



## Transit Systems Shouldn't Return to Pre-COVID-19 Service—They Can Do Better

Faster than we ever imagined, everything changed.

Here at Nelson\Nygaard, we went from practicing working at home on a Thursday to doing it every day the following Monday. As things have come to a standstill, travel has plummeted. Widebody planes are carrying only a handful of people, and rush hour congestion has disappeared. Transit ridership has dropped correspondingly. Before the coronavirus hit the U.S., nearly all our employees used transit to get to and from work. Now, none do, as we are all working from home. All transit systems are reporting severe drops in ridership, with rail ridership declines in the range of 70-90 percent.

However, as people have curtailed their routines, the changes have not been uniform. Most restaurants are either closed or providing take out only, and business for most is way down. However, Yelp reports increased interest in pizzerias and places that provide healthier food. It has been similar for transit. Declines in rail ridership seem to have been much greater than declines in bus ridership. In Boston, as of March 16th, rapid transit ridership had declined by 68%, while bus ridership had declined by 50%. Through March 12th, in the Seattle area, bus ridership had declined by 36%. Even within modes, there have been significant differences. Boston's MBTA cut service to Saturday levels on March 16th and experienced overcrowding on one of its rapid transit lines and several of its bus routes. It has since added service back to relieve overcrowding.

These differences are not surprising. Rapid transit in Boston carries many more white-collar workers who can work from home, while bus services carry more hourly employees who work in essential services. The Blue Line, which quickly became overcrowded, carries a higher percentage of workers who must do their work onsite. Anecdotally, but also intuitively, peak-period ridership has also declined more than off-peak ridership, as people who work traditional hours are more likely to be those who can work from home.

Looking forward, we don't know how temporary or permanent these impacts will be, since we currently can't predict the timeline or recurrence of COVID-19. What we do know is that transit systems should be—and can be—prepared for these changes and the variety of potential outcomes they face.

Transit systems should assume these foundational changes will impact future transit demand. Many people now working at home may continue to do so, either all the time or part time. As long as COVID-19 exists, social distancing measures will shape our routines—and they will reshape mode share. How many people will shift away from transit, Uber, and Lyft into personal vehicles? How long will depressed gas prices provide cost savings that enable many lower income people to buy cars and forgo transit?

All crises provide opportunities, and this crisis offers opportunities for transit. Historically, too many transit systems have been too slow to adapt to the changes occurring around them. Even as transit agencies have successfully learned to pivot and adapt, the pace of change has accelerated with new technologies and systems changing nearly all aspects of their business models. The shelter-in-place/stay-home-stay-safe policies in response to COVID-19 are certainly the most rapid and arguably the most dramatic of these changes.

In the immediate future, transit systems will need to determine how to restore service. The easiest approach would be just to turn everything back on at some safe point. A smarter approach would be to use available data, lessons learned from the pandemic, and the analysis of emerging changes to make restored services better than pre-COVID-19 services. To do this, transit systems should:

- **Determine the best way to restore service.** Rather than just going back to what was there before, use data and monitoring strategies to ramp up service where needs are greatest and where improvements provide the greatest benefits. Current events also provide invaluable insights on where people who need transit the most live and work. Transit systems should begin this planning now.
- **Monitor ridership trends.** Just as ridership drops have occurred unevenly, demand will also recover unevenly—in terms of geography, time of day, and by day. Understanding ongoing trends will be essential to determine needed changes and to help prepare for other unexpected events. Transit systems should begin looking into these trends now.
- **Use real-time or near real-time ridership data to inform service designs.** Most, but not all transit systems, now have access to detailed ridership data, but relatively few can access it quickly. This information will provide transit systems with the ability to make informed decisions that produce smarter, more effective changes than across-the-board changes. Transit systems that do not have this capability should develop it as quickly as possible.
- **Determine longer-term service adjustments.** Once the dust has settled, transit systems will need to determine how much has changed and make appropriate adjustments. The faster they adjust, the stronger they will be. Transit systems should start preparing for this now.
- **Strategize on ways to win back passengers.** Restoring service in the right places at the right times is the best way to win back passengers. However, other measures should also be considered. These could include fare-free service for everyone, more targeted free fares, and fare discounts.
- **Learn from what other transit systems are doing.** Transit systems have also begun implementing new operating practices. Boston's MBTA has asked passengers to board and alight buses via the rear door to minimize exposure to drivers. Two-door boarding and alighting has been proven to speed service but can also increase fare evasion. Other transit systems are now providing fare-free service. Lessons-learned from these changes can produce insights for longer-term improvements.
- **Reassess capital spending plans.** Changes in demand could also impact capital priorities and funding. The \$2 trillion stimulus bill that just passed provides \$25 billion in funding for transit systems that can be used very flexibly. Transit systems have the opportunity now to move forward with their most transformative projects and win back riders with better service.
- **Develop contingency plans.** Once this is over, transit systems should also consider developing contingency plans for future emergencies. This could include contingency service plans, such as the snow plans that most northern transit systems use, and the development of reserve funds, pursued by many westerns systems, as well as other contingency measures.

These are difficult times for everyone, transit systems included. Planning for tomorrow has always been important; it is now critical—both for transit agencies and the communities they serve by providing access to jobs and more equitable and sustainable mobility options. Transit is the backbone of vibrant, urban communities and a lifeline in rural ones. As COVID-19 has impacted transit ridership in the short term, transit systems can learn from these impacts and provide better service once the world comes back to life.

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