



30 Miles to Go:

How Mayor de Blasio can
secure a progressive
legacy on transportation

Introduction

2021 is Mayor de Blasio's last chance to deliver a more equitable, just, and sustainable transportation system for New Yorkers. It's also a pivotal time for New York's future -- a year the mayor must use to put the city in the best possible position to recover from the pandemic. A fair recovery for New York will require making bus riders a priority.

Eight years ago, Bill de Blasio campaigned on a commitment to making New York the fairest big city in America. Any mayor who hopes to achieve that goal must address the city's abysmal bus service. The millions of New Yorkers who depend on the bus are more likely to be Black or brown, people with low incomes, or elderly, yet New York City has the slowest bus service in the country.

As de Blasio nears the end of his tenure, what has he done for bus riders?

Before COVID-19 struck, there was a tangible sense of promise for transit in New York City -- including ambitious plans to expand bus lanes from de Blasio's Department of Transportation. Then the pandemic upended life in the city. Still, New Yorkers' reliance on transit quickly became apparent, with buses playing an especially critical role moving the essential workers who kept the city functioning during the crisis.

With the release of its Better Buses Restart plan in 2020, NYC DOT acknowledged the importance of moving full-speed ahead with street improvements that prioritize the needs of people most affected by the COVID crisis -- Black and brown New Yorkers, and essential workers. The plan called for quickly building out 20 miles of bus lanes and busways.

As often happens under Mayor de Blasio, implementation fell behind the promised pace of bus improvements. Yet the benefits to bus riders of the projects that were completed are undeniable, and the spirit of urgency that led City Hall to adopt the plan must carry over through 2021.

In this report, the Bus Turnaround Coalition lays out a bus agenda for Mayor de Blasio's last year in office. We firmly believe that by building on past experience, the de Blasio administration can make 2021 the most successful year yet for improving the experience of New York City bus riders.

Executive Summary

The Bus Turnaround Coalition calls on Mayor de Blasio and NYC DOT to complete 30 miles of bus lanes in 2021.

- 2021 is Mayor de Blasio's final year to improve the bus service that Black, brown, and low-income New Yorkers rely on. It is his last chance to etch a legacy of racial equity and economic fairness into New York City's transportation system.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has raised the stakes. New York City bus riders need a strong network of bus priority streets to prevent service from getting bogged down in car traffic. Mayor de Blasio has a window of opportunity to make that happen now, while traffic levels remain relatively low due to diminished activity.
- NYC DOT accelerated the pace of bus lane installation in 2019 and 2020. The agency can build on that momentum in 2021 and set a new standard by adding 30 miles of bus lanes.
- The bus lane network is poised to function much better because the state legislature has lifted restrictions on the use of bus lane enforcement cameras. As the MTA procures more bus-mounted cameras, every bus lane DOT implements will be less prone to obstruction.
- In 2022, New York City's Streets Master Plan will take effect, mandating 30 miles of bus lane installation per year for five years. Mayor de Blasio can hand off an effective bus lane playbook to the next mayor by meeting that goal in 2021 and keeping existing bus lanes clear for buses.



Mayor de Blasio's Bus Legacy

When Mayor de Blasio first ran for office, he pledged to end the "tale of two cities" in New York. Any plan to make New York a fairer city must include efficient and reliable bus service as a core strategy.

The average bus commuter earns \$28,455 a year versus an average annual income of \$40,000 among subway commuters, and car-free households earn less than half as much as households with access to a car. 75% of bus riders are people of color, 55% are immigrants, and 12% are elderly, according to the U.S. Census. A clear majority of New Yorkers -- 56% -- support repurposing parking spaces to create more bus lanes, according to polling from Transportation Alternatives, and support is even higher -- 66% -- among New Yorkers earning less than \$50,000 per year.

During the pandemic, people of color and people with low incomes are more likely to work essential jobs and continue riding the bus instead of working from home. A network of effective bus lanes will improve riders' access to jobs and economic opportunities, save time and money, and reduce the stress and detrimental health effects associated with long, unreliable commutes.

At the outset of the de Blasio administration, NYC DOT implemented bus lanes only for Select Bus Service projects, in conjunction with the MTA. This limited bus lane expansion to one or two streets per year. **The major breakthrough during de Blasio's tenure was to embrace a more systemic approach.**

NYC DOT's Better Buses Action Plan, released in 2019, set an annual goal of installing 10-15 miles of bus lanes, upgrading an additional five miles of existing bus lanes, and giving buses priority at 300 signalized intersections. **With the new approach, DOT implements multiple bus priority projects in each borough each year.**

The agency's most recent commitment, the Better Buses Restart plan released last June, called for 3.5 miles of new busways and 16.5 miles of new bus lanes by October 2020. Some of those bus projects were pushed into 2021 or delayed indefinitely, but most have been completed. DOT also surpassed its 300-intersection goal in 2020, installing bus priority at 648 intersections.

Each of these improvements makes a difference. Projects like the Jay Street busway and 149th Street bus lane demonstrably speed up service and save time for tens of thousands of bus riders each day. **However, the cumulative gains have not been large enough to register as a major improvement to citywide bus performance.**

In January 2019, de Blasio announced his goal of increasing bus speeds 25% by the end of 2020. But average local bus speeds in December 2020 stood at 8 mph, or 5% faster than the 7.6 mph average in December 2018, according to the MTA's bus dashboard -- and much of that improvement may be due to reduced traffic congestion during pandemic conditions.

Under de Blasio, three shortcomings of planning, implementation, and management explain why buses remain stubbornly slow:

- Initial bus lane mileage targets are not ambitious enough.
- Deference to project opponents slows down implementation.
- Completed bus lanes are obstructed too often and don't function as intended.

By addressing these weaknesses, Mayor de Blasio can strengthen his bus improvement program and leave a lasting legacy of better bus service in his final year in office.





The Final Year

Prioritizing bus riders on city streets with 30 miles of bus lanes

In 2021, Mayor de Blasio can secure a fairer transportation system for New Yorkers by installing 30 miles of bus lanes.

Hitting an ambitious bus lane implementation target will be necessary to help New Yorkers recover from the pandemic. The bus network was a workhorse during the depths of the COVID crisis, moving hundreds of thousands of essential workers. In the spring, service was 15% faster as car congestion fell dramatically -- but most of those gains have slipped away as traffic has returned. Riders will be stuck on slow buses if traffic surges back to pre-pandemic levels without more bus priority measures in place. 2021 presents the de Blasio administration's last chance to lock in better bus service as the city recovers.

Despite falling behind the schedule laid out in 2020's Better Buses Restart, during the pandemic NYC DOT has proven capable of accelerating the pace of bus lane implementation. The city remains in the thick of a crisis and the need for bus priority remains great. The de Blasio administration must maintain a spirit of urgency and possibility toward the task of improving streets for bus riders through the final months of the mayor's second term.

In 2020, DOT focused on speeding up routes serving Bronx neighborhoods where bus ridership is high and average incomes are low. Operating within an ambitious overall mileage goal in 2021 will give DOT even more leeway to target bus improvements for routes serving high-poverty areas and large numbers of essential workers.

Combined with the bus lane mileage in the Better Buses Restart plan, 30 miles of bus lanes in 2021 will bring the city within reach of the MTA's June 2020 request for 60 miles of bus lanes to keep essential workers moving and guard against a surge in traffic congestion. The MTA, for its part, must translate speed gains from bus lanes into greater service frequency on those routes.

Furthermore, the 2019 Streets Master Plan law calls for a citywide plan to install 150 miles of bus lanes in five years, beginning in 2022. By securing 30 miles of bus lanes in 2021, Mayor de Blasio can pass the baton of bus lane expansion to the next mayor in stride.

On transit signal priority, NYC DOT surpassed its goal by adding it to 648 intersections in 2020. Maintaining that pace in 2021 will put the city well on its way to equipping every TSP-eligible intersection with the technology.



Communication, public engagement, and implementation

Under Mayor de Blasio, NYC DOT often spends weeks or months seeking what it considers to be adequate permission or political buy-in to move forward with bus improvement projects. At times the delays are beyond the city's control, as projects get tied up in court. But often, implementation is dragged out by City Hall and DOT's own political hesitance.

Cities that have successfully rolled out ambitious bus lane programs combine thorough communication and public engagement with a commitment to implementation. In San Francisco and the Boston region, street departments have advanced quick-build bus lanes through an iterative process, beginning with low-cost materials, gathering feedback, and moving forward with permanent installation. The process does not eliminate conflict or opposition, but it gives projects a chance to succeed -- effectively conveying the benefits of change while channeling good-faith critiques productively.

DOT has conducted bus project communication through community advisory boards that assemble relevant stakeholders. During COVID, this has been done remotely, which opens up more possibilities for participation. Many projects in 2020 proceeded smoothly, but others would have benefited from more attentive and culturally competent communication. Project communication and engagement could be expanded to include more economic justice-oriented organizations and other groups with a stake in improving transit service.

In addition, DOT has not made full use of temporary or low-cost materials to demonstrate project benefits on a trial basis, the model employed by San Francisco and Boston. Initiating bus improvements in this low-stakes manner can accelerate implementation and public buy-in as gains for bus riders quickly become apparent while fears of negative impacts prove overblown.

Keeping bus lanes clear for buses

Buses traveling in bus-only lanes are often blocked by illegally traveling and parked vehicles, resulting in significant travel delays and unreliable service.

Better design and better enforcement can keep bus lanes clear for buses. On the design front, DOT recently piloted a protected bus lane segment on Archer Avenue in Jamaica, but the flex post separations were not sturdy enough to last. DOT should continue to experiment with physical dividers until finding a solution that works.

Center-running busways, like the new bus lanes on EL Grant Highway in Highbridge, are inherently less prone to blockage than curbside or offset bus lanes. The treatment is a promising solution for upgrading existing bus lanes on large two-way streets like Fordham Road, where DOT is currently scoping out an improvement project.

On enforcement, bus lane cameras offer the best path forward. Cameras do not carry the risk of racial discrimination or excessive use of force associated with police enforcement. In 2019, the state legislature removed limits on automated camera enforcement for NYC bus lanes. DOT now operates stationary camera enforcement on more than two dozen streets serving more than 30 bus routes.

In 2020, the MTA began to roll out enforcement cameras mounted on buses, but the program is lagging and doesn't cover most bus lanes. Expanding both types of enforcement, especially the MTA's bus-mounted cameras, will ensure that bus riders benefit from faster trips as the bus lane network grows.

Successful bus lane camera enforcement will cause violations to go down and bus speeds to go up. DOT and the MTA must publicly report data from the camera program -- including data on bus speeds and rates of bus lane obstruction, not just rates of violations. Detailed reporting will be necessary to evaluate the bus camera program and demonstrate benefits to the public.





About the Bus Turnaround Coalition

The Bus Turnaround Coalition is a diverse group of New Yorkers determined to turn around the poor service that plagues the city's bus system and the more than 2 million rides taken on it every weekday.

We are winning increased attention from our leaders and greater resources for high quality, fast and reliable bus service for all neighborhoods in New York City.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



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