The shift in management came after the Louisiana legislature prohibited the ferries' primary source of revenue – the former tolls on the Crescent City Connection bridge – from being used to support the ferries and those tolls were then eliminated by local voters. In the near-crisis that followed, there was talk of possible elimination of the ferries and the Gretna-Canal Street line was, in fact, eliminated. Ultimately, the City and State agreed to privatize ferry operations. Then-delegated management contractor Transdev took over management through the auspices of the RTA. Operations were supported with an approximately \$6 million annual state subsidy and the introduction of a \$2 fare for a previously free trip.⁸

But there was minimal thought into how to integrate the ferries into the transit system. The ferry budget also remained separate from the general RTA budget because of the direct state subsidies for the ferry. Therefore, much of the ferry operations remained at arms-length from the rest of the service.

That arrangement came back to haunt riders who rely on the Canal St./Algiers Point ferry service over the last 18 months, as the ferries experienced one of their worst periods ever for reliable service. From June 2019 until March 2020, riders literally did not know if the ferry would run on a daily basis. From September 15 to December 15 the ferries were completely shut down, replaced by a “bus bridge” over the CCC that added significant time to the normally 15-minute cross-river trip.

At issue, according to RTA officials, was the advanced age of the two boats long-used to run the Canal St./Algiers Point ferry, the Thomas Jefferson and the Armiger. Both boats went out of service, with the Thomas Jefferson in dry dock for lengthy repairs and the Armiger, constantly undergoing smaller repairs and then also going into dry dock.

The situation should never have arisen. In 2018, the RTA received two new state-of-the-art ferry boats, RTA #1 and RTA #2, that were supposed to replace the aging boats. But, both boats have not yet passed Coast Guard inspection. Much of the last two years has been a behind-the-scenes legal battle between RTA and the boat manufacturer, Metal Shark, about who is responsible for paying for the repairs and even the degree of repairs needed. Metal Shark claimed that the boats were able to pass inspection and the problem was operator error on the RTA's side.⁹ But a report issued for the RTA was damning, saying the hull of one of the two boats was welded improperly and that safety equipment was installed incorrectly, in addition to multiple cosmetic issues.¹⁰ It was hard for the public to understand the specific issues as the RTA board would only discuss the issue in depth in closed session with their attorney, while offering over-optimistic timetables throughout the fall of 2019 that indicated the new boats might be in the water by early 2020.

RTA officials blamed the overall situation on mismanagement by Transdev and, in the fall of 2019, stripped the ferry contract from the larger operations contract and rebid it. The winning bidder was a Louisiana company, LabMar, with more specific expertise in water-transportation, specifically in the Gulf oil industry.

While negotiating the final contract, the RTA awarded LabMar a temporary contract to operate the Canal St./Algiers Point ferry service using the Margaret Lab, a LabMar owned boat converted to general passenger ferry. The December 15 addition of that service ended the ferry uncertainty that had been plaguing the service since the previous summer, though it temporarily reduced the frequency to one trip from each side an hour instead of every 30 minutes.

Clear sailing ahead?

In summer 2020, RTA and Metal Shark came to an agreement over repairs to the new ferry boats. At press time, the RTA announced that the first of the new RTA boats would finally start to serve riders. The announced date to begin service was October 10.

In addition, the New Links network redesign proposed a redesign of Algiers transit that would increase bus service to the Algiers Point ferry terminal to every 30 minutes and widen access so riders would have a direct link to the ferry terminal from the neighborhoods along Tullis and General Meyer, the Wilty Terminal, and Gretna. That service would be timed to match the regular ferry schedule. They also proposed the RTA implement a free transfer from bus to ferry so riders would not have to pay at least \$3.25 for a single trip that uses both modes.

If this change is implemented and if the new ferry boats are truly reliable, this would be a big step forward, allowing thousands more Algiers residents the ability to access reliable service.

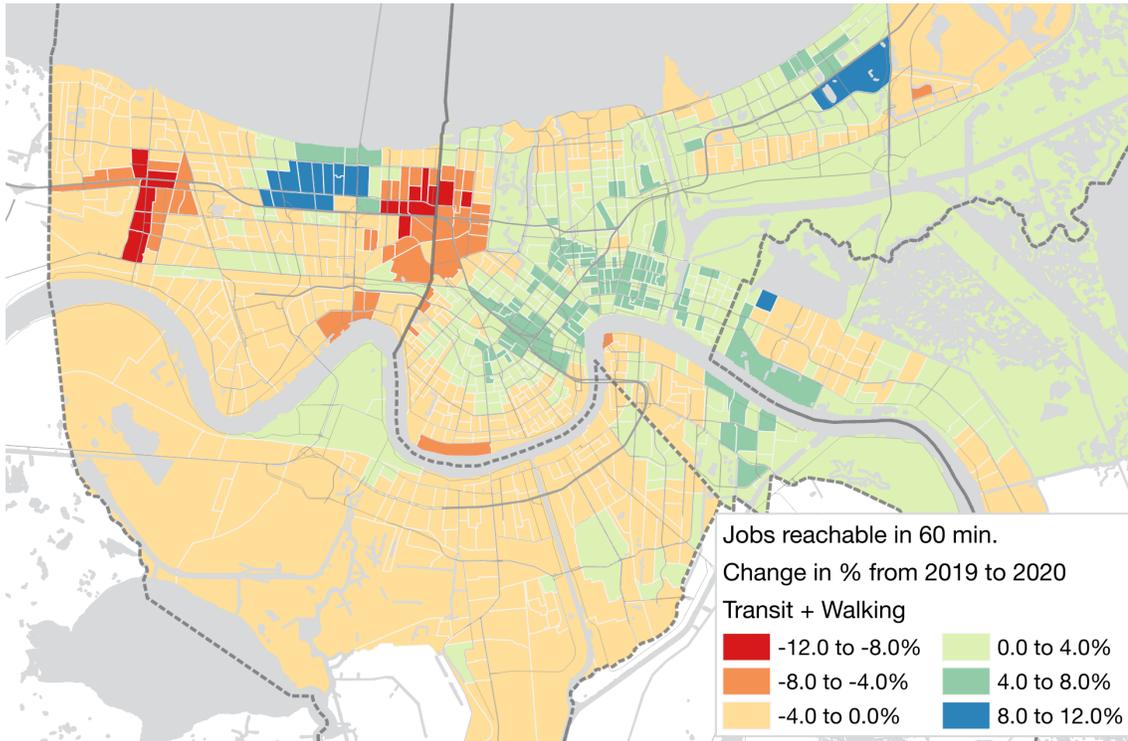
THE REGIONAL DIVIDE STILL LOOMS

New Links could bring real change to regional transit connectivity, but it's important to note that we're not there yet. The status quo in regional transit is still not working for riders. We have a regional economy, but multiple transit systems that operate with a narrow view that assumes, first and foremost, that the priority should be to transport riders only within the jurisdiction they serve.

For example, in the current system, Google maps indicates it would take more than three hours traveling from Bullard Avenue in New Orleans East to Elmwood via transit during rush hour. On a Sunday, the trip would basically be impossible. But the trip would take an average of just over 30 minutes via car.

This glaring inequity in access for New Orleans East residents to one of the region's largest jobs center is because we don't have real regional routes and adequate regional connectivity. It's a story that's repeated in a number of disadvantaged communities on different sides of the parish lines.

Figure 22: Percent change in jobs reachable by transit in an hour or less from 2019 to 2020



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

Signs of progress

Fortunately, there have been signs of progress in recent years that show an increasing number of regional leaders understand this. The cooperation between Jefferson and Orleans parish officials to approve the extension of the RTA's #39 Tulane bus across parish lines to reach the Ochsner Medical Center on Jefferson highway in 2018 is a great example (see State of Transit 2019).

RIDE's analysis also shows that creating new regional connections will make a big difference in access to jobs for communities that need the help. For example, consider the effect of JeT's 2019 decision to create a new branch of the E-1 Veterans going from Louis Armstrong airport to the New Orleans CBD. Previously all E-1 buses ended at Cemeteries Transfer Center and New Orleans CBD-bound riders would have to transfer to the much-slower Canal streetcar line. This made it impossible for most riders from the Veterans corridor to get to the CBD in under an hour.

But as you can see in the above map, neighborhoods along Veterans Highway between Clearview and Causeway saw a sizeable increase in jobs accessible in 60 minutes-or-less via transit because of this change.

It's important to note that this was not an ideal change or process. Communities along Veterans near the parish line actually lost access to jobs in 60 minutes-or-less because of the change. This is likely due to the fact that when the E1 Veterans was split into two branches, the downtown-bound branch left Veterans Highway at Causeway to take Interstate-10. That means communities further east on Veterans saw reduced service levels as the downtown-bound branch did not serve them directly, even though the same total number of buses remained on the line.

Furthermore, the new route was not optimized to consider reliability. According to Jefferson Transit data, OTP on the E1 Veterans went from 83% in September 2019 to 63% in December 2019, the first full month of the change, meaning much of the theoretical gains in access may have been lost to unreliable on-the-ground conditions.

But it does show that it is very possible to make new regional connections without having to find significant new revenue and that those changes can bring big increases in access to communities. But it also shows that the changes can't come from isolated adjustments to individual lines. Those changes can also have negative effects on other communities and the on-the-ground situation may not predict the full on-paper effect unless they are carefully plotted out.

This brings us once again to New Links and why a comprehensive, data-driven, equity-focused effort to redesign the regional transit network is the region's best option for big gains in transit access and reliability over the next five years.

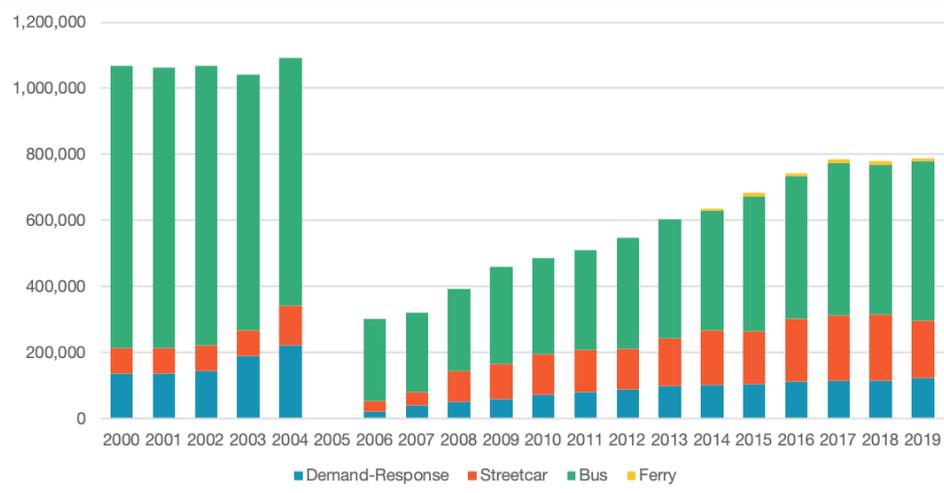
2020 New Orleans

TRANSIT BY THE NUMBERS



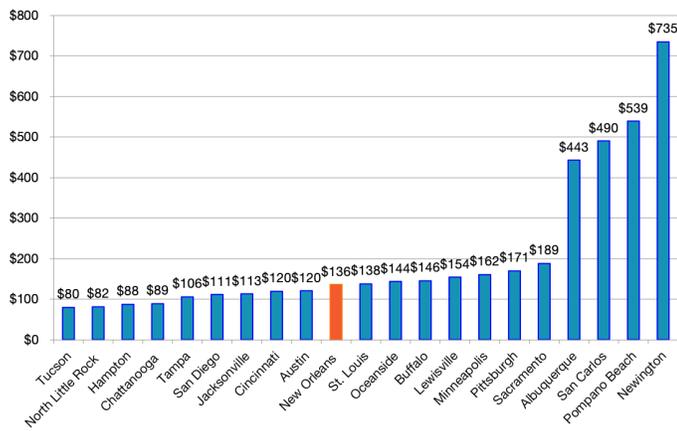
Vehicle Revenue Hours (VRH) are hours a transit vehicle actively serves customers. It's a standard way to measure total service and whether it's increasing or decreasing. In 2019, the RTA saw a slight increase in overall VRH and a seven percent increase in bus VRH. There's been a 15 percent increase in RTA VRH since 2015, but the increase has plateaued over the last three years.

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



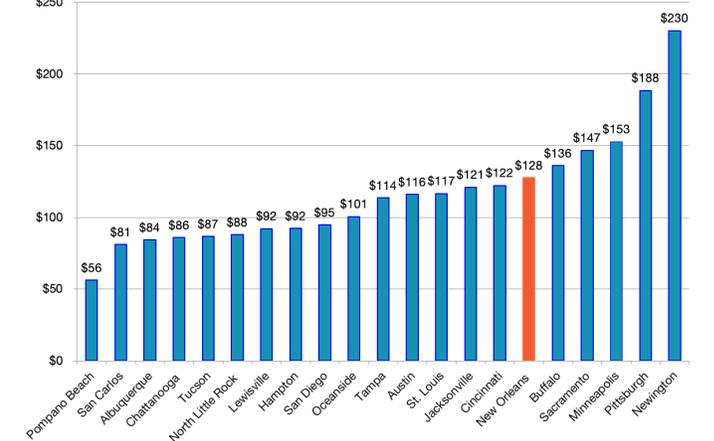
Source: National Transit Database (NTD) 2000-2018 and Regional Transit Authority 2019 NTD filing

Figure 24: Total operating expenses per VRH, 2018 - peer agencies



Source: National Transit Database (NTD) 2018

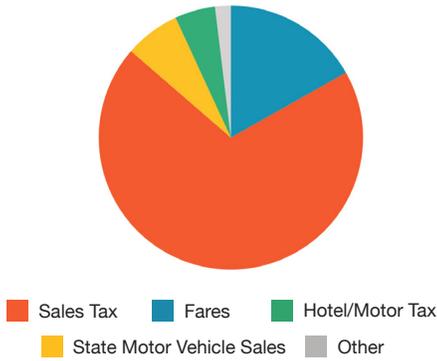
Figure 25: Bus operating expenses per VRH, 2018 - peer agencies



Source: National Transit Database (NTD) 2018

To evaluate cost effectiveness, RIDE annually compares RTA cost per vehicle revenue hour (VRH) to cost per VRH for a group of equivalent agencies in other regions (based on modeling at the Florida Transit Information System). Lower operating costs mean more service for riders. The RTA has seen an overall decline in costs per VRH recently – going from \$149 per total VRH/\$148 per bus VRH in 2014, to \$136/\$128, respectively in 2018. The RTA's bus service is still more costly per VRH than many of its peers.

Figure 26: 2020 RTA operations budget: \$107,299,077 in local funds



The RTA's 2020 approved budget projected the RTA's highest collection of local sales tax ever, following steady annual improvements in recent years. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 crisis, sales tax collection is expected to plummet this year. The RTA is only able to stave off deficits in 2020 due to \$43 million in emergency federal funding and switching to Saturday service levels. Available operating revenues for 2021 are unclear as of press time.

JeT relies on a millage instead of sales tax for the primary source of local dedicated funds, meaning JeT is more insulated from short-term economic issues. JeT also has been spending more than it generates for several years, gradually depleting a reserve fund to make up the difference. This will become a serious issue for transit riders and employers in the next few years if additional revenue is not found.

Figure 28: 2020 JET operations budget: \$16,613,138 in local funds

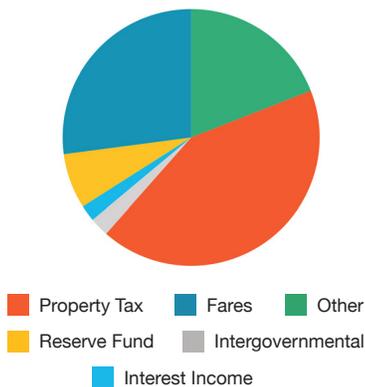
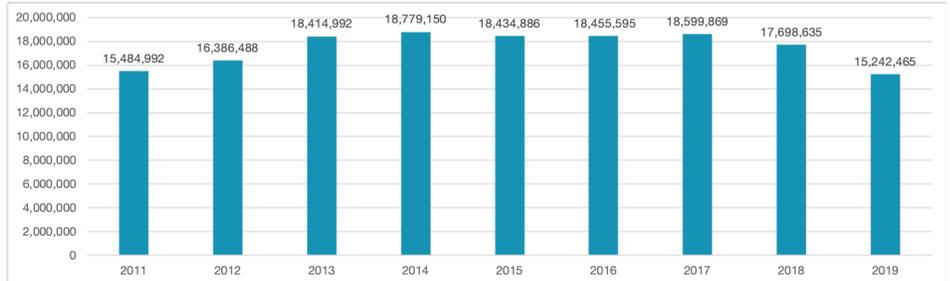


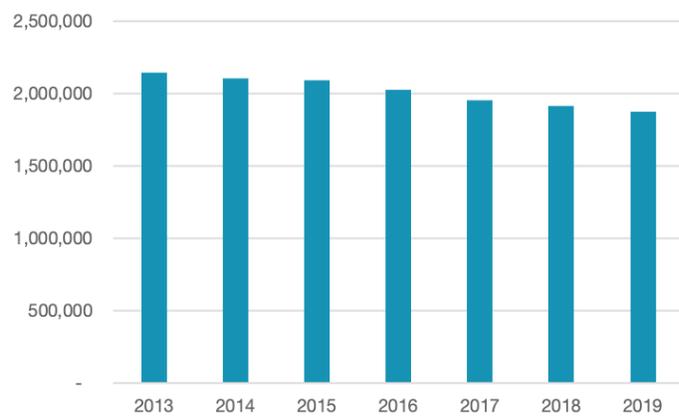
Figure 27: RTA total boardings by year



RTA ridership dropped for the second consecutive year and much more sharply – with a 14 percent decline, mostly from streetcars. The St. Charles line was under construction most of the year and the Hard Rock Hotel collapse led to the complete shuttering of the Rampart/St. Claude streetcar spur, temporarily shut down the Riverfront Streetcar line, and severed the Canal Street lines at their busiest point in the CBD. When you take away “bus bridge” ridership (using a bus in place of streetcar when the tracks are shut down), bus ridership declined from 2018, but at a slower level of 5 percent.

JeT ridership continued its slow decline over the last decade, with a two percent drop in 2019. The biggest ridership drop came on the E3 Kenner Local, which saw a 15 percent loss. The first full year of the RTA's #39 Tulane extension to Ochsner Medical Center on Jefferson Highway may have contributed, since RTA customers now had a much easier and cheaper trip to Ochsner. JeT's highest ridership bus, the E1 Veterans, saw an 8 percent increase, with steady gains all year that really took off in November when the new airport terminal opening led JeT to create two branches of the E-1, with one branch terminating in the New Orleans CBD.

Figure 29: Jefferson Transit total boardings by year



Sources: New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (Figures 26 and 27); Jefferson Parish 2020 Budget (Figure 28); Jefferson Transit (Figure 29)

Figure 30: Travel time to nearest hospital on public transit and walking

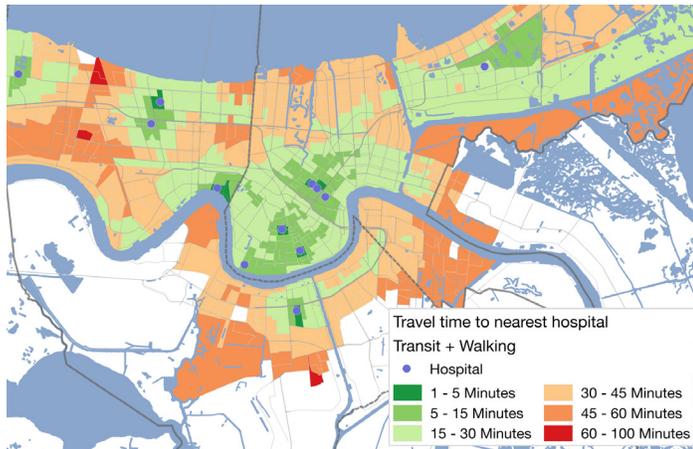
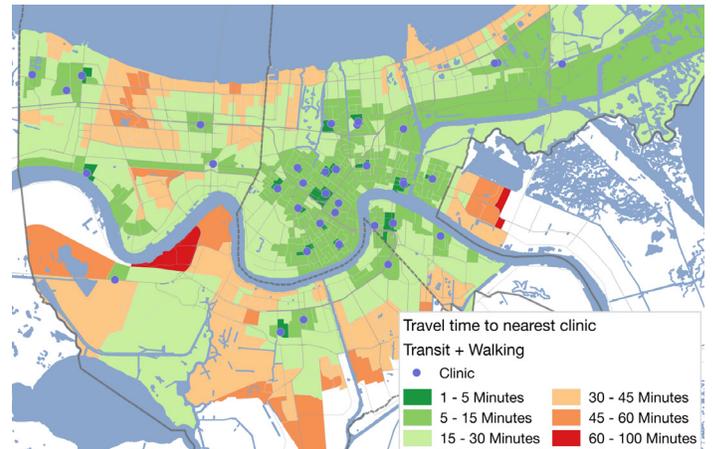


Figure 31: Travel time to nearest community clinic on public transit and walking



The RTA's 2017 Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) added improved access to health care services via transit as an RTA goal. Per the recommendation of health advocates, the RTA established a goal of 65 percent of transit riders within 30 minutes of a hospital via transit and 80 percent of transit riders within 30 minutes of a community health clinic via transit. RTA service has consistently been above the goal for community health clinics and just below the goal for hospitals over the last several years.

Figure 32: Number & percent of households able to reach any hospital or clinic within 30 mins

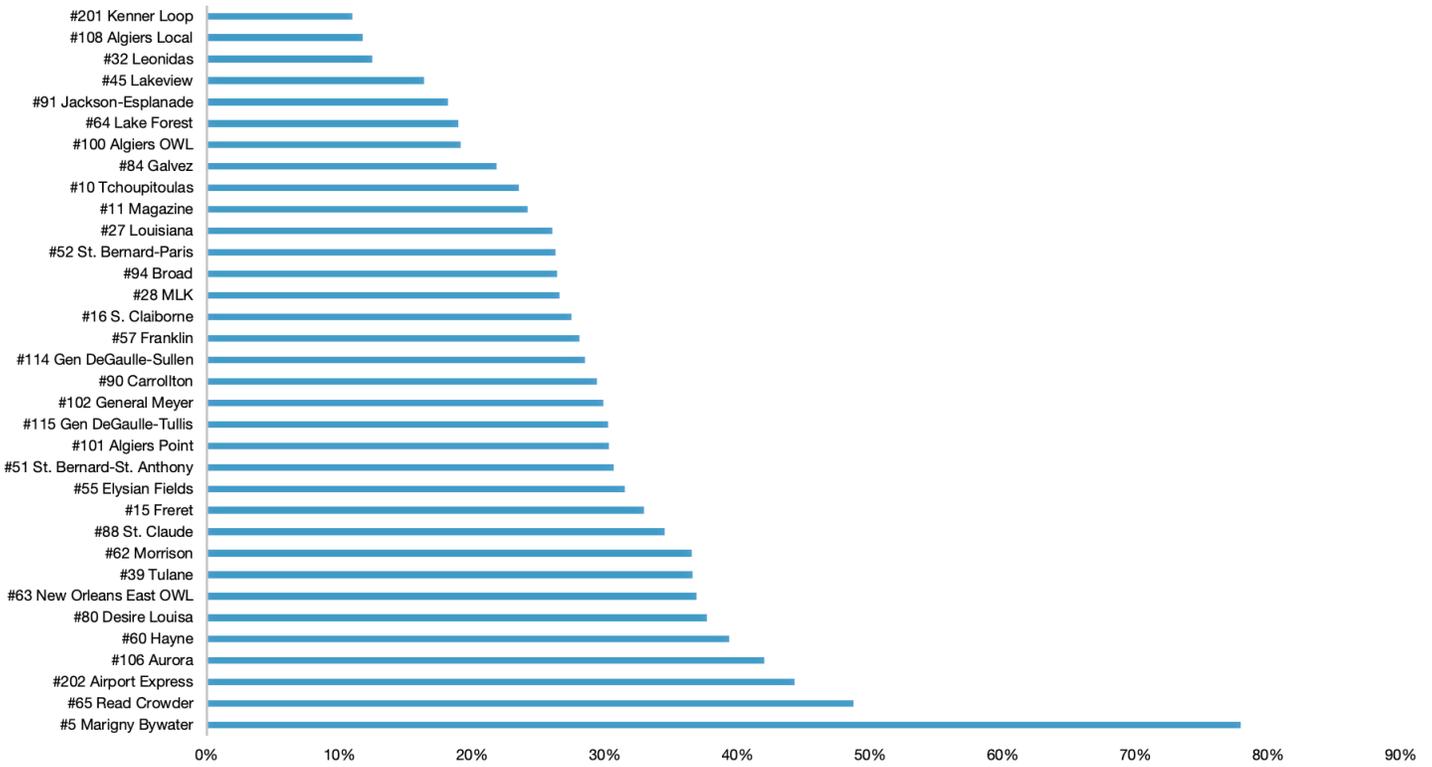
	Parish	Hospital		Clinic	
		#	%	#	%
2020	Jefferson	52,653	31%	96,374	57%
	Orleans	97,300	63%	135,707	88%
	Overall	149,953	46%	232,081	72%
2019	Jefferson	58,747	35%	97,235	58%
	Orleans	99,401	64%	136,505	88%
	Overall	158,148	49%	233,740	72%

Figure 33: RTA median monthly on time performance (OTP) by bus line, October 2018 - September 2019



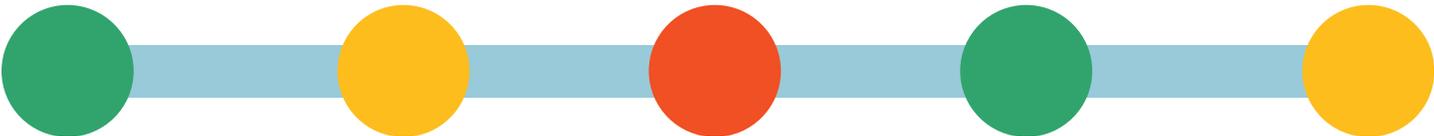
The RTA SMP sets a goal of 85 percent OTP by 2022, but recent actual performance has lagged goals. Here RIDE includes the median monthly OTP for each RTA bus line between October 2018 and September 2019. We stop the analysis in September 2019 because the Hard Rock Hotel collapse and COVID-19 crisis make the post-September 2019 data harder to compare with past performance.

Figure 34: Percent difference in median/90th percentile run times for RTA bus lines



Another way to look at OTP is the difference in individual “run times” on routes. Run times are the time for a transit vehicle to travel from beginning to end of a route. Larger run time variation means a line that is less predictable. If the schedule doesn’t reflect these variations at different times of day, which the RTA schedule mostly does not, it makes it less reliable as well. Here RIDE looks at each RTA bus line to see the difference between the median run time and some of the longer run times to see which lines are less reliable by this standard. RTA planning staff is preparing schedule updates in the next year that should hopefully address this problem.

Sources: RTA, Jefferson Transit, OpenStreetMap, U.S. Census Bureau: LODS (2017); Ride New Orleans analysis (Figures 30, 31, 32); New Orleans Regional Transit Authority; Ride New Orleans analysis (Figure 33 and 34)



What are the next steps?



Implement the New Links regional transit network redesign

Finally give riders the reliable, frequent, and regional transit system that they deserve

pg. 33



Make it regional

Start the next steps in regional coordination between RTA and JeT – especially around farebox integration

pg. 38

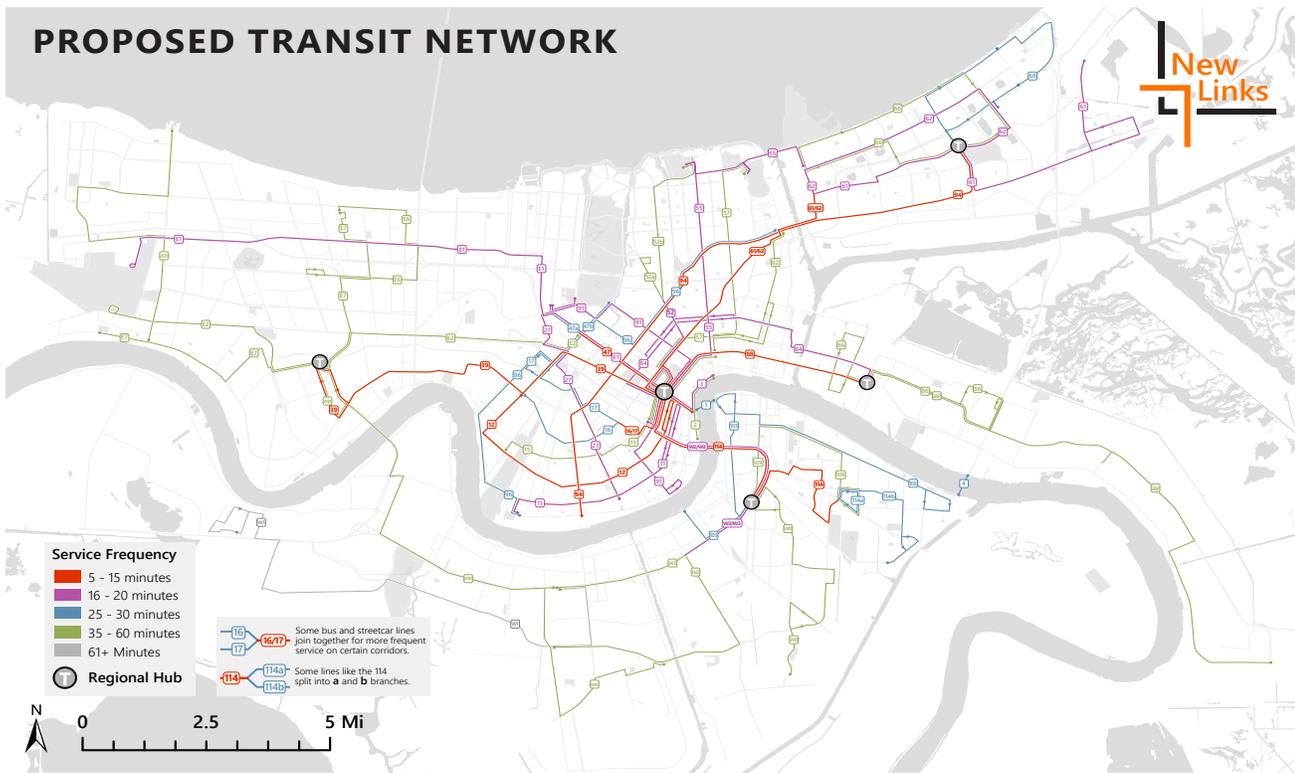


Plan for the long-term

Use New Links to develop a tiered long-term capital needs plan and transparent next steps for future service enhancements

pg. 40

Figure 35: New Links proposed transit network



Source: Regional Planning Commission

IMPLEMENT NEW LINKS

The region's transit agencies must prioritize implementing New Links over the next year. This is the region's best chance to provide transit access that meets rider and employer needs. Otherwise, the region will waste a "once a decade" opportunity to comprehensively improve transit.

The draft New Links proposal will bring a lot of changes – and those can sometimes be scary and feel disruptive. But these needed changes will improve transit's performance in five key areas:

- Access to jobs
- Equitable transit service
- Regional connectivity
- Response to rider priorities
- Increased chances of future success

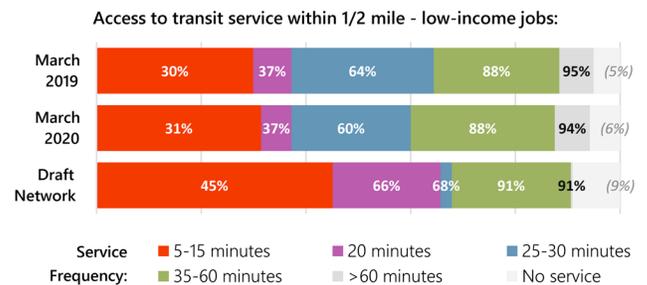
In the next few pages, we unpack the benefits of each.

New Links means access to jobs

New Links implementation will mean thousands more jobs will immediately be within a reasonable commute for the average transit rider. Driving this increased access is the fact that many more jobs will be within walking distance of high frequency transit. Currently only 1/3 of jobs in the region are within a 10-minute walk (1/2 mile) of transit that comes every 15 minutes or less. With the New Links proposal, that will increase to almost half of the jobs. And 64% of the region's jobs will now be within a 10-minute walk of transit that comes every 20 minutes or less.

These impressive numbers support why implementation of the New Links proposal would be such a big win for the region.

Figure 36: Percent of low-income jobs within 1/2 mile of different levels of transit service



Source: Regional Planning Commission

New Links means equitable transit service

In building the framework for the network redesign, the New Links team used a scoring framework called the Transit Propensity Index (TPI) to determine where to prioritize service (see page 8). The index assigns points to routes and corridors to determine where to prioritize transit service, with the highest scoring geographic areas receiving top priority. The TPI gives more points to routes and corridors based on metrics correlated with a need for transit like a higher number of residents of color, low-income residents, low wage jobs, and households without a vehicle. This means that New Links will make transit work significantly better for communities of color and lower income communities.

Figure 37: Changes to percent of residents of color within 1/2 mile of different levels of transit service

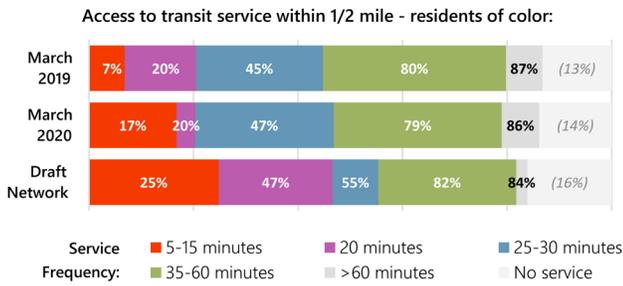


Figure 38: Changes to percent of residents in poverty within 1/2 mile of different levels of transit service

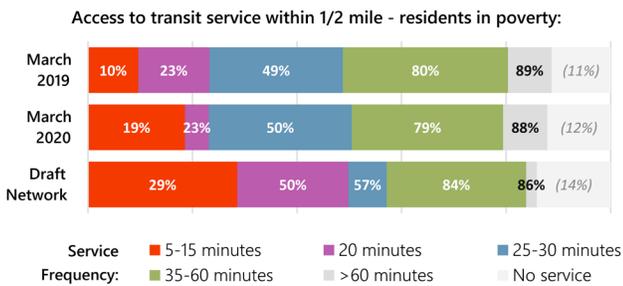


Figure 39: Changes to percent of carless households within 1/2 mile of different levels of transit service

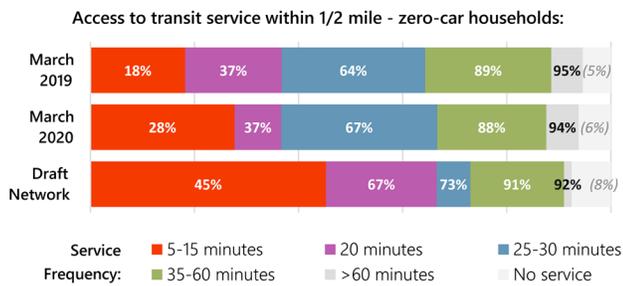


Figure 40: New Links New Orleans East map



Source: Regional Planning Commission (for all figures on this page)

Some key highlights include:

- 47 percent of residents of color will be within a 1/2 mile (10-minute walk) of transit that comes every 20 minutes or less (compared to only 20 percent today)
- 50 percent of residents in poverty will be within a 1/2 mile (10-minute walk) of transit that comes every 20 minutes or less (compared to only 23 percent today)
- 45 percent of carless households will be within a 1/2 mile (10-minute walk) of transit that comes every 15 minutes or less (compared to only 31 percent today). 2/3 of carless households will be within a 1/2 mile (10-minute walk) of transit that comes every 20 minutes or less.

New Links will also provide a geographic equity boost, as some of the highest-need neighborhoods would see big gains in access.

- Hollygrove residents will be able to access four transit lines coming every 30 minutes or less, including a #39 Tulane bus that can connect them directly to three of the largest jobs centers in the region – the New Orleans CBD, Elmwood, and Ochsner Hospital.
- Central City residents will see stepped up service on the four lines that currently serve the neighborhood, including the addition of service every 15 minutes along MLK and Simon Bolivar, providing much more frequent connections to downtown New Orleans and the main transfer center.
- Lower 9th Ward residents will see greatly increased service on the main lines connecting the neighborhood with downtown New Orleans, the #84 Galvez and #88 St. Claude. They will also see the introduction of a circulator that connects residents within the Lower 9 to the main lines and key destinations in Arabi and Chalmette – something community leaders stressed as a priority during the first two phases of New Links outreach.

But the biggest improvements will occur in the high-need neighborhoods that are hardest to serve due to their car-centric design and distance from other major destinations - New Orleans East and the West Bank.

- **New Orleans East:** Riders will see a reimagining of how transit works in the East. All routes in the East will connect to a new hub at Read and Lake Forest. From there, two bus lines, the #62 Morrison and #64 Lake Forest (renamed the #61), will take riders downtown via the existing routes on those corridors. Some riders will connect to buses traveling downtown via local circulators that will remain in New Orleans East, but the frequency and reliability of the buses they most often use will improve, leading to reduced overall travel time for most riders. New Orleans East riders will still have the option of the #94 Broad for crosstown trips, but it will be extended to Tchoupitoulas (via Napoleon), giving the neighborhood direct access to Uptown without having to go through downtown. Riders will also have the option to transfer to a redesigned and more frequent #55 Elysian Fields, extended across the Industrial Canal, to reach UNO, SUNO, and other destinations in Gentilly.
- **Algiers:** Similar to New Orleans East, the West Bank will see a redesign of the network with fewer total lines going across the river, but more frequency on the lines that do. All Algiers and Gretna routes will connect to the existing transit hub at Willy Terminal in Gretna. Algiers riders will see enhanced frequency on the General DeGaulle buses, and the chance to transfer to more JeT headed downtown or to other West Bank destinations. Like in New Orleans East, more riders will rely on local circulators to

connect to lines travelling downtown. This additional transfer is a tradeoff, but one with significant benefits – reduced overall travel time for most riders and more reliability since more buses will stay on the West Bank and not get caught in traffic on the bridge or in downtown New Orleans.

West Bank riders will also see a better connection to the Algiers Point ferry – currently difficult for anyone to use who is not in the vicinity of Algiers Point. This will be accomplished by a new bus line connecting the Cut-Off neighborhood and Gretna via the ferry terminal and General Meyer.

New Links means regional connectivity

We have a regional economy but separate transit systems that don't work in a coordinated fashion to get riders across parish lines. One of the biggest potential benefits to New Links is a number of proposals to improve this situation.

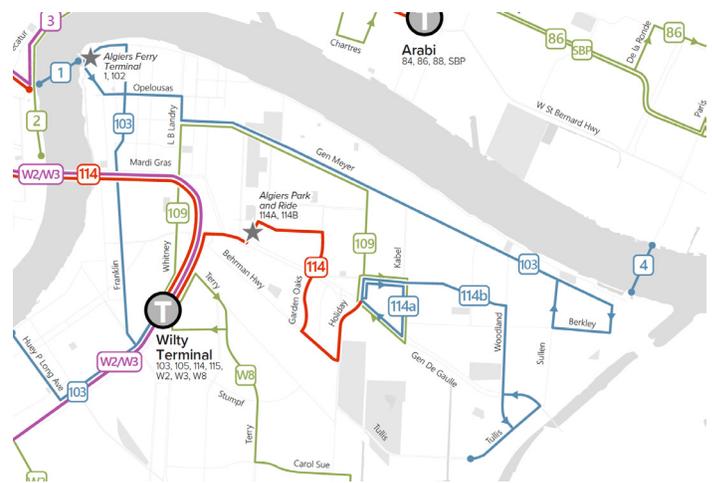
On the East Bank, New Links proposes two regional routes, one operated by each of the two transit agencies.

- The RTA's #39 Tulane bus, recently extended across parish lines to Ochsner Medical Center, will continue all the way to Elmwood, running every 15 minutes between the New Orleans CBD and Elmwood – two of the biggest job centers in the region.
- JeT's E-1 Veterans will run as a rapid line from the Cemeteries Transfer Center to downtown New Orleans stopping at major intersections on Canal Street, creating a direct connection between the New Orleans CBD and the main Metairie business area as well as a more reliable and frequent connection to the airport. JeT already operates a branch of the E-1 Veterans to downtown New Orleans, but that extension was poorly coordinated when it was introduced immediately after the new airport terminal opened and has been plagued by poor promotion and unreliable service (see Page 27). This proposal will ensure a more coordinated and reliable connection that will be a real boost for regional connectivity.

On the West Bank, New Links proposes that RTA and Jefferson Transit both route their West Bank lines through the Wilty Terminal in Gretna, JeT's main West Bank transfer facility. This will bring two benefits:

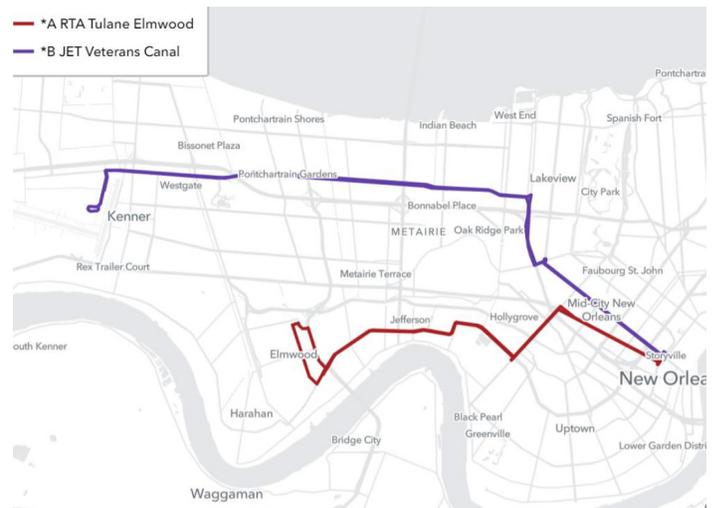
- First, it will create more reliable connections between West Bank communities in both parishes. Currently, with only one infrequent RTA route making the connection at Wilty Terminal, it is difficult for riders to reliably connect to other West Bank destinations.
- Second, and more importantly for the long-term, it will set up a future economy of scale for both transit agencies that maximizes service for West Bank riders going to the East Bank while minimizing agency cost. Downtown New Orleans and the Crescent City Connection bridge are traffic bottlenecks that currently consume significant RTA and JeT resources as both agencies throw multiple buses from multiple lines into an uphill battle to provide as frequent service as possible to downtown for West Bank riders. Centering operations on Wilty Terminal means more opportunities for the two agencies to combine forces on express buses across the river. That would lead to much more frequent service between the West Bank and downtown for riders, but at much less cost for the two agencies.
- To make this work, both agencies will need to coordinate more closely on schedule planning and take steps toward fare integration (see Page 38). But routing lines through Wilty Terminal will help make additional advancements possible in the next few years.

Figure 41: New Links Algiers map



Source: Regional Planning Commission

Figure 42: New Links East Bank regional routes



Source: Regional Planning Commission

RTA service standards can keep New Links fresh in coming years

In parallel with the New Links process, the RTA is developing formal service standards to evaluate, design, and modify transit service in the future. This will standardize agency evaluation of transit performance and create a transparent and objective process to regularly update the work of the New Links network redesign.

Targets will be established for each corridor based on the Transit Propensity Index (TPI – see Page 8) and equity metrics. This will be used as a baseline to determine which corridors should be prioritized and at what service level. For example, a rising TPI along a particular corridor might mean 24 hour service in the future, with higher frequencies throughout the day.

The standards are broken into two main categories: performance evaluation and service design guidelines.

Performance evaluation is used to establish service equity and productivity targets for corridors and areas and to determine if existing transit lines are meeting those targets. Service design guidelines provide criteria for determining the operational factors of transit service: service frequency, stop spacing, service duplication, route paths, etc. Together, they will provide the RTA and the public with a clear set of guidelines and standards for developing, managing, and improving transit service.

New Links responds to rider priorities

Throughout the New Links public engagement process, riders were clear about their top two priorities. They wanted buses to be more reliable and more frequent. New Links delivers on both counts.

Figure 43: Number of routes by frequency, 2020 service levels V New Links proposal

	Existing System		New Links Proposal	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
15 minutes or less	3	6%	6	16%
15.1 to 20 minutes	5	10%	10	26%
15.1 to 30 minutes	8	16%	10	26%
30.1 to 50 minutes	18	37%	5	13%
Greater than 50 minutes	15	31%	7	18%

Source: New Orleans Regional Transit Authority; Regional Planning Commission

- On frequency, a New Links implementation will take our system from only three transit lines that come every 15 minutes or less to six transit lines that do so. We will double the number of transit lines that come every 20 minutes or less. Importantly, these lines will run at that frequency all day, not just at peak times as they currently do, meaning more flexibility for riders.
- On reliability, New Links planners recommend that the agencies simplify and shorten a number of routes, which will improve reliability. This will be especially noticeable for RTA lines in New Orleans East and Algiers, where riders have consistently dealt with the most unreliable transit. One of the chief causes of this is that almost every line in each neighborhood currently follows a long and winding path into downtown New Orleans that leaves transit riders vulnerable to small backups causing cascading delays, leading to the level of unreliability discussed in the last section.

The New Links proposal calls for more local routes in each neighborhood to connect riders to high frequency lines that service downtown and other destinations. This would create two layers of benefits.

- More buses in each neighborhood will have strong on-time performance (OTP), enabling riders to get to local destinations with much more predictability.
- More buses can be put on the lines that still service downtown, leading to much greater frequency so even when one bus is delayed by traffic, another will be coming in under 15 minutes*

*It is also important to continue to push for dedicated transit lanes downtown, as noted on Page 25, which will do much to ensure that Algiers and New Orleans East express buses are more reliable).

Spotlight on New Links and New Orleans schools

Education stakeholders believe the New Links transit system redesign will facilitate easier access from schools and communities to skill and career development opportunities, including extracurricular activities, advanced coursework such as technical training and dual enrollment, and internships.

For example, YouthForce NOLA runs an annual summer internship program that places rising seniors from New Orleans open enrollment public high schools with employers throughout Orleans and Jefferson parishes. In 2019, more than half of participants lived in New Orleans East or on the Westbank, many of whom spent a substantial amount of time in daily transit in order to gain experience in their field of interest. By reducing transit times and increasing connectivity to regional job centers, the New Links transit network redesign will increase the number of young people who are able to access experiences that will prepare them for careers in high-wage, high-demand fields like healthcare and IT.

The network redesign could also go a long way towards making transit a viable alternative to private yellow bus service, potentially saving schools substantial resources that could be redirected to classroom instruction and student supports.

New Links sets up future improvements

Together, the benefits listed in the preceding pages are much more than the sum of their parts. That's because they would combine to create a greatly improved network across all parts of the region.

The current system is designed primarily to do two things – get people to downtown New Orleans, primarily during peak periods, and provide limited life-line service for residents with no other option. The New Links proposed network makes downtown access work better and preserves lifeline service for the riders who need it the most. But it also opens up greater access to many additional places. We see this network effect in the overall increase in access to jobs referenced above.

Creating a vastly improved network brings two important additional benefits:

- **More riders:** A more reliable system will start to attract new ridership and coax some former riders back to the system. As seen on Page 29, the regional transit system has been losing riders overall in recent years. There are many reasons for this, some beyond the transit agency's control. But a vastly improved network means transit that is more useful for more people. That will mean either increased ridership in the coming years, or, at the very least, a reduced level of decline from what we would see if we maintain the existing system. That means more funds for operating expenses than there otherwise would have been, which can be reinvested into additional service enhancements.
- **A template for next steps:** Outside of expensive and unhelpful (from a transit sense) streetcar investments, most RTA service enhancements over the last decade have been either aimed at restoring pre-Katrina service or aimed at boosting service on individual lines. Unfortunately, with very limited resources, this has mostly meant slight improvements around the edges, with little effect on the network as a whole.

The New Links proposed network changes that equation. With an identified spine of high capacity lines that would now hold the system together, and a rubric for where to prioritize service based on ridership demand and equity concerns, the New Links network would provide a clear priority list for investments moving forward. This means that riders would not only have an improved network, but a much clearer path toward greater transit improvements in the next decade and beyond.

RIDER PROFILE

Lavonte Lucas, Harvey



"I believe public transportation is an essential system that helps keeps our economy running, especially during times like the COVID-19 emergency.

I rely on public transit to get to school and as a freelance digital media professional, to my gigs that can be anywhere in the region. That being said, trip times can be so long.

I travel from the Westbank and for work, I often need to be in the New Orleans Central Business District. That ride on the W3 Lapalco can be up to an hour and a half. Between stops that take longer than expected and the unpredictability of traffic, I worry about being late.

I am grateful for public transportation keeping communities connected, and although the interactions may be small, I'm thankful to the bus drivers for keeping our transportation system safe and convenient."

Lavonte Lucas works as a freelance digital media professional and is a full time Dillard university junior, a New Orleans Youth Alliance alum, and a Youth Advisor for the New Orleans Children and Youth Planning Board.

MORE STEPS FORWARD ON REGIONAL COORDINATION

To reiterate, we can't connect more transit riders in the region to economic opportunity without improving regional transit connectivity. It's among our most critical tasks. But because the status quo sets the bar low, it's also among the easiest changes from a technical sense. Political boundaries create artificial challenges, but these should not be insurmountable.

With New Links pointing the way, next year should be the time for regional leaders like New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell and Jefferson Parish President Cynthia Lee Sheng, who both have prioritized greater regional transit connectivity and already delivered some impressive wins, to take us to the next level in regional coordination.

We challenge our leaders to take the following four tangible steps in the next year:

1. Coordinate around regular service adjustments
2. Implement New Links
3. Move toward farebox integration
4. Explore cost-sharing on regional lines

1. Coordination around regular service adjustments

Due to labor contractual agreements, both transit agencies only can change schedules and routes at several specific times a year. These times are called “picks” – named because transit operators use these times to pick the routes and times that they want to operate for the next several months.

One small way that the agencies can make regional transit work is to coordinate during the “picks” to ensure that schedules for the lines that generate the most inter-agency transfers minimize wait time for transit riders.

Creating a clear procedure for this will lead to small but noticeable improvements for riders who currently transfer between the systems and can start to build momentum for enhanced coordination down the road.

2. Implement New Links

As we noted on Page 35, the New Links proposal includes important steps forward on regional connectivity between Jefferson and Orleans parishes.

Moving forward on direct connections between Metairie and the New Orleans CBD and Elmwood and the New Orleans CBD, as well as bringing together both RTA and JeT West Bank lines at the Willy Terminal are critical foundational steps that must happen now while there is momentum.

3. Farebox integration

Farebox integration will allow seamless and affordable transfers between the RTA and JeT. If making regional transportation easier for transit riders is a goal, farebox integration is a clear next priority after implementation of New Links.

Currently, the RTA operates one fare system and Jefferson Transit operates a separate system. The base RTA fare is \$1.25 and the base Jefferson Transit fare is \$1.50. If a rider wants to transfer to another transit line in the same system, the cost is an additional \$0.25 on the RTA, and \$0.50 on JeT. But if the rider wants to transfer to the other system, then she is forced to pay the full fare for the second ride.

Figure 44: RTA and JeT current fare structure

	RTA	JeT
Single fare	\$1.25	\$1.50
Transfer within system	\$0.25	\$0.50
Discount fare for seniors, Medicare cardholders, and individuals with disabilities	\$0.40	\$0.75
Day Pass	\$3	\$4
Regional Day Pass (good for travel on both systems)	\$6	\$6
Monthly Pass	\$55	\$60

Source: New Orleans Regional Transit Authority, Jefferson Transit

This can add up fast and creates a real equity issue. It also dampens the impact of some proposed New Links changes.

For example, one of the important redesign components is to keep more RTA and JeT buses on the West Bank to increase reliability and local connections, but, in return, offer more frequent service from the Willy Terminal to the New Orleans CBD via a combination of RTA and JeT express buses. Thus, some riders would have to transfer one more time but would gain increased reliability and reduced overall travel time in return.

The practical, long term benefits will be limited if the RTA and Jefferson Transit continue to run separate fare systems with no reduced-price transfers. Without farebox integration, if an RTA bus was about to leave, many JeT riders – wanting to save \$1.25 – would likely wait for a JeT bus (and vice versa), thus adding time and hassle to their trip and making the new, coordinated system less useful overall.

Similarly, the New Links proposal calls for the E1 Veterans bus to travel Canal street as an express service, stopping at major intersections on its way into the New Orleans CBD. This could fill a huge need for an express service along Canal.

If riders have to pay a second full price fare to transfer from an RTA line, many lower-income customers may continue to rely on the much slower Canal Street streetcar line, again diminishing the impact of a key New Links proposal.

Historically, local transit officials have responded cautiously to regional fare integration. They have focused on potential small, short-term losses in farebox revenue, rather than the longer-term potential for a more useful regional system and a more affordable and effective means of transportation for local residents.

But there have been some small steps in recent years to build on.

In 2018, the RTA and JeT introduced a regional day pass, good for travel on either system for a 24-hour period. At \$6 a pass, it's too pricey to be a money saver for most riders transferring between the two systems. Its value is more convenience for riders who can afford it and then only have to pay once that day. But it did create a precedent for the two agencies to work together on fare issues and is something to build on.

Many other regions have confronted this issue recently and developed plans that work better for riders, without breaking the bank for agencies that depend on farebox revenue. Separate agencies in both the Detroit and Charlotte regions (see sidebars) recently implemented fare integration policies that led to small reductions in farebox revenue, but increased ridership and customer satisfaction.

Such decisions can't be done overnight, but RIDE strongly urges both transit agencies to start a joint study on the issue within the next year. Decision-makers in both parishes should strongly pressure agency leaders to do this to set the stage for much greater regional connectivity in the next several years.

4. Cost sharing on regional lines

Another way to ensure more cost-effective regional transit is to begin to split the costs of operating lines that cross parish boundaries.

Recognizing that this discussion could be a sticking point in the short-term, the New Links team intentionally did not put this idea into the New Links proposal. All the new regional lines that are proposed will be fully operated and funded by one transit agency or the other.

However, there should be an in-depth look at this in the near future. It could be much more effective for the RTA and JeT and provide an overall increase in service to riders.

Implementation could be as simple as having each agency operate a set number of buses on a particular line – for instance an airport express bus – jointly coordinating the schedule, while keeping fares and operating funds completely separate.

Ideally, over the long-term, it would involve agreement between agencies where one would operate a particular line and the other would help subsidize that operation. That subsidy could be through a set fee or for a percentage of total annual costs.

These agreements generally aren't static. They can be for a small period of years – or even adjusted annually – so agencies can continue to monitor them and make sure they are getting an acceptable deal financially. With this arrangement, the two agencies could determine what lines make the most sense for a particular agency to operate, based on who can run it most efficiently and cost effectively. This would benefit both agencies' bottom lines. Most importantly, it would benefit transit riders as it would lead to cost savings for each agency that could be reinvested in additional service elsewhere.

RIDE recommends that the RTA and JeT jointly begin to explore this idea over the next year, with the Regional Planning Commission (RPC) as a potential neutral broker, with the goal of launching at least a pilot program in the next few years.

Free transfers between an express bus and light rail in Charlotte



Rider Transit, one of three transit agencies that serves the suburbs of Charlotte, and the Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS), recently moved to a policy of free transfers for up to 85 minutes between a Rider Transit express bus and a CATS light rail line and local bus service.

CATS offered the idea of free transfers between the systems while working with Rider

Transit on the development of the Rider Transit Concord Charlotte Express (CCX). Rider Transit's decision to do so is especially interesting, because the agency not only now allows free transfers from another agency (they also accept free transfers from the Rowan Express provided by the Rowan Transit System), but they also lowered the price for their own express bus to that of their local routes after 15 months, to allow easier transfers from other lines within their system.

Rider Transit estimates that they've lost, at most, \$10,000 in annual revenue from the switch – or approximately 3 percent of their total farebox revenue. Even if the number had been slightly higher, a Rider Transit representative said they still feel the decision was right, since their intention was to make things easier for a ridership that is mostly lower-income and transit-reliant. As a bonus, Rider Transit said that ridership increased on the CCX after the shift, which has helped to offset some of the minimal revenue loss.

More flexible transfers between system in Detroit



The Detroit, Department of Transportation (DDOT), which operates transit in the City of Detroit and the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART), which operates transit in the surrounding suburban counties, came together in 2019 to make transferring between the systems more convenient for riders. Both agencies agreed

on a \$2 base fare that is good for up to four hours of travel on either system.

While riders could already transfer between the two systems for a reduced price, both agencies had different base fares, leading to confusion for riders who had to keep track of multiple fares and sometimes pay \$0.25 for a transfer and sometimes \$0.50, depending on which system they were transferring from.

The process leading to the switch didn't happen overnight. Both agencies first commissioned a study to look into the issue before coming to the \$2 mutual base fare proposal. DDOT also had to raise their fare to \$2 to match SMART's base fare in order for the idea to work. This caused some controversy but DDOT was able to sell the fare raise to the public by stressing the increased flexibility of a base fare that was good for four hours.

Both agencies have seen a slight decline in passenger fare revenue, but an uptick in passenger satisfaction in the first year of implementation.

USE NEW LINKS TO GUIDE LONG TERM GROWTH AND PLANNING

New Links by itself will improve transit for riders. But the region will need to see further action to fully deliver the transformative and equitable changes riders need. The transit agencies and parishes need to jointly use New Links to guide and develop a long-term capital improvement plan that delivers those additional necessary transit improvements.

Both RTA and JeT have taken the first steps on this path, with the RTA's 2017 Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) and Jefferson Transit's 2018 Strategic Plan. But neither document is sufficient to translate an inspiring vision into clear and concrete next steps for building on New Links.

RTA staff did present a draft long-term capital plan to the RTA board – in spreadsheet form – in the summer of 2020 with a wish list of items that totaled \$2.3 billion. Calculating that the agency can issue up to \$83 million in new bonds, staff created an initial priority list of projects that \$83 million would cover – assuming federal grants paid for 80 percent of the cost of each project (the standard federal share of costs for many transit grants).

But this draft capital plan is several steps away from being a realistic guide for RTA decision-making. There has been no public outreach and it is not clear how the particular pieces were prioritized. The most expensive item – purchasing new, more accessible streetcars for the Canal lines – doesn't even appear as its own item in the SMP. Rather it is only mentioned in passing as part of a larger action item on ADA compliance.

Thus, while RTA and JeT have a variety of long-term projections and ideas, no one should be under any illusion that these are sufficient to guide the agencies forward.

This is where New Links becomes a critical piece to drive the agencies' future, even after a network redesign implementation. New Links must be used to not only guide and prioritize new investments, but should support a proactive narrative about how those investments would benefit the region's residents.

With the COVID-19 emergency drastically cutting budgets in a matter of months, it's hard to focus on the need for additional transit revenue for expansion beyond the status quo. But that need remains and it will grow in the next few years.

Regional consensus demands a clear rationale for why it's needed, what can be accomplished, and a specific list of improvements beyond the status quo that will get us there.

To this point, our transit agencies have begun to define that vision, but they have not been able to clearly communicate the next step. But with the completion of New Links – and the thousands of hours of internal study and analysis and thousands of residents who participated meaningfully with the process – our region finally has a data-driven, equity-focused, results-oriented, community-vetted rubric for how to move forward.

The big question over the next year is whether our transit leaders will have the courage and wisdom to take advantage of this opportunity by approving and implementing New Links, and taking those necessary steps to finally move beyond a status quo that is unworthy of riders and the region.

WILL OUR LEADERS HAVE THE COURAGE AND

WISDOM TO IMPLEMENT NEW LINKS AND

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268

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