



On the Horizon: Planning for Post-Pandemic Travel

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AMERICAN PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION

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Executive Summary

Transit agencies played an essential role in ensuring the mobility of Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with a challenging environment, agencies operated buses and trains day in, day out, moving millions of people, especially essential workers who kept society going even at the height of the health crisis. Even though agencies experienced a dramatic loss of riders during the pandemic, they were resilient and creative in moving forward. With good planning, effective operations, and strong communication, they can adjust their services to attract more riders.

To evaluate transit agencies' responses to the pandemic and their future plans, we collected data from operators, deployed a nationwide survey of staff, and conducted detailed case studies of five agencies. We amassed information on how demographic, employment, and travel trends may change in the coming decades. Finally, we developed recommendations for agencies to leverage best practices to ensure their ability to provide equitable access to mobility in the coming decades. Our major findings:

Pre-Pandemic Trends Gave Transit Agencies Reason to Be Optimistic, But Challenges Remain

- City centers, where transit functions most cost effectively, were attracting an increasingly educated and wealthy population, although many urban neighborhoods remain entrenched in poverty. At the same time, regional growth patterns encouraged people to work farther from home. Families with low incomes were increasingly living in communities far from transit.
- After a growth spurt, national transit ridership began to fall in 2015 as driving increased. Competition from ride-hailing services, difficulties attracting new riders, and failure to retain riders tired of inadequate bus and train service limited agencies' ability to expand their customer base in some areas. Other agencies were able to grow ridership with improved service offerings. There were some signs that this nationwide trend was revers-

ing in the period just before the pandemic—transit ridership in the U.S. grew significantly in December 2019, as well as in January and February 2020.

The Pandemic Led to an Increase in Remote Work, and Transit Agencies Lost a Large Share of Their Users

- At the beginning of the pandemic, telecommuting increased dramatically, leaving offices empty. Although some urban residents moved to suburban or rural communities, the evidence that this trend will continue is limited.
- In spring 2020, transit agencies nationwide lost many riders, to a large degree because of telecommuting. Although road use also declined, traffic had returned to pre-pandemic levels by summer 2021, including at rush hour; use of buses and trains did not pick up as rapidly.

Agencies Responded in Different Ways to the Pandemic, Some More Successfully Than Others

- In response to falling ridership, difficulty retaining enough staff members, and concerns about finances, most transit agencies cut service. But the GRTC Transit System in Richmond, Virginia, one of our case-study systems, did not. GRTC eliminated fares and reoriented service to local bus routes to prioritize essential workers and social equity. Likely because of these choices and the Richmond region's demographics, GRTC managed to recoup most of its ridership. This was not the case for the other agencies we studied.
- Agencies developed approaches to handling pandemic challenges. The Port Authority in Pittsburgh quickly convened a response team that ensured the system could maintain effective service throughout the pandemic. All agencies emphasized employee and rider safety, such as by improving cleaning protocols, working with unions to develop programs for sick employees, securing operator space on buses, and providing free masks. Spokane's STA, for example, gave paid time off to all workers to receive COVID-19 vaccine doses.
- During the pandemic, agencies struggled to attract new workers and address material shortages. Higher private-sector wages made attracting new employees more difficult, limiting agencies' ability to keep buses and trains running and clean. However, they used overtime to compensate.
- Some agencies, such as Port Authority in Pittsburgh, expanded service to communities where many people of color and families with low incomes live. Along Regional Transportation District routes in Denver, these communities continued to ride transit in large numbers.

- To ensure the public was kept abreast of changes to transit service, agencies expanded communication with the public. Los Angeles' Metro system, for example, reinforced its social media campaigns and signage, while monitoring customer feedback in real time.

A Post-Pandemic Future Offers New Possibilities for Transit Operators, but in an Evolving Context

- Interest in living and working in dense, transit-friendly communities is likely to continue post-pandemic. Public transit agencies have an interest in ensuring cities accommodate a diversity of residents, particularly people of color and families with low incomes, through expansion of available affordable housing near public transportation.
- Higher levels of telecommuting are likely to persist, which could lead to both negative and positive outcomes for transit agencies. On the one hand, the demand for transit in urban centers, on which transit operators have historically relied, could be permanently reduced. On the other hand, opportunities to serve people who have not previously used transit may arise.
- Transit agencies can seize the opportunity to better serve people who continue to need access to mobility, such as people who work in manufacturing facilities, students, health care professionals, and people with low incomes.

Transit Agencies Should Execute Key Changes in Operations and Planning to Adapt to New Realities

- For transit agencies, success can take many forms: increasing ridership, guaranteeing an equitable and just level of access for the most vulnerable members of society, helping to ensure a sustainable transition away from a carbon-emitting society. The choices transit agencies make can help determine

whether pre-pandemic trends are reinforced or reversed. There are four overarching recommendations the industry can incorporate into planning and operations:

Institutionalize Best Practices from the COVID-19 Period

- **Develop improved partnerships with labor.** Transit agencies faced challenges keeping staff coming to work, not only because of the health emergency, but also because of increasing wages offered in the private sector. Nevertheless, agency management improved relationships with workers over 2020 and 2021. First, agencies with unions identified key areas of agreement on creative ways to redeploy manpower in the face of material and staff shortages. Maintaining these collaborations can help ensure employees are engaged and do not feel that changes are being undertaken out of nowhere. Second, agencies improved their day-to-day communications with staff. This included the creation of Facebook messaging and texting channels that allowed managers to better understand which staff members were available and what needs they had. The combination of formal and informal approaches to seeking feedback can improve responses to sudden changes.
- **Offer better community engagement.** The pandemic initially shut down public engagement as agencies scrambled to respond to the crisis. As the pandemic continued, however, transit organizations developed new approaches to working with the public. All agencies increased public communications. Operators expanded outreach through virtual meetings, helping ensure that residents continued to be able to participate in decision making. Better engagement can also identify community needs. Spokane Transit Authority, for example, learned that it needed to improve access for older adults. It then reassigned paratransit vehicles to help older

adults access health care, recreation, and other needs. Transit agencies should continue similar efforts in the years to come.

- **Ramp up hiring for more operators and mechanics.** Because of rapidly increasing private-sector wages, agencies may have to find ways to increase pay beyond what was previously considered reasonable for these types of occupations. They must develop strategies to attract trainees through operator and mechanics courses, which are pipelines for future employees but shrank during the pandemic. Agencies must also work with state governments to allow commercial driver's permitting and licensing on-site, as GRTC did. Agencies should highlight the positive aspects of working in the public transportation industry, such as job stability, good benefits, and union membership.
- **Develop new efforts to address potential future materials shortages.** Officials may consider assessing and quantifying the materials needed to keep buses and trains running and establish an approach to warehousing enough materials to allow agencies to maintain service for several months without additional purchasing.
- **Expand sanitation measures.** Early in the pandemic, public health authorities claimed that people could contract COVID-19 from touching surfaces and recommended considerable cleaning. Transit agencies responded by expanding cleaning protocols, including with midday shifts and temporary staff. More recent evidence shows that the disease is unlikely to be spread by touch, and that ventilation (which agencies also invested in improving) is more important. Nonetheless, more frequent cleaning improved the customer experience, making riders feel more welcome on board. Agencies should expand their sanitation measures primarily with the goal of ensuring higher ride quality.

Plan and Operate More Effectively by Prioritizing Social Equity

- **Redefine transit success beyond just transit ridership.** Interviewees from the five case-study agencies emphasized that the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement had altered their perceptions of why they were providing transit service in the first place. According to officials at the Port Authority of Allegheny County, for example, the agency learned it needed to think of transit less as a business but more as an essential service that provides high-quality rides for everyone who uses it. For agencies looking for inspiration, that means finding ways to ensure that even the most marginalized members of society have access to reliable, convenient, affordable, and fast ways to get around, not necessarily focusing on improving service for the most people or for the most privileged.
- **Identify people and communities that have faced, and continue to face, inequitable access to opportunity.** Making progress toward socially equitable transit access requires identifying which people and communities are most vulnerable to lack of transit access, and whose livelihoods would be most improved by expanding service. Conducting such an investigation requires detailed mapping of current access to opportunity, such as to jobs, recreation, schools, and health care, within transit service areas. It requires identifying differences in access times by different modes of transportation, and differences in people's access based on the mode they use, such as by transit or by car. Finally, it requires agencies to identify where jobs are located—particularly for families with low incomes and people of color. This baseline evaluation is necessary not only to meet federal Title VI civil rights requirements, but also to aid agencies in identifying how to reorient service and investments.
- **Reallocate resources toward vulnerable people, underserved neighborhoods, and essential workplaces.** Harnessing evidence

offered by a systemic access analysis, transit agencies should work to ensure that bus and train service best serves the communities that most need better access to transportation. This effort can take several different forms. One approach could be to alter the balance between the hub-and-spoke network that characterizes most US transit systems now and a network that allows neighborhood-to-neighborhood access. This new approach could respond to changing commuting patterns and create better options for people who do not work in downtowns.

- **Consider adapting services to different needs on different days of the week and different times of the day.** Making bus and train options that work for people all day, including late and night and on weekends, is essential for ensuring connectivity. If ridership is less concentrated at the peak than it once was, transit agencies may save money by being able to reallocate resources to better service all day.
- **Harness these same lessons to improve capital planning programs.** New bus rapid transit lines and rail routes will continue to play an important role for transit agencies; indeed, with new federal funding, there may be more money than ever to invest in them. But capital projects must emphasize the needs of families with low incomes and people of color—particularly those living in communities with relatively poor access to opportunity—so outcomes can be linked to the goal of building social equity. In some cases, this should mean piloting service to suburban job centers or to dense, relatively high-poverty urban communities.
- **Realign existing services to best meet the needs of the traveling public.** Our research demonstrates that the pandemic affected public transportation services in different ways. Local bus services—particularly those that provide access to communities with high numbers of essential workers and families with low incomes and people of color—maintained much of their pre-pandemic ridership,

suggesting their continued importance. On the other hand, express bus options and commuter rail services suffered significant reductions in demand. Public transit agencies should learn from this experience and align service patterns to best meet the needs of the traveling public.

- **Provide opportunities for meaningful involvement in decision making by all.** Expanding social equity means giving the public opportunities to participate in decision making related to the planning and operations of transit agencies. The agencies we interviewed as part of this research project emphasized that the pandemic offered opportunities to expand outreach through virtual engagement. These mechanisms, combined with renewed in-person processes, can help agencies learn what is working well and what is not. In some cases, agencies must build on their current approaches in order to ensure adequately representative participation. Examples include paying participants with low incomes for their time, partnering with trusted community groups, and weighting surveys for population representativeness to make up for gaps in participation.

Leverage Opportunities to Expand Ridership

- **Focus on opportunities to make transit a good choice for everyone.** This requires agencies to not sit back and wait. Making transit more attractive to more people could mean lowering barriers to access, such as a lack of information about how to ride. One transit agency CEO we interviewed said, “our theory is that people don’t have to marry us; they can just date us.” Staff pointed out opportunities for increasing the public’s understanding of how to ride transit. The Port Authority of Allegheny County showed off a bus at a car show. At RTD, staff partnered with businesses to carry attendees to downtown events, which had the net benefit of also bringing people downtown during the

pandemic. These approaches allowed people unfamiliar with transit to understand what it was like to use it.

- **Identify potential fare payment improvements and discounts.** One official noted that many people do not know how to pay for transit. The agency is investigating working with a utility company to distribute fare cards to all customers along with billing statements. Transit agencies should also consider identifying new fare discounts aimed specifically at riders who may be ready to jump on if given the opportunity. Los Angeles Metro, for example, is piloting free passes for children, which could develop a future transit market. Spokane Transit Authority is considering working with downtown apartment managers to provide transit passes to tenants as an incentive for living in certain units.
- **Increase efforts to link transit service with equitable transit-oriented development.** This is essential because ridership is dependent to a large degree on the presence of workers and residents adjacent to transit lines. Transit agencies can partner with developers to coordinate planning new projects that are located along bus and train routes and provide easy walking access to them. Agencies should acknowledge that in some cases, the most effective sorts of transit-oriented development are those that provide affordable housing, since low- and moderate-income residents are more likely to ride buses and trains than their higher-income counterparts.
- **Develop engaged, long-term relationships with other governmental actors.** Federal, state, and local governments must identify new funds to aid transit agencies in expanding access to mobility for all. Local governments could work with agencies to build bus and train ridership. To encourage dense new housing near transit stations, they can reform zoning ordinances, including by reducing parking requirements and allowing more

housing units per lot. And they can redesign streets to prioritize pedestrians in order to make neighborhoods more welcoming for people walking to the bus or train.

Keep Abreast of Changing Trends

- **Respond to changing telecommuting trends.** Public transit agencies can reconsider certain types of services, like peak-of-the-peak services, if increasing numbers of workers are telecommuting. Expanding neighborhood services can help serve mid-day trips taken by telecommuters. Conversely, if telecommuting rates return to pre-pandemic levels, transit agencies can reinforce core routes to downtowns in order to keep up with the growth of in-person jobs.
- **Respond to increases in automobile traffic.** Growing levels of congestion could be an opportunity for transit agencies to demonstrate their value in offering riders an escape from hours of commuting by car. Agencies must carefully calibrate schedules to match realistic travel times for buses stuck behind cars, and work with local governments to expand bus-only travel corridors.
- **Plan for changes in market demand in central-city areas.** Increased investment in central areas can be good news for transit agencies in that it hits their core market. In order to combat gentrification and displacement that impacts local transit users, public transit agencies can work with local governments and housing developers to increase the amount of affordable housing constructed adjacent to transit stations to create a built-in ridership base. On the other

hand, declining demand could be difficult for transit agencies—but also offer opportunities to enhance accessibility for families with low and moderate incomes who are newly able to afford living near bus and train service. Agencies can work to ensure continued good service to such communities to guarantee equitable access to mobility.

- **Plan for increased development in suburban communities.** Budding growth in suburban residential and employment environments should be associated with new transit service, especially in line with growth in communities with high shares of residents who have low incomes and are people of color. This may require negotiations with local governments to identify new funding to account for growth, as well as partnerships with developers to ensure that new construction is designed in a fashion that accounts for the needs of transit users.
- **Respond to concerns about spreading infection.** If the public continues to be concerned about potential infection from COVID-19 or future pandemics, transit agencies must respond attentively. First, they must show a continued focus on cleanliness, while emphasizing the use of masks or other personal protective equipment. Given the low cost of surgical masks, transit agencies should consider distributing them for free on all buses and trains. Second, the public transportation industry must work with public relations firms and the media to continue spreading the accurate message that transit is not a proven vector of disease, and passengers should feel comfortable using public transportation.

Read the full study at www.apta.com/Horizon/



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