



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY >>

As Chicago strives to become a more connected, prosperous, and equitable city, elected officials and transit agency leaders must take action to improve bus service. More than half of CTA trips in Chicago are made by bus and it's one of the most affordable transportation options in many neighborhoods where people can't easily access the El train. Every day, buses are connecting people to jobs, schools, and other critical services while taking up far less space on the road than private vehicles. While buses continue to play a central role in the city's transportation system, there are signs that quality bus service is under threat in a changing transportation environment.

From 2015 to 2016, bus ridership in Chicago fell by more than 15 million rides (5.8 percent), continuing a recent trend of fewer Chicagoans riding the bus. Since 2012, bus ridership has declined in Chicago by more than 17 percent, and it's dropped by more than 21 percent since pre-recession levels in 2008. Of all CTA trips, buses still account for 52 percent of rides, but this proportion has dropped steadily as rail ridership has increased, despite reaching far fewer neighborhoods than the bus network.

spoke rail system continues to be a good option for people who live and work along the CTA train lines and in the Loop, but many neighborhoods lack access to it. Without more investment in bus service, Chicago risks more people abandoning transit for transportation options that are more expensive and less efficient, healthy, and green.

In an era of limited funding at all levels of government, bus upgrades are cheaper and can be implemented faster than rail modernization and expansion. The next several years present an opportunity to make timely, cost-effective improvements to bus service while continuing to pursue long-term investments in rail modernization and expansion.

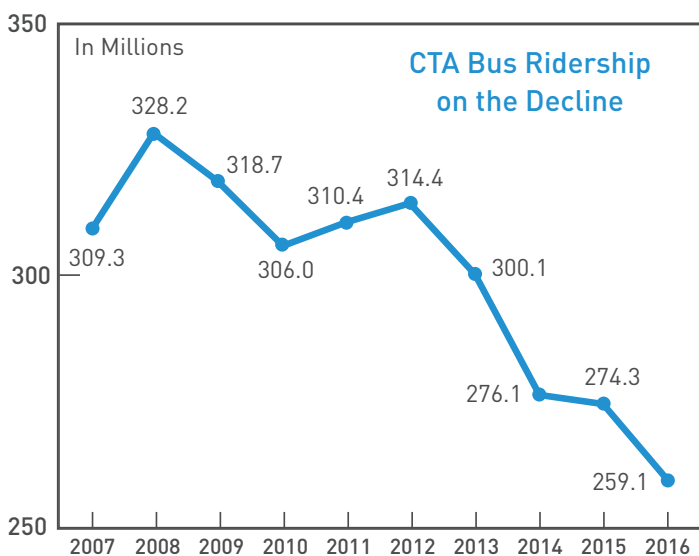
Upgrading bus service requires leadership from elected officials and city agencies, and a strong and unified push from advocates and community leaders. This report lays the foundation for a multi-year effort for a renewed focus on improving bus service and getting Chicagoans back on the bus.

Without more bus investment, Chicago risks falling further behind its peers in transit growth. Currently, transit accounts for just 28 percent of work trips in the city of Chicago, which is low in comparison to peer cities. This is in part because the Chicago region trails its peers in system expansion, transit-friendly development, and per capita transit spending.¹

Percentage of residents riding transit to work (2016)

- New York City – 57%
- Washington, D.C. – 36%
- San Francisco – 34%
- Boston – 33%
- Chicago – 28%
- Philadelphia – 24%

Source: 2016 American Community Survey (ACS)



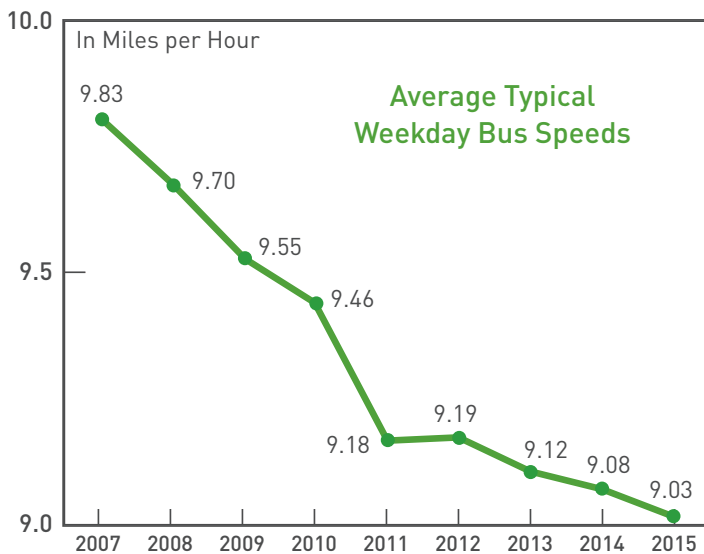
Source: Chicago Transit Authority (CTA)

Chicago needs a healthy and growing bus system. Fewer Chicagoans riding the bus means more people driving and more cars on our already congested streets, especially in and around downtown during peak periods. Our hub-and-

¹Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Metropolitan Governance of Transport and Land Use in Chicago, 2014

There are many reasons for declining bus ridership, including an underinvestment in bus service, declining gas prices, growing transportation options, and the proliferation of jobs and sprawling development in suburban areas that are difficult to reach by transit. Budget cuts also forced CTA to institute significant service cuts in 2010, which naturally leads to declines in ridership. In 2013, the agency also changed its fare structure to increase the price of unlimited ride passes while maintaining the base fare price.

Another central cause is that service on many bus routes is slow and unreliable. And with gas prices low and new options like ride-hailing services available, Chicagoans are increasingly choosing other options. Many local buses frequently get stuck in traffic – especially during rush hour. Traffic congestion has contributed to a consistent decline in average bus speeds in Chicago since 2007, along with service cuts and changes. Meanwhile, the quality of bus service is often overlooked in the public discussion in favor of flashier transportation options like rail, bikes, Uber, and Lyft.



Source: National Transit Database

Lower quality bus service has major equity impacts. A disproportionate number of bus riders live in low-income communities or work in places that lack access to the rail transit system. Substandard bus service hurts these Chicagoans the most while discouraging higher-income residents otherwise inclined to ride transit from riding the bus more frequently.

Public buses carry exponentially more people than private vehicles with one or two passengers, and deserve priority on our streets. The CTA has 1,888 buses that operate on 130 routes and 1,301 route miles. Buses make about 18,843 trips a day and serve 10,813 bus stops, carrying about 46 people per trip on average – and many more on the high ridership routes, which are the focus of this report.

Active Trans launched *Back on the Bus: Speeding Up Chicago's Buses* to rally Chicagoans, our elected officials, and transit agencies to work together to increase investment in the bus network and boost ridership. This report advocates for the city to invest in the following long overdue **bus service upgrades**:

- **Dedicated bus lanes** – Create a network of Transit Priority Streets, as outlined in the Chicago's Complete Streets policy, including at least 50 miles of dedicated bus lanes and other on-street infrastructure to give crowded buses priority;
- **Traffic signal improvements** – Move buses more smoothly through busy intersections by changing signal timing or using technology that gives buses an extended green light to get through intersections;
- **Faster boarding** – Allow riders to pay their fare at the bus stop before boarding and enter the bus through the front or rear doors.

Each of these improvements has the potential to help boost bus **speed** and **reliability**, and get people in Chicago back on the bus. A 2016 national report by TransitCenter, a national foundation working to improve urban mobility, found that speed and reliability are two of the most important factors in bringing new and more consistent riders to transit service, in addition to service frequency and walkability. The findings were based on focus groups with riders in several cities and a statistically significant sample of more than 3,000 riders across 17 regions.

Chicago has already installed or piloted the three improvements listed above on a few routes, but there's potential for broader, permanent implementation of these relatively affordable upgrades if the CTA, Chicago Department of Transportation, mayor's office, and the city



Public buses carry exponentially more people than private vehicles and deserve priority on our streets. *Photo: Anne Evans*

council further prioritize bus service and work together to overcome planning, funding, and political challenges. The upgrades would bring immediate benefits to millions of Chicagoans who already ride the bus while helping attract new riders who frequently will use the network.

This report focuses on six of the busiest routes in the system with potential for improvements: #4 Cottage Grove, #8 Halsted, #53 Pulaski, #66 Chicago, #79 79th, and #80 Irving Park. These routes were selected because they serve millions of riders annually and each has experienced a dip in ridership in recent years. The level of service is already robust, with frequencies of 10 minutes or less during peak periods and often less than five minutes. They run through diverse neighborhoods across the city and connect to many popular destinations, such as schools, hospitals, job centers, and retail corridors. They fill in gaps in the city's rail network and are generally the only public transit option for many people.

Beyond pushing for service upgrades on individual routes, this report aims to start a citywide dialogue about how we can prioritize bus service and pursue policy changes that support bus ridership growth. Our policy objectives are:

(1) Create a plan for Transit Priority Streets with 50 miles of new bus lanes

Chicago's Complete Streets policy identifies transit riders as second only to people walking in terms of priority modes for all transportation projects and programming. It also establishes the typology of Transit Priority Streets, which CDOT

and CTA can identify as corridors where transit will be prioritized ahead of all other modes. However, outside of the Loop Link and Jeffery Jump bus routes, the city has yet to implement this portion of the Complete Streets policy.

CDOT and CTA have been analyzing additional corridors for bus transit priority, but there are no definitive plans for implementation. Moving plans into reality will require growing public and political will for improving bus service and greater coordination between the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) and the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT).

ACTION: *CDOT and CTA develop plan for transit priority streets within two years that includes at least 50 miles of new bus lanes*

(2) Create effective ways to enforce bus-only lanes

The city needs a better way to keep bus lanes clear of other traffic and maximize the impact of public investment in bus infrastructure. Currently, this requires more in-person enforcement by the police department and other city agencies. But with police resources already stretched thin and equity concerns about more in-person enforcement, a new state law is needed that enables photo enforcement of bus lanes, which has proven successful in other cities such as New York and San Francisco.

ACTION: *Illinois General Assembly establishes state law enabling photo enforcement of bus lanes*

(3) Incentivize purchase of multi-day passes

In 2013 CTA increased the price of one-, three-, seven-, and 30-day passes. These unlimited passes encourage people to ride transit frequently and can be particularly relevant for bus trips, which are often shorter and easier to replace by walking, biking, or taking Uber or Lyft. CTA should assess whether these price increases have contributed to losses in ridership and revenue while looking for new ways to incentivize the purchase of passes.

State leaders should also pass proposed legislation (House Bill 2802) that would require Chicagoland companies with 25 or more

employees to offer the transit benefit program. State Rep. Theresa Mah and others sponsored this bill in the 2017 legislative session but it stalled in committee.

The agency must consider the impact of any changes to fare policy on low-income riders and consider equity strategies like “fare capping,” which prevents riders from spending more on multiple single ride passes than they would have if they had purchased a daily or monthly pass. Once a rider using a transit card taps enough times to reach the cost of a daily or monthly pass, they are no longer charged for any additional trips.

ACTION: *CTA further incentivizes the purchase of multi-day passes in a new pricing structure and analyzes a potential fare capping policy. State legislators pass House Bill 2802 requiring Chicagoland employers to offer the transit benefit program*

(4) Establish a new local dedicated revenue stream to fund transit improvements and expansion

Active Trans will continue to advocate for more state and federal transit funding, which is a very effective investment in the region’s mobility, health, economy, and environment. Still, with less reliable and consistent state and federal transit funding, the Chicago region needs a new, local dedicated revenue stream to fund transit operations, improvements and expansion – both bus and rail.

The cities that are most actively upgrading and expanding their transit networks – like Los Angeles, Denver, and Seattle – all recently made significant local commitments that allow them to access more federal funding. Chicago recently took this approach when it established a transit TIF to fund the Red Purple Modernization project on the North Side, and this mechanism could potentially be used for more projects. Transit agencies also receive a portion of local sales tax revenue to help fund operations, although this funding has been cut in recent state budgets, including the budget agreement in July 2017. To make progress long term, the Chicago region needs a new, more consistent and reliable revenue stream.

The mayor took an initial step towards more local funding for transit by including a ride-hailing fee increase in his 2018 budget proposal. If approved by city council, the current 52-cent fee would be increased by 15 cents and all the new revenue would go to CTA for public transit. This is a small but important step in addressing our public transit funding crisis and how ride-hailing is affecting our transportation network.

ACTION: *The City of Chicago, Cook County, or State of Illinois establish a new dedicated revenue stream for public transit improvements and expansion*

(5) Push for more data sharing and analysis of ride-hailing trips

Evidence from studies in New York and San Francisco suggests the growth of Uber and Lyft has increased congestion and contributed to declines in public transit ridership. A recent UC Davis study² surveyed transportation users in seven major cities – including Chicago – and found that ride-hailing may be attracting riders away from public transit, buses in particular, and leading to more vehicle miles traveled (VMT). Unfortunately, we currently have little more than anecdotal evidence about where and how people currently use ride-hailing in Chicago. Greater data sharing from ride-hailing companies – whose business relies on smooth operations in the public right of way – would allow policy makers and researchers to more fully understand how the changing transportation network is working for all its users, and to pinpoint where intervention is needed.

ACTION: *Chicago City Council passes an ordinance mandating that ride-hailing companies make anonymized trip data publicly available*

²UC Davis Institute for Transportation Studies, Disruptive Transportation: The Adoption, Utilization, and Impacts of Ride Hailing in the United States, 2017