

# Fixing NYC's Buses



2019  
Progress  
Report

**The Bus Turnaround Campaign presents its third annual review of progress made by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), New York City Transit (NYCT), the New York City Department Of Transportation (NYC DOT) and the New York Police Department (NYPD) on the Bus Turnaround agenda, and an assessment of what these agencies must do going forward to deliver for bus riders.**

For New York City bus riders awaiting faster, more reliable service, the next few years hold enormous promise. Responding to a long trend of declining bus speeds and falling ridership, both the MTA and NYC DOT have released ambitious plans to improve bus service citywide. If implementation proceeds according to schedule, transit riders in every borough will benefit as more buses bypass traffic congestion, the boarding process speeds up, and bus networks are redesigned to reduce travel times and expand access to frequent service.

In 2019, the efforts of both agencies yielded encouraging signs of progress. DOT's Better Buses Action Plan laid out a program to speed up buses citywide, rather than on a few routes branded with Select Bus Service. New bus lanes on 14th Street in Manhattan, Fresh Pond Road in Queens, and Church Avenue in Brooklyn, combined with upgrades to existing bus lanes and better coordination with NYPD on bus lane enforcement, cleared car traffic out of the way of buses and resulted in significant speed improvements.

Meanwhile, a year after New York City Transit's redesign of the Staten Island express bus network, those buses are moving 8.4% faster and reliability is up. Citywide, the rate of bus bunching declined, which the MTA attributes to better dispatching.

In September 2019, total weekday bus trips ticked up 1.5 percent compared to September 2018, a sign that bus performance may be starting to turn the corner and reverse the longstanding trend of declining ridership. Year-to-date ridership, however, remains below 2018 levels.

While there are pockets of tangible improvement, citywide bus speeds have largely remained flat. In the Bus Turnaround Coalition's 2019 report cards, 73% of local bus routes received either D's or F's for speed and reliability.



To set bus service and bus ridership on a long-term upward trend, the MTA, NYC DOT, and NYPD have to build on their positive recent results, expanding and accelerating efforts to turn around the bus system. The commitments outlined in the MTA's Fast Forward plan and NYC DOT's Better Buses Action Plan map out a path to better bus service at the scale of the entire city. If the agencies follow through on their bus improvement agendas, the tentative recovery we see today will grow and flourish over the next 18-24 months.

**A fast, reliable bus system is within reach. Success depends on whole-hearted support from elected leaders and skilled implementation by agency staff.**



# INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

NYCT: B-

NYC DOT: B-

Improving NYC bus service depends on both New York City Transit, which operates the buses, and NYC DOT, which runs the streets. The agencies need to work together to deliver fast, reliable service for riders. Better coordination is apparent in NYCT's bus network redesigns for the Bronx and Queens, and in DOT's Better Buses Action Plan.

In last year's progress report, we noted that well-coordinated public engagement would be crucial to a successful bus network redesign, and it appears that DOT and NYCT have made coordinated communication a priority. At NYCT's redesign workshops in the Bronx and Queens, DOT staff presented bus lane projects and priority corridors. Both agencies are thinking about where they can work together to run more frequent service on streets with bus priority treatments.

After releasing its Better Buses Action Plan, DOT created the Better Buses Advisory Group, composed of elected officials, agency staff, and advocates, to strategize on bus corridor improvements throughout the city. At the launch of the task force, MTA officials stressed the importance of interagency cooperation, and MTA staff serve on the advisory group.

There is room to improve coordination and sync up the timelines of overlapping projects. While NYCT will be moving forward with bus network redesigns in the next year, for instance, DOT's work to prioritize buses on many of the same routes will come later. It's very encouraging that NYCT says efficiency gains from bus lanes will be put toward increased service, but **hand-in-glove coordination could deliver bus lanes and frequency improvements simultaneously.**

Another area in need of better coordination is bus stops. NYCT can improve bus speeds and reliability by consolidating bus stops, allowing buses to spend less time stopping and pulling in and out of traffic. While this gets riders to their destinations faster, some may object to walking another block or two. Bus riders are more



supportive of bus stop balancing when the process is coupled with improvements to remaining stops like shelters, benches, real time arrival information, accessibility improvements, and safer pedestrian connections — all of which fall under DOT's purview.

**By working together to ensure that bus stop balancing is paired with improvements to bus stops, DOT and the MTA can improve speed, reliability, comfort, and safety.**

# DESIGNING STREETS TO PRIORITIZE BUSES

## NYC DOT: A-

Last year's progress report recommended that DOT establish ambitious benchmarks for bus lane and signal priority expansion. The Better Buses Action Plan does that, with commitments to install 10-15 new miles of bus lanes per year, improve 5 miles of existing bus lanes per year, pilot up to 2 miles of physically separated bus lanes in 2019, and add transit signal priority at 300 intersections per year.

DOT has largely followed through on its goals for 2019, overcoming a number of challenges in the process. Two separate lawsuits delayed bus lanes on Fresh Pond Road and 14th Street, and bus lanes proposed for Church Avenue proved contentious. With political support from the mayor's office and steadfast effort from DOT and the city law department, all three projects were completed. The 14th Street busway is already speeding up buses, reversing a long trend of dwindling ridership and raising expectations for prioritizing buses throughout the city. Since its implementation, ridership on the M14 is up 17% compared to September of last year. October numbers also show that travel times between 3rd and 8th avenues have decreased 30%. On Fresh Pond Road, bus speeds have more than doubled during hours when the new bus lane segment is in effect.

Year to date, DOT has added or enhanced about 8.8 bus lane miles, and appears on track to meet their target of adding 10-25 miles and improving 5 miles.

Additional bus lane miles include:

**Allen Street : Offset red bus lanes between Delancey Street & Houston Street along the M15**

**14th Street : Red bus lanes on 14th St. between 9th ave & 3rd Aves**

**Webster Avenue : Southbound bus lane between 174th and 176th streets**

**Fresh Pond Road : Dedicated bus lane between Bleecker Street and Putnam Avenue along the Q58.**



**Church Ave : Curbside bus lanes from E.7th street to Marlborough Road**

**Utica Avenue : Curbside bus lane between Fulton St. and Atlantic Avenue along the B46**

Improved or upgraded bus lanes include:

**Lexington Avenue : Full time offset bus lane from 96th to 60th Streets added bus boarding platforms at 79th and 72nd Streets**

**Madison Avenue : Upgraded existing double bus lanes to red painted bus lanes, updated bus lane signage to reinforce lane regulations**

In October the agency began implementing a protected bus lane pilot along Archer Avenue from 153rd to 160th Streets in Queens.

DOT has implemented signal priority for buses at over 32 intersections this year. While this is far below the expected rate of completion, the agency says most signal work will go live towards the end of the year, and it is on track to meet its target of 300 intersections annually.



# NYPD BUS LANE ENFORCEMENT

COORDINATION with MTA and DOT: B

AGENCY CULTURE: F

A promising part of the Better Buses Action Plan was a commitment from City Hall that NYPD would better enforce bus lanes, including through the deployment of seven tow truck teams. However, evidence that NYPD is making a dent in bus lane compliance is mixed.

From January through July, the NYPD issued about 2,600 fewer bus lane moving violations than it did during the same time last year. According to the City, this decline has been offset by an increase in bus lane parking violations, which are up by over 12,000 year to date. Information on towing activity is not available.

We can say that NYPD coordination with NYCT and NYC DOT is improving. Representatives from each agency now meet regularly, with the transportation agencies highlighting problem areas in the bus network where traffic enforcement could help to clear clogged streets. These enforcement actions may not show up in the numbers for bus lane violations, because they involve ticketing double-parked motorists who aren't necessarily blocking a bus lane.

NYCT notes that the following routes saw a speed increase of 4.1 percent during rush hour, due in part to greater NYPD enforcement:

|                |                |              |
|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| <b>Q6</b>      | <b>B25</b>     | <b>Bx5</b>   |
| <b>Q10</b>     | <b>B44</b>     | <b>Bx27</b>  |
| <b>Q43</b>     | <b>S61</b>     | <b>M7</b>    |
| <b>Q44 SBS</b> | <b>S79 SBS</b> | <b>M2LTD</b> |

NYPD's measurement and reporting on bus lane enforcement remains frustratingly vague, however. Simply counting the number of tickets issued does not say much about whether bus lanes are actually unobstructed. A better assessment system would measure the rate of bus lane violations per mile at different times of day, for instance, setting specific goals and



tracking compliance over time. NYPD's scarce-to-nonexistent reporting on its bus lane activities falls far short of useful performance measurement.

NYPD would get higher marks for bus lane enforcement if not for the agency's general culture of disrespect for bus lanes. Whatever progress NYPD may make as one branch of the agency coordinates with NYCT and NYC DOT, much of it is negated by the number of squad cars and personal vehicles with NYPD parking placards that routinely obstruct bus lanes and bus stops. **The real breakthrough will come when police stop blocking bus lanes themselves and start cracking down on parking placard abuse that makes life harder for bus riders.**

2019 saw passage of legislation permitting DOT and the MTA to operate bus- and street-mounted cameras to enforce bus lane violations. Automated camera enforcement has begun on key bus routes, including the M15 and M14, with further corridors slated for camera enforcement in 2020. It's imperative that the MTA fast-track procurement of bus-mounted camera technology to bring camera enforcement to every bus lane citywide.



# MAKING USING THE BUS EASY AND INTUITIVE

NYCT: C-

NYCDOT: B-

Since last year, NYCT added over 2,100 screens on buses that display upcoming stops and real-time service information. At the same time, the MTA began removing printed schedules from all bus stops this summer. With over 16,000 bus stops, this change negatively impacts riders who may not have access to a mobile device to check schedules — especially low-income New Yorkers and senior citizens. While NYCT's efforts to make use of newer technology and provide real-time information is welcome, the agency must ensure that all riders can remain informed. NYCT should work with the DOT to provide some form of arrival information at stops before schedules are removed.

NYCT's April 2018 bus plan included exciting commitments to develop user-friendly bus maps and provide real-time seat availability information, but it is still unclear when riders will see these changes.

Looming over efforts to improve the rider experience is the MTA's heavy-handed approach to fare evasion. Portraying fare evasion as a pervasive and growing problem, especially on buses, the agency's solutions overwhelmingly involve harsher crackdowns and increased policing.

The MTA is jumping straight to punitive measures without making bus fare payment easy and intuitive. MetroCard machines are not available at bus stops, and merchants that sell fare cards are not easy to find. Many low-income New Yorkers simply cannot afford the full fare, according to surveys by the Community Service Society. The city's Fair Fares program offering half-price MetroCards isn't expected to fully scale up until 2020.

The impending rollout of the OMNY fare payment system should be accompanied by a sustained effort to offer fare cards for sale at stores near bus stops. And as all-door boarding becomes citywide practice, the MTA and NYPD should follow the lead of agencies that train fare inspectors in de-escalation and anti-bias



tactics, including San Francisco Muni, Seattle's King County Metro, and Portland's Tri-Met.

While there is little data available on just how many bus stops are currently accessible, DOT has made some strides. This year the agency has made 21 bus stops accessible, up from 13 stops in 2018, and expects to reach its target of 50 accessible bus stops by the end of the year.

DOT is also working on a physical accessibility survey of all city-wide bus stops to be completed by the end of 2019. We encourage DOT to set the goal of making every bus stop accessible to all New Yorkers, and to ensure that all bus stops have shelters, benches, and real time information once the citywide bus network redesign process is complete.



# REDESIGNING THE BUS NETWORK

## STOP SPACING: B-

## ROUTE OPTIMIZATION & SCHEDULING: C-

With the launch of Fast Forward, NYCT committed to redesign the bus network in every borough. This year the agency made substantial progress on redesigning the bus networks in the Bronx and Queens. The final plan for the Bronx was released in October, and a draft of the Queens plan is slated for release in November.

The strongest element of the Bronx plan is the removal of about 400 bus stops — a good step toward faster, more reliable service in a borough where too many stops are spaced only a block or two apart.

While NYCT's bus network overhaul is laudable, the Bronx plan leaves opportunities on the table. The plan calls for some routes to be straightened out, adjusted, or run more frequently, but overall these changes amount to incremental progress, not major improvements for bus riders. A more ambitious redesign would do more to optimize routes so operating resources can be reallocated to more frequent service where riders need it most.

In its draft plan, NYCT did not communicate the improvements to travel time or job access that bus riders would gain. And because Governor Cuomo has not prioritized bus service, the redesign is revenue-neutral, limiting capacity to extend the hours of frequent service or add new routes.

In Austin, Houston, and even the MTA's own overhaul of Staten Island express bus routes, agencies increased the total operating budget, adding service which in turn helped overcome resistance to contentious changes. The same was not done in the Bronx.

Transit agencies that have successfully implemented bus network redesigns in other American cities generate political will by thinking big.



**Bolder changes to the network unlock more substantial improvements for riders. By communicating those improvements in compelling fashion, agencies build public support.**

We applaud the types of changes laid out in the Bronx redesign plan, but Governor Cuomo and NYCT should go further. As the agency proceeds with bus redesigns in the Bronx and other boroughs, it's clear that an incremental, revenue-neutral approach is not enough.



# TRANSFORMING HOW WE GET ON THE BUS

NYCT: B+

Allowing bus riders to board at any door has improved reliability and travel time on Select Bus Service routes. By making all-door boarding standard on every route, NYCT can make service better across the board.

Implementation of citywide all-door boarding is tied to the rollout of new fare payment technology. This year, the MTA launched a public pilot of OMNY, the tap-and-go contactless payment system that will enable farecard readers to be placed by every door on the bus. The pilot is not yet citywide — currently, OMNY is only available on a pay-per-ride basis at select subway stations and on Staten Island buses.

NYCT has committed to citywide all-door boarding sometime in 2021. While it's encouraging that the agency has set the goal, bus riders could use a more aggressive timetable. Getting all-door boarding in place by the end of 2020 would also put the bus system in a better position to handle an influx of riders when congestion pricing goes live, which is expected to happen early in 2021.



# ADOPTING BETTER METHODS OF KEEPING BUSES ON SCHEDULE

NYCT: B+

To keep buses more evenly spaced, NYCT's Fast Forward plan calls for the creation of a new bus command center and the implementation of computer-aided dispatching.

Construction of the command center is underway, with the project expected to be fully operational in 2020. Computer-aided dispatching should be rolled out before the completion of the command center, but exactly when is unclear. The new technology will help operators maintain consistent headways and prevent buses from bunching.

In the meantime, NYCT has made some progress on reducing bus bunching, which the agency attributes to more attentive dispatching. On frequent bus routes, the rate of bus bunching declined from 14% to 11%.





# INCREASING TRANSPARENCY ABOUT BUS PERFORMANCE

## NYCT: A

NYCT has taken a number of steps to improve its reporting about bus performance. In 2018, the agency released a bus performance dashboard and improved its rider engagement via social media. This year, the agency has continued to make progress.

The customer service team releases a quarterly update tracking the agencies progress on customer commitments like service improvement projects with the DOT, adding off-peak service, and adding real time information screens on buses.

In October, route-level data was added to the bus performance dashboard. Other commitments outlined for the final quarter of this year include installing enforcement cameras on 100 buses and working with NYC DOT to add signal priority at over 100 intersections along the M15-SBS route.

# #busturnaround

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN

