NEW YORK CITY COMPTROLLER
BRAD LANDER

Behind Schedule:

How New York City's Bus System Slow Rolls Riders

BUREAU OF POLICY AND RESEARCH

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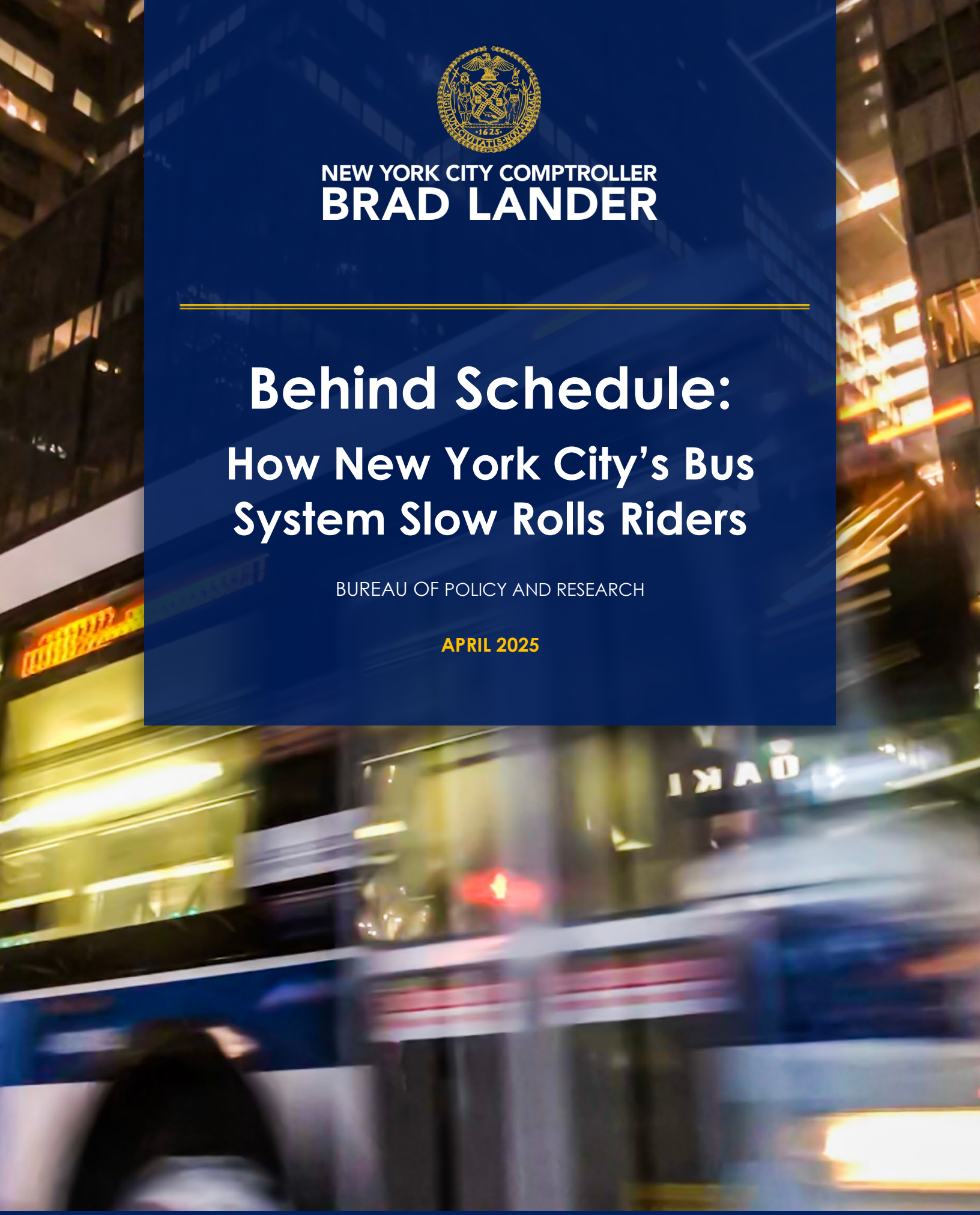

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Executive Summary

Over 1.1 million New Yorkers ride the bus every day – a population larger than most US cities. Buses remain the primary mode of public transit for much of the city, particularly in outer borough transit deserts without subway access. For decades, bus riders have had lower incomes than subway riders and drivers. Disabled New Yorkers are also especially reliant on buses, as most subways remain inaccessible.

Despite the central role buses play in moving people throughout the city, bus ridership in New York has been in free fall for over 20 years.[1] The MTA-managed bus system lost millions of riders starting in 2002, when over 2 million people were riding buses every day. This downturn largely reflects the weaknesses of New York City's bus system. By the late 2010s, bus service had become increasingly slow and unreliable by the MTA's own metrics.[2] Bus networks in each borough were based on decades-old streetcar routes that did not serve New Yorkers' needs or match contemporary commuting patterns.

When the pandemic hit, all transit ridership dropped precipitously as the City and State instituted stay-at-home orders. In subsequent years, however, bus ridership has stagnated at about two-thirds of 2019 levels even as subway ridership continues to recover.[3] Traffic volumes in 2024 are 15% higher than in 2019, indicating that New Yorkers are choosing driving over public transit.

Recognizing the downward trajectory of bus ridership and performance, the City and MTA introduced ambitious plans to improve buses and attract riders through the introduction of Select Bus Service (SBS), Fast Forward, Better Buses, and NYC Streets Plan initiatives. These programs delivered tangible improvements, including the implementation of four dedicated busways throughout the city, widespread installation of transit signal priority, and commencement of bus network redesigns for the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn. The bus priority initiatives adopted by MTA and the New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT) also set clear goals and correctly identified the tools available to enable fast, convenient, and reliable bus service.

However, these tools are not reaching their full potential to serve New York City's bus riders. Cancelled and downscaled projects missed targets and goals, and a lack of vision are undermining and even reversing progress. Bus performance has stagnated and improvements for riders remain undelivered, as bus speeds remain unchanged over the past five years and service is consistently unreliable. Since the pandemic, the bus system has also experienced high rates of fare evasion with the MTA estimating that over 40% of riders do not pay.[4] The City introduced the Fair Fares program in 2019 to provide low-income New Yorkers with a 50% discount on transit fares, but only 38% of those eligible have enrolled.[5]

The City has also failed to initiate major bus improvement projects in recent years. When the MTA's Central Business District Tolling Program (congestion pricing) began operating in January 2025 after years of delay and environmental review, it immediately generated measurable improvements in traffic, bus speeds, and transit ridership. But the City did not implement or announce major bus or streetscape improvement projects in anticipation of the projected traffic improvements.

Delivering for bus riders demands a transformative approach. Speeding up buses and winning back riders requires renewing the City's commitment to improving performance and creating a bold, new vision to guide bus priority investments. This report evaluates existing tools and initiatives deployed by NYC DOT and MTA and proposes a plan for building a world-class bus system that serves all New Yorkers.

Key Findings

Bus System Performance

Assessments of bus performance over three key metrics – speed, on-time rate, and reliability – reveal poor performance systemwide. This report relied on speed data provided by the MTA and real-time Generalized Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) data for evaluation.[6]

- **Bus speeds have not meaningfully improved over the past 10 years and have fallen far short of the City's goal to improve bus speeds citywide by 25%**. In 2024, buses ran at an average of 8.17 mph citywide.[7] Buses in Queens and Staten Island are faster than the citywide average while buses operate closer to 7 mph in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx. Manhattan buses are the slowest, at 6.29 mph. The average speed of buses in New York barely changed over 10 years, declining by 0.6% between 2015 and 2024. Manhattan is the only borough where bus speeds were higher in 2024 than in 2015, increasing a modest 3% over 10 years.

- **New York City buses fail to reach stops at their scheduled time 30% of the time. Express buses are off-schedule 37% of the time**. A bus line's on-time performance rate reflects its ability to reach stops and pick up passengers on-schedule. The average on-time performance rate for New York City buses with headways over 10 minutes is 69%, but the performance of individual lines varies widely. Express buses have worse on-time performance rates than buses overall. 15 of the 18 bus lines that arrive at their stops on-schedule less than half of the time are express buses.

- **Over half of bus lines with headways under 10 minutes are delayed due to bunching, cancelling out the reliable service frequent buses should provide riders**. Bunching occurs when two or more buses fail to stick to their scheduled headways and end up spaced close together, creating irregular and unreliable service for riders. Across the city's bus system, 14% of buses that should arrive less than 10 minutes apart are bunched while 74 bus lines have bunching rates of 15% or more. This means more than one out of every 10 buses fail to maintain even spacing along their route, leading to wait times two to three times longer than scheduled for riders. 128 out of 243 (52%) of frequent bus lines are regularly delayed enough to extend wait times to 10 minutes or more. For riders who use one of these lines to commute five days a week, at least one of those trips would involve waiting anywhere from 10 to 18 minutes for buses whose average scheduled wait should be no longer than five minutes.

- **Congestion pricing boosted bus speeds and ridership more than any other intervention, but the City is not taking advantage of these improvements.** The Central Business District Tolling Program (congestion pricing) had transformative impacts on traffic volumes and bus performance since its implementation in January 2025. Data from the first month of the program found that nearly all Manhattan buses experienced speed increases of up to 5% during the first month of congestion pricing, because of lower traffic volumes. Speed improvements were more pronounced for express bus riders, who experienced trip time savings of up to 10 minutes following implementation. These improvements translated to large increases in bus ridership of up to 5.8% on weekdays and 21% on weekends. However, NYC DOT has not implemented new bus priority projects to take advantage of the lower traffic volumes or preserve improvements in bus speeds. In fact, NYC DOT has scaled back efforts to build bus lanes in recent years, completing just over five miles of new projects in 2024 – the lowest number in six years.

Bus Priority Tools and Initiatives

Since 2018, MTA and NYC DOT have pursued strategies to improve bus performance and boost ridership, using design and technology innovations like dedicated bus lanes, automated enforcement, and transit signal priority. These initiatives gave New York City the tools to create a world-class bus system, on par with internationally renowned bus rapid transit (BRT) networks. However, in practice, implementation was haphazard, and the City and MTA failed to meet their own goals and maximize the potential of the strategies they pursued. This report evaluates agencies' performance implementing specific bus priority tools, and how they fell short.

- **MTA and NYC DOT declined to upgrade and expand the Select Bus Service (SBS) program into a true bus rapid transit (BRT) system, instead abandoning the program midway through implementation.** New York City's 18 SBS routes outperform the bus system overall on speed and reliability and could form the foundation of a BRT system. However, NYC DOT and MTA have failed to commit to the program, implementing just 16 out of 20 proposed corridors. While SBS contains some BRT-like features, it lacks the center-running bus lanes, platform-level boarding, and fully separated transit lanes standard in other cities. MTA paused the program in 2018 as a cost-cutting measure and announced no new routes after 2019. As of 2025, MTA and NYC DOT have no plans to revive the program.

- **NYC DOT has failed to meet any of the dedicated bus lane targets mandated by the Streets Plan, built fewer bus lanes over the past three years than in the two preceding years, and continues to build curbside and offset bus lanes over higher quality center-running lanes or busways.** NYC DOT has failed to meet any of the dedicated bus lane targets mandated by the Streets Plan, building or upgrading just 27.6 miles out of the 50 miles required between 2022 and 2023. In 2024, NYC DOT painted just under 5.5 miles of new bus lanes – the lowest number since 2018. In comparison, the City installed 29.2 miles of new lanes between 2019 and 2020. Of the 163 miles of bus lanes that do exist in the city, 88% are curbside or offset lanes that are more prone to encroachment from

vehicles double-parking, seeking to make right turns, or pull up to the curb. Only 6.8 miles (4%) are median or center-running lanes. Dedicated busways, which have sped up buses by 30% or more where implemented, make up just 3% of the total bus lane network.

- **Overly permissive enforcement rules limit the efficacy of automated camera enforcement (ACE)**: ACE is effective at deterring drivers who illegally block buses and MTA reports that 80% of drivers who received a ticket for a bus lane-related violation never received a second. ACE-equipped routes also see bus speed increases of 5%. However, the large number of legal reasons a vehicle can block or enter a bus lane undermines the efficacy of ACE in New York City. Under current law, driving in a bus lane and parking or stopping in one for extended amounts of time is illegal but entering the lane to make a right-turn, access a parking spot, or complete drop-offs and deliveries is not. Curbside and offset lanes, which account for almost 90% of NYC bus lanes, are especially prone to these encroachments. Different bus lanes are also enforced at different hours, potentially confusing drivers.

- **Despite the implementation of Transit Signal Priority (TSP) at thousands of intersections, NYC DOT has failed to report on the technology's impact on bus performance:** NYC DOT reports installing TSP at thousands of intersections across the city, meeting mandates set by the NYC Streets Plan. However, the resulting benefits for buses are unclear as NYC DOT has not disclosed the locations or routes equipped with this technology or published any evaluations of it since 2017.

- **MTA followed through on its commitment to redesign bus networks in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens but the final plans scaled back some of the most transformative changes, like interborough routes and wider spacing between stops**. In 2019, MTA initiated plans to redesign bus networks in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn, which had not been updated since the 1950s. The Bronx plan was completed in 2022, the Queens plan is scheduled for implementation in summer 2025, and the Brooklyn redesign is still in planning stages. The Bronx and Queens redesigns contained improvements like simplified routes, faster connections to subway stations, and new service on some lines, but the final plans cut the more dramatic proposals. The choice to retain a borough-based network structure also kept buses relatively isolated within each borough, foregoing the chance to create an integrated citywide network. Furthermore, the MTA opted not to use the Bronx and Queens redesigns as an opportunity to introduce new SBS routes.

- **MTA failed to implement plans for all-door boarding systemwide, citing concerns over fare evasion.** When implemented on SBS routes, all-door boarding helped improve bus speeds by up to 19%. MTA announced plans to pilot all-door boarding on 10 local routes in 2021 and systemwide by 2023 but scrapped these plans citing persistently high rates of fare evasion. As of 2025, there are no plans to revive the pilot.

Summary of Recommendations

Plan, design, and build a world-class bus rapid transit (BRT) network for New York City, building on the success of existing initiatives.

- **Design and implement new or expanded Select Bus Service routes, New York City's equivalent of a BRT system, with a focus on creating more interborough connections.** MTA and NYC DOT should collaborate to revive and implement all 20 SBS routes originally proposed in 2009 and create new interborough connections by extending SBS routes across bridges and between boroughs. Specific connections to prioritize include creating a new SBS route along the Brooklyn-Queens waterfront and upgrading the B55 to an SBS route between Kensington and JFK Airport.

- **Take advantage of the "street space dividend" created by congestion pricing to implement new, large-scale busways throughout Manhattan's Central Business District**, modeled off the successful 14th Street Busway. With 30,000 fewer cars in lower Manhattan each day **as a result of** congestion pricing, NYC DOT should translate this decline in traffic into benefits for bus riders by swiftly implementing new busways on 34th Street, and 42nd Street, where buses are currently slower than anywhere else in the city.

- **Implement more high-quality busways and center-running bus lanes citywide**. Most of New York City's 162 miles of bus lanes are curbside or offset and prone to encroachment from vehicles making right turns or accessing parking spots. The City should prioritize high-quality, center-running lanes along appropriate corridors, like Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn.

Maximize the effectiveness of existing bus service and priority tools through better enforcement, payment, and accessibility measures.

- **Improve the effectiveness of automated enforcement to protect bus lanes and routes** by standardizing bus lane operating hours across the city, restricting the legal reasons for private vehicles to enter a bus lane, and creating and enforcing the use of loading zones to prevent delivery vehicles from blocking bus lanes.

- **Enable all-door boarding by refining the proof-of-payment system enabled by OMNY**. MTA anticipates transitioning to OMNY systemwide by 2026, at which point all riders will pay with a smartphone, contactless credit card, or OMNY card. MTA should commit to enabling all-door boarding across all buses by the time the rollout is complete and use the intervening months to clear up technical issues present in its proof-of-payment technology to ensure its reliability in consistently checking fare payments. MTA should also ensure that tap-to-pay devices are at a height and distance accessible to all riders.

- **Expand fare enforcement operations to deploy MTA EAGLE teams across the entire bus system.** Enforcement operations on local buses are extremely limited, and MTA's EAGLE teams responsible for conducting fare enforcement on the bus system focus primarily on SBS routes. MTA should expand these operations to cover more local bus lines and

conduct more ubiquitous enforcement across the bus system using its force of 250 EAGLE team civilian security inspectors.

- **Ensure all buses are accessible to disabled riders**. Riders with disabilities experience challenges boarding buses, especially express buses. An observational study conducted by the Comptroller's Office found that express bus operators did not have proper training on how to deploy the lifts or secure wheelchair users onto the bus. MTA should regularly retrain bus operators on the use of wheelchair lifts and servicing riders who use wheelchairs and mobility devices, pilot additional low-floor buses on express bus routes, ensure audio and visual communication tools function, and engage riders with disabilities in efforts to improve bus service.

Strengthen agency management over bus priority initiatives.

- **Evaluate bus performance and agency progress using new performance-based targets**. MTA and NYC DOT should set performance-based targets to inform bus improvements, such as increase average bus speeds by 25% citywide, cut wait times in half on the 20 worst-performing bus routes, and reduce the rate of bunching on high-frequency routes from 14% to 5%.

- **Empower DOT to hire and retain qualified staff**. NYC DOT's failure to meet mandates in the NYC Streets Plan is in part due to inadequate staffing, hiring freezes, elimination of vacant positions, and hiring delays. The City's Office of Management and Budget should expedite hiring for approved positions, allow DOT to offer new hires higher salaries, and prioritize the retention and promotion of employees with unique skills and experience.

Make buses more affordable.

- **Expand Fair Fares to New Yorkers with incomes at 200% of the federal poverty level and CUNY students**, to reach more regular commuters and transit users.

- **Expand fare discount programs to cover express buses across all times of day**. The City and MTA respectively should ensure express bus trips receive 50% discounts under the Fair Fares and Reduced-Fare programs, at all times of day.

NYC Buses Today

Types of Bus Service

New York City's bus system is managed by the MTA, the country's largest transit agency. The MTA bus system consists of a fleet of over 5,800 buses and 330 routes across the five boroughs.[8] Two divisions within the MTA are responsible for managing these routes. New York City Bus, a division of New York City Transit, manages the majority of local, express, and Select Bus Service (SBS) routes. The MTA Bus Company runs express service to Manhattan as well as about 40 local routes in the Bronx and Queens.[9] Bus service is broken into three categories:

Local Buses

Over 70% of New York City's bus system consists of local routes. These buses make frequent stops and travel extensively within each borough, but rarely travel between boroughs. There are 238 local routes across the city.[10] Local buses are the slowest bus service in the city, averaging speeds of 7.8 mph citywide.

Select Bus Service (SBS)

The MTA and NYC DOT partnered to create New York City's 18 SBS routes. These routes, running along 16 corridors across the city, use features present in bus rapid transit systems to provide faster, more reliable bus service. These routes run at higher average speeds, running 11% faster than local buses and 6% faster than the citywide average, proving that interventions like bus lanes, automated enforcement, and transit signal priority can be effective.

Express Buses

Express buses provide transit service to neighborhoods lacking subway access, offering a one-seat ride between Manhattan and the outer boroughs. There are 76 express routes, 29 of which are in Staten Island and 30 in Queens. Many of these routes only run during peak times on weekdays. Express buses are more expensive to operate and ride, with one-way fares set at $7. Ridership is lower and per-trip subsidies are much higher for express routes compared to local and SBS service. Express buses are also distinct from local and SBS buses in design and use high-floor coach buses with high-back seats, reading lights, and luggage racks. While express buses have higher average speeds, due to their routing through highways, on-time performance is poorer than for the system overall.

MTA also operates shuttles and limited routes, which are similar to local buses but make fewer stops and run infrequently.

Table 1: Average speed by service (2024)

Service	Average Speed (mph)
Express	12.3
Limited	8.4
Local	7.8
Select Bus Service	8.7

Source: MTA Bus Speeds: 2020 – 2024

What is Bus Rapid Transit?

Bus rapid transit, or BRT, provides frequent, high-capacity bus service comparable in quality to rail and subway systems, at a fraction of the cost. Faster and more efficient than traditional bus systems, BRT uses a combination of design features and technical elements to deliver high-quality service to bus riders. When designed correctly, BRT corridors can provide both express and local service, cover long distances quickly, and move large numbers of passengers. According to the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), an international transit standards organization, the essential elements of a BRT corridor are:

- **Dedicated right-of-way**: BRT uses bus lanes, separated from other vehicles, to keep buses fast, reliable, and out of mixed traffic.
- **Center-running lanes**: The bus lanes and stops used in BRT systems are aligned to the median of a roadway. Median or center-running bus lanes are less likely to experience delays and conflicts with turning or idling vehicles compared to curbside lanes.
- **Off-board fare collection**: Riders pay the fare at bus stops to speed up boarding and reduce dwell time.
- **Intersection treatments**: Efficient BRT systems ban turning vehicles, preventing potential conflicts and delays to buses.
- **Platform-level boarding**: BRT bus stops use raised platforms that allow riders to step directly onto a bus eliminating the need for steps or ramps. This reduces the time required for boarding and enables accessibility.

76 cities throughout the world have at least one BRT line, meaning that they meet the minimum criteria to quality as a BRT system under ITDP criteria.[11] 10 US cities, including Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco, have BRT lines but New York City is not among them. Select Bus Service, New York City's closest approximation of BRT, features off-board fare collection and dedicated bus lanes for part of each corridor, but the other three features are rare. In 2015, then Councilmember Brad Lander led the passage of a bill in the City Council to require NYC DOT and the MTA to develop a citywide BRT plan. The agencies compiled a list of over 40 potential corridors, eventually implementing 16 under the SBS program.

Bus Ridership

In 2024, the bus system saw an average of 1.1 million riders each day. This is a 45% decrease from two decades ago, when the average number of daily bus trips was over 2 million. Between 2003 and 2019, bus ridership fell from over 735 million annual trips to about 677 million – a 7.9% decrease.[12] This decline occurred during a period of population growth for New York City, when subway ridership grew by 22.6%.

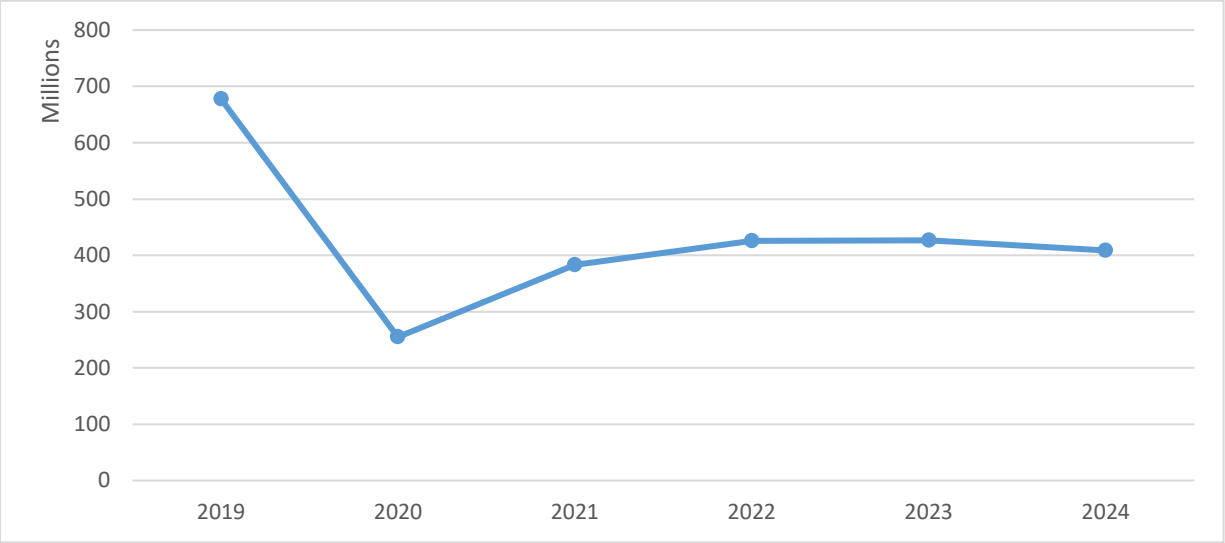
The onset of the pandemic in March 2020 saw transit ridership drop dramatically, and much of it has yet to return. While all transit ridership declined at the start of the pandemic, bus ridership levels were initially closer to 2019 levels compared to subway ridership throughout 2020. This is likely due to the high proportion of essential workers who relied on the bus as their primary means of transportation to work. Bus speeds also rose 15% in 2020, the first speed increase in decades, as traffic disappeared from city streets.[13]

Table 2: Annual bus ridership (2018-2024)

Year	Total Bus Ridership
2019	677,468,480
2020	254,767,849
2021	383,325,056
2022	425,702,347
2023	426,983,064
2024	409,053,750

Source: MTA Monthly Ridership / Traffic Data: Beginning January 2008

Figure 1: Total Annual Bus Ridership



Source: MTA Monthly Ridership / Traffic Data: Beginning January 2008

As of 2024, bus ridership has stagnated at about 60% of 2019 ridership levels. In contrast, subway ridership has rebounded to about 75% of pre-pandemic levels. Long-term trends like remote and hybrid work explain the leveling off of ridership on both buses and subways. But while subway ridership has increased year-to-year since 2020, bus ridership has not, and in fact declined between 2023 and 2024.

Accessibility

Unlike subway stations, only about 25% of which are fully accessible citywide, the MTA's bus fleet is considered fully accessible to riders with disabilities. 13.4% of disabled New Yorkers report relying on buses to commute to work.[14] People with disabilities also make up a greater proportion of bus riders compared to subway riders. 5.6% of all bus commuters are people with disabilities, compared to 3.6% of subway riders.[15] Wheelchair and mobility device users, just one subset of the disabled population, took over 1.2 million rides on local buses in 2023.[16]

While the MTA considers all of its buses compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), there are major variations within the fleet. All local and SBS routes use "low-floor" buses that are wheelchair accessible using front-door ramps. Newer bus models have wider entryways and ramps allowing for easier entry. Express buses, however, are "high-floor" and passengers who cannot climb steps must board via a lift that the operator deploys from the side of the bus. Express buses take longer to board passengers with disabilities compared to the low-floor buses used on local and SBS routes. An observational study conducted by the NYC Comptroller's Office in summer 2024 found that wheelchair users were unable to board express buses 25% of the time and operators lacked adequate training on how to use the lift and safely board disabled riders. The complete report and findings are available here.

Accessibility problems are not necessarily limited to express buses. Wheelchair and mobility device users also reported local buses failing to board them when double-parked vehicles, snow,

or other obstacles blocked or complicated ramp deployment.[17] The bus system must also accommodate riders with vision or hearing impairments, using features like audio announcements about approaching buses and stops, large-print, high-color contrast, and tactile braille signs, and audio and visual information systems to communicate about service changes and emergencies.

Bus Performance Data

Speeds

Bus speeds have not meaningfully improved over the past 10 years. In 2024, buses ran at an average of 8.17 mph citywide. Buses in Queens and Staten Island are faster than the city overall while buses operate well below 8 mph in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan. Manhattan buses are the slowest of the five boroughs, running at an average of just 6.29 mph.

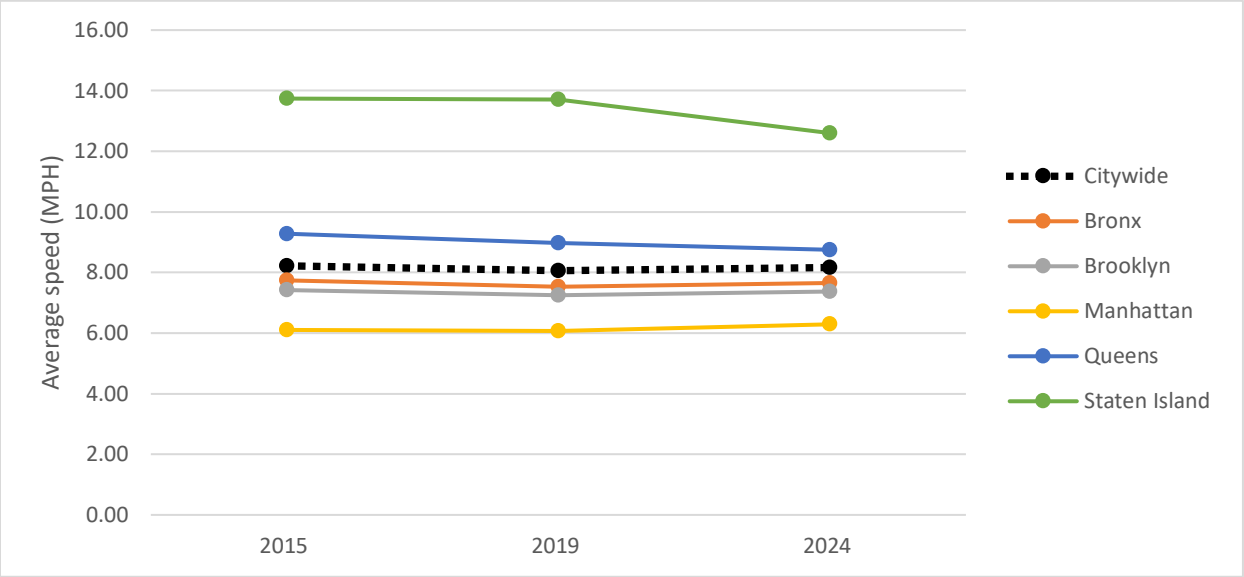
Unfortunately, bus speeds have not meaningfully changed over time. Staten Island buses slowed down the most of any borough, decreasing 8% between 2015 and 2024 while Queens buses slowed down by about 5%. Bus speeds were incrementally higher in the Bronx and Brooklyn in 2024 compared to 2019, but slightly lower than in 2015. Manhattan is the only borough where bus speeds were higher in 2024 than in 2015, increasing a modest 3% over 10 years.

Table 3: Average Bus Speeds by Borough (2015-2024)

Borough	2015	2019	2024
Bronx	7.74	7.53	7.65
Brooklyn	7.42	7.25	7.37
Manhattan	6.11	6.07	6.29
Queens	9.28	8.98	8.75
Staten Island	13.74	13.71	12.6
Citywide	8.22	8.06	8.17

Sources: MTA Bus Speeds: 2015-2019 and MTA Bus Speeds: 2020 – 2024

Figure 2: Average Bus Speed by Borough (2015-2024)



Sources: MTA Bus Speeds: 2015-2019 and MTA Bus Speeds: 2020 – 2024

On-time Performance

New York City buses fail to reach stops at their scheduled time 30% of the time, 37% for express buses. A bus line's on-time performance rate reflects its ability to reach stops and pick up passengers on-schedule. A higher percentage indicates that a bus line is more likely to reach stops within at least five minutes of the scheduled time, while buses with a lower on-time performance rate are less reliable. This metric is most useful for evaluating less frequent bus lines, defined as bus lines with headways of 10 minutes or more. When buses with longer headways fail to stick to their schedules, riders experience longer wait times.

The average on-time performance rate for New York City buses with longer headways is 69%, but the performance of individual lines varies widely. The QM5 express bus has the lowest on-time performance rate of any bus line, arriving at its stops within five minutes of the scheduled time only 33% of the time. The S89 Limited bus and M79-SBS are the best performing routes by this measure, each with a 91% on-time performance rate. There are 18 bus routes systemwide that fail to arrive at stops within five minutes of their scheduled time at least half the time, 15 of which are express buses (Table 4). Bus riders who use any of these lines would experience delays every other time they rode the bus. Overall, express buses have an on-time performance rate of 63%, lower than the citywide average (Table 5). SBS buses have the best on-time performance, with a rate of 75%.

Table 4: Bus routes with an on-time performance rate below 50%

Line	Service	On-time Rate
QM5	Express	33%
QM6	Express	36%
QM31	Express	38%
QM1	Express	39%
BM2	Express	41%
QM17	Express	42%
BM5	Express	42%
QM35	Express	42%
B74	Local	42%
BM1	Express	43%
BM4	Express	45%
QM12	Express	45%
QM42	Express	46%
BM3	Express	47%
Q56	Local	47%
B32	Local	48%
QM36	Express	49%

Source: MTA Generalized Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) Data

Table 5: On-time performance rate by service

Service Type	On-Time Performance Rate
Express	63%
Local	70%
Select Bus Service	75%
Other (Limited/Shuttle)	71%

Source: MTA Generalized Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) Data

Reliability

Over half of bus lines with short headways are delayed due to bus bunching, negating the reliability and convenience they should provide riders. A frequent, reliable bus system allows riders to reach a stop and board a bus without experiencing excessive wait times. 239 New York City bus lines have headways of 10 minutes or less, meaning that a rider would typically wait no more than five minutes on average for a bus at any given stop. Excessive wait times occur when buses fail to maintain even spacing along their route, due to bus bunching or canceled service.

Bus "bunching" occurs when two or more buses fail to follow their scheduled headways and end up spaced close together. This measure is most useful for evaluating more frequent bus lines, defined as bus lines with headways of 10 minutes or less. When bunching occurs, the first bus ends up picking up extra passengers at increasingly crowded stops causing further delays. The bus behind it picks up fewer passengers in turn, speeding up and running ahead of schedule, creating a longer gap between it and the next bus. Two buses are considered bunched if the actual headway between them is less than 25% of the scheduled headway. For instance, if buses on a route are scheduled to arrive every eight minutes, a bus two minutes or less behind the one preceding it is considered bunched. Across the city's bus system, 14% of buses are bunched.

74 bus lines have bunching rates of 15% or more. The 13 least reliable bus lines have rates above 20%, meaning one in every five buses is bunched (Table 6). Bus lines experiencing frequent bunching creates irregular and unreliable service for riders. Riders who use any of the 241 lines with headways under 10 minutes should wait no more than five minutes, on average, for a bus. Due to bunching, however, wait times often exceed double or triple the expected amount.

Riders on over half the city's high-frequency bus lines (128 out of 241) regularly experience wait times upwards of 10 minutes, cancelling out the frequent service these routes are supposed to provide. Table 7 lists the bus lines that have wait times of 15 minutes or more at least 10% of the time. A rider who takes 10 trips on any of these buses would wait at least 15 minutes during one of those trips.

Table 6: Most bunched bus lines

Line	Service	Bunching Rate	Scheduled Wait Time	Actual Wait Time
Q24	Local	23%	3.64	9.00
B41	Local	23%	2.54	5.42
Q58	Local	22%	1.82	6.30
B60	Local	22%	4.79	10.28
B46	Local	21%	4.05	8.29
B68	Local	21%	4.38	8.06
QM15	Express	20%	3.50	5.96

Line	Service	Bunching Rate	Scheduled Wait Time	Actual Wait Time
B38	Local	20%	3.04	5.81
Q56	Local	20%	4.43	9.91
B12	Local	20%	3.74	7.63
Q25	Local	20%	2.72	6.48
B25	Local	20%	4.29	9.33
B3	Local	20%	4.13	7.63

Source: MTA Generalized Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) Data

Table 7: Bus lines with the highest wait times

Line	Service	Scheduled Wait Time	90th Percentile Wait Time
S55	Local	4.25	18.64
SIM31	Express	3.63	18.17
BM3	Express	4.69	17.09
S51	Local	3.85	16.88
S57	Local	4.05	16.53
S52	Local	4.34	16.51
S56	Local	3.07	16.46
S54	Local	3.90	16.38
B16	Local	3.49	16.00
S62	Local	4.03	16.00
Q34	Local	4.86	15.89
M35	Local	4.89	15.66
B67	Local	4.46	15.34
S74	Local	3.56	15.29
B7	Local	3.83	15.10
Bx26	Local	4.57	15.02

Source: MTA Generalized Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) Data

Congestion Pricing

Upon implementation, congestion pricing delivered unprecedented improvements in traffic volumes, bus speeds, and transit ridership but the City has not taken advantage of the presented opportunities.

Congestion pricing improved bus speeds, reliability, and ridership in short order, more so than any other policy intervention. Implemented in January 2025 after years of studies, delays, and regulatory procedures, the MTA's Central Business District Tolling Program (congestion pricing) charges most drivers $9 to enter Manhattan south of 60th Street. The program had transformative impacts on traffic volumes and bus speeds almost instantaneously. Data from the first month of the program found that nearly all Manhattan buses experienced speed increases of up to 7.8% during the first month of congestion pricing, as a result of lower traffic volumes.[18] The requirement that buses follow schedules created for heavy-traffic conditions likely depressed potential speed gains. Speed improvements were more pronounced for express bus riders, experiencing trip time savings of up to 10 minutes following implementation.[19] These improvements translated to increases in bus ridership of 1.9-5.8% on weekdays and 7-21% on weekends.[20]

While the traffic reduction impacts of congestion pricing have delivered major improvements for bus riders, the City is missing a once-in-a-generation opportunity to capitalize on these gains. Eight of the city's 10 slowest bus routes are in the congestion relief zone (Table 8). Lower traffic volumes free up street space previously occupied for vehicles to become new or repurposed public space and transit infrastructure. Prior to the implementation of congestion pricing in London, Transport for London implemented large-scale bus service improvements.[21] In contrast, NYC DOT has scaled back efforts to build bus lanes in recent years, completing just over five miles of new projects in 2024 – the lowest number since 2018.[22] Failure to take advantage of the "street space dividend" created by congestion pricing risks allowing traffic to flood back into Manhattan's central business district, reversing the policy's hard-won gains.

Table 8: Top 10 Slowest New York City Bus Lines (2025)

Line	Average Speed (2025)
M42	5.27
M34A+	5.38
M57	5.42
M31	5.45
M50	5.49
B35	5.51
M14A+	5.52
M8	5.59
M34+	5.64
M116	5.65

Source: MTA Bus Speeds: Beginning 2025

Evaluation of Bus Priority Initiatives

Since 2018, MTA, NYC DOT, and the City Council have created plans to improve bus performance, attract riders, and reverse a decade's worth of declining ridership attributable to unreliable performance, antiquated route networks, and slow speeds. MTA's 2018 Bus Plan, spearheaded by then New York City Transit President Andy Byford, proposed redesigning the citywide bus network, implementing all-door boarding, improving bus dispatching, and making street design and traffic signal changes on select corridors in coordination with NYC DOT.[23] NYC DOT's Better Buses Action Plan set goals of increasing bus speeds by 25% citywide, installing 10-15 miles of new bus lanes per year and upgrading five, installing transit signal priority (TSP) at hundreds of intersections, and piloting new busways and automated enforcement technology.

In 2021, NYC DOT launched its Better Buses Restart initiative to install nine new major bus lanes and busways throughout the city. Better Buses Restart extended and made permanent the 14th Street and created plans to implement five additional busways, four of which are operational as of 2025. The NYC Streets Plan, passed by the City Council in 2021, sought to accelerate this progress and mandated NYC DOT install 20 miles of protected bus lanes in 2022 and 30 miles each year through 2026. The Streets Plan also required DOT to implement TSP at thousands of intersections by 2026.

In subsequent years, MTA and NYC DOT have met some of these objectives and partially fulfilled or abandoned others. This section of the report evaluates agencies' performance and progress towards implementing bus priority tools.

Summary of Evaluation

Initiative	Status	Evaluation
Bus Priority Tools		
Select Bus Service	MTA and NYC DOT jointly implemented 16 SBS corridors between 2008 and 2019, out of 30 potential corridors.	Failing. While SBS outperforms the bus system overall on speed and reliability criteria, MTA and NYC DOT abandoned the program midway through implementation.
Dedicated bus lanes	Since 2022, NYC DOT built only 23.1 miles of protected bus lanes, far short of the required Streets Plan target of 80 miles through 2024.	Failing. In addition to missing Streets Plan targets, NYC DOT built fewer new bus lanes in the past three years than between 2020-2021.

Initiative	Status	Evaluation
Automated enforcement	50 bus routes and over 1,000 buses are camera-enforced as of 2024.	Underway, but needs improvement to be more effective
Transit signal priority	DOT has installed TSP at over 2,000 intersections, meeting the Streets Plan mandate.	Met targets, but no data is reported on impact
Bus network redesigns	Bronx redesign is complete (2023), Queens redesign will begin implementation (summer 2025), Brooklyn redesign in planning stage	Underway, but with only modest redesign improvements
All-door boarding	MTA never started this initiative outside of SBS routes.	Failing
Congestion pricing	Went into effect on January 5, 2025	Resounding success in reducing traffic and increasing transit ridership

Bus Priority Tools

Select Bus Service (SBS)

SBS buses outperform the bus system overall on speed, on-time performance, and reliability, and could form the foundation of a true bus rapid transit (BRT) system in New York City. However, NYC DOT and MTA have failed to commit to the program, implementing just 16 out of 20 proposed routes, abandoning opportunities to revive the program after pausing it in 2019, and falling short of internationally accepted criteria for BRT systems.

SBS buses function as New York City's version of a BRT system. BRT applies features present in rail systems like dedicated bus lanes, off-board fare collection, and longer distances between stops to speed up buses and provide more reliable service. NYC DOT is responsible for installing bus lanes and shelters, while the MTA manages service. The city's 18 SBS routes run at higher average speeds than local routes, running 11% faster than local buses and 6% faster than the citywide average, proving that these interventions can be effective. These routes operate on dedicated bus lanes, make fewer stops, and are equipped with automated enforcement and transit signal priority. However, the SBS program does not meet the criteria of a true BRT system as defined by the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. Features including center-running bus lanes, platform-level boarding, and transit lanes fully separated from general traffic are standard in BRT systems in other US cities and abroad, but rare in New York City.

The SBS program began in 2008 when NYC DOT and MTA partnered to plan and implement 20 SBS corridors across the city, starting with the Bx12 SBS in the Bronx.[24] 17 more routes across 16 corridors launched over the next 10 years, half of which came online between 2015 and 2017.

Seven of these corridors are in Manhattan, while the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens each have three, none of which provide crosstown service. In 2018, the MTA announced it would be putting the SBS program on hold for at least three years as part of a cost-cutting measure. The last SBS route, the M14, launched in 2019 alongside the 14th Street Busway but no additional routes have been announced since. As of 2025, MTA and NYC DOT have not revived the program.

Dedicated Bus Lanes

NYC DOT has failed to meet any of the dedicated bus lane targets mandated by the Streets Plan, built fewer bus lanes over the past three years than in the two preceding years, and continues to build curbside and offset bus lanes over higher quality center-running lanes or busways.

Bus lanes improve bus speeds and reliability by reducing delays and the amount of time spent in traffic. Dedicated bus lanes can take various forms and design choices greatly influence the degree to which they improve bus performance. Bus lanes first appeared in New York City in 1963, when the City installed a painted bus lane on Livingston Street in downtown Brooklyn. The City painted its first red bus lane in 2007, on 57th Street in Manhattan.[25]

When designed and enforced properly, dedicated lanes can dramatically improve bus speeds and reliability. MTA reports that bus speeds increased by 8.4% on routes where NYC DOT added bus lanes in 2019 – a year when overall bus speeds declined.[26] Dedicated busways can have even more transformative impacts, speeding up buses on street segments where they are implemented by up to 30%.[27] Travel speeds on 14th Street in Manhattan increased up to 47% after the installation of a dedicated busway in 2019, making trips for bus riders on the corridor 10 minutes faster.[28]

As of 2024, there were approximately 163 miles of bus lanes throughout New York City, 58 (35%) of which were built in the past five years (Table 9). Four out of New York's five busways were built between 2019 and 2022. As of the end of 2024, there are approximately 163 miles of bus lanes throughout New York City. 144 miles (88%) of these lanes are curbside or offset, while only 6.8 miles (4%) are center-running lanes. The City also has 5.7 miles of busways which give transit vehicles exclusive use of a segment of a roadway, making up 3% of the total bus lane network (Table 10).

MTA and NYC DOT made progress on bus priority projects, piloting the 14th Street busway by late 2019. While the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused some delays, NYC DOT completed a record number of bus lanes and signal upgrades in 2020.[29] The NYC Streets Plan, codified into law by the City Council in 2021, mandated that NYC DOT install 20 miles of protected bus lanes in 2022 and 30 miles each year through 2026. The law defined "protected" as bus lanes physically separated from other traffic lanes or equipped with automated camera enforcement. DOT has built or upgraded only 27.6 miles of bus lanes out of the 50 miles required between 2022 and 2023. In 2024, NYC DOT painted just under 5.5 miles of new bus lanes – the lowest number since the launch of the Better Buses initiative.[30] Of the few projects proposed since 2022, including bus priority improvements on Tremont Avenue and Hillside Avenue, most have not moved forward.

Table 9: Miles of bus lanes built and upgraded (2020-2024)

Year	New Lane Miles	Miles Upgraded
2024	5.48	13.5
2023	15.7	5.2
2022	7.8	4.4
2021	12.9	No data
2020	16.3	No data

Source: Mayor's Management Report and NYC Streets Plan Update 2024

Table 10: Total miles of bus lanes by type

Lane Type	Mileage
Curbside	77.33
Offset	66.60
Median/Center-Running	6.84
Busway	5.72
Other	4.71
Uncategorized	1.68

Source: Bus Lanes – Local Streets (NYC Open Data)

Automated Camera Enforcement

Automated Camera Enforcement (ACE) is effective at deterring drivers who illegally block buses but produces limited improvements in bus speeds, as vehicles can legally park, stop, and turn in bus lanes due to overly permissive enforcement rules.

MTA and NYC DOT rely on automated enforcement technology to ticket vehicles illegally blocking bus lanes and routes throughout the city. Started as a pilot in 2010, NYC DOT maintains cameras in stationary locations and MTA uses cameras installed on buses to issue tickets to vehicles that illegally enter and block bus lanes. Trained camera operators review footage before issuing a violation. The state legislature initially authorized a pilot program to deploy automated enforcement on a limited number of Select Bus Service (SBS) routes. In 2019, the state legislature expanded the automated enforcement program to cover all bus lanes and established a graduated fine schedule, with initial violations set at $50 and rising to $250 based on the number of tickets received within a 12-month period. In 2024, MTA received further authority to use bus-

mounted cameras to ticket drivers who park in bus stops or double park anywhere along a bus route.[31]

As of September 2024, 50 bus routes are camera-enforced, through a combination of stationary and mobile bus-mounted cameras.[32] Over 1,000 individual buses are equipped with cameras.[33] Under the NYC Streets Plan, DOT installed additional cameras along a small number of bus lanes towards a mandate that the agency implement 20 miles of protected bus lanes in 2022 and 30 miles per year thereafter.[34] Automated camera enforcement can indirectly improve bus speeds by deterring drivers and unauthorized vehicles from blocking bus lanes. DOT's most recent evaluation of the camera program, conducted in 2021, reported that 80% of drivers who received a ticket for a bus lane-related violation never received a second.[35] In a September 2024 announcement related to the program, MTA stated that just 9% of drivers received more than one violation.[36] Yet, even one illegal blockage can slow down a bus or push it out of its dedicated lane.

Automated enforcement works best when combined with a package of bus priority improvements tailored to specific routes and corridors. In isolation, MTA estimates that automated enforcement resulted in average speeds increasing by 5%.[37] However, the effectiveness of automated enforcement is dependent on both the type of bus lane and the types of encroachments considered legal. Driving in a bus lane and parking or stopping in one for extended amounts of time are illegal but entering the lane to make a right-turn, access a parking spot, or complete drop-offs and deliveries are not. Furthermore, different bus lanes are enforced at different hours, potentially confusing drivers. Curbside bus lanes are especially prone to encroachment, as buses get stuck behind vehicles legally waiting to make right turns. Improving the efficacy of automated camera enforcement requires designing higher quality bus lanes (e.g. center-running vs. curbside), standardizing the operating hours of bus lanes, and restricting the legal reasons for private vehicles to enter a bus lane (e.g. banning right turns).

Transit Signal Priority (TSP)

NYC DOT reports installing TSP at thousands of intersections across the city but has failed to publicly track or report on the impacts of TSP, leaving the resulting benefits for buses unclear.

A technology intended to reduce the amount of time buses spend waiting at traffic lights, TSP lengthens green signals and reduces red signals when a bus approaches an intersection. NYC DOT has implemented TSP on bus routes throughout New York City since 2012, starting with 260 intersections across five SBS routes.[38] A 2017 evaluation found that TSP could reduce bus travel times by an average of 18% on the five SBS routes where it was active. These results were highly dependent on the route, direction of travel, and time of day, and NYC DOT concluded that the technology worked best on two-way streets outside of Manhattan, following thorough traffic analyses.[39] NYC DOT must also coordinate with MTA to ensure buses are equipped with technology compatible with TSP.

The Streets Plan required NYC DOT to install TSP at 750 locations in 2022 and an average of 1,000 intersections per year through 2026. Unlike their mandate for bus lanes, the agency is on track

to meet this goal and over 2,000 intersections received TSP by the end of 2023.[40] This pace of implementation was possible due to updated traffic modeling technology. However, the shift in implementation strategy, from installing TSP across entire bus routes to focusing on individual intersections, makes its impacts on individual routes more difficult to isolate and assess. Indeed, NYC DOT has not made public any evaluations of TSP since 2017. Up-to-date lists of bus routes or intersections with TSP are also unavailable.

Bus Network Redesigns

MTA followed through on its commitment to redesign bus networks in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens but final plans lack transformative changes.

Since 2019, MTA has embarked on plans to redesign the citywide bus network, with the goals of improving connectivity, decreasing travel times, and simplifying routes for riders. These redesigns were much-needed, and represented the first updates to the bus network in over 50 years. MTA completed and implemented a redesign of the Bronx local bus network in 2022 and finalized a redesign of the Queens network in early 2025. A redesign for Brooklyn is currently in the planning stages. These plans represent the first attempts to modernize bus networks that have remained mostly static since the 1950s. While network redesigns can be revenue neutral, the Bronx and Queens redesigns also included new and increased service on some routes. MTA also chose to retain the borough-based bus network structure, foregoing the choice to create an integrated bus network for the city.

The Bronx redesign featured major changes to 13 out of 46 routes, added two new routes, and made minor changes to most pre-existing routes, such as removing stops and altering schedules. The changes affect the Bronx's local, limited, and Select Bus Service routes, but not its express buses. Following its implementation in 2022, MTA reported that bus speeds in the Bronx had increased by 4% on the routes that received the biggest changes from the redesign, while citywide speeds remained flat.[41] Ridership also increased borough-wide, growing by as much as 8% on redesigned cross-town routes.[42] The Queens redesign is more ambitious in scope. In addition to simplifying, straightening, and consolidating routes, MTA also plans to introduce $30 million worth of new and increased service.[43] The redesign also features new "rush" service, limited routes intended to provide faster connections to subway stations to passengers who do not live near one.

Original proposals developed by MTA for both boroughs contained more dramatic changes. Specific elements cut or downscaled from initial proposals include:

- *Interborough routes*: The original bus network redesign plans for the Bronx and Queens contained more interborough routes, many of which were downscaled or removed from the final plans. Longer routes that travel between boroughs can provide riders with faster connections and relieve crowding on subways but tend to be more expensive and less efficient to operate. As a result, MTA tends to terminate bus routes at borough borders or subway stations, requiring passengers to make transfers. Finding a balance between improved interconnectivity and route efficiency is a challenge for bus network redesigns.

- *Wider spacing between bus stops*: The Bronx bus network redesign cut 258 bus stops, a modest number compared to the original proposal which cut 400.[44] The redesign also extended the amount of space between stops. The Queens redesign removes many more stops across a larger number of routes although MTA has not disclosed the final count. Closely-spaced stops result in slower travel times for buses, with each stop adding at least 16 to 20 seconds to a trip.[45] Removing, or extending distance between bus stops can help speed up travel times. However, this may pose challenges for passengers with disabilities or mobility challenges, for whom buses serve as an accessible mode of transportation but cannot walk long distances. Attempts to rebalance bus stops must weigh both considerations.

- *New SBS routes*: Neither the Bronx nor Queens bus network redesigns included new SBS routes, missing an opportunity to revive and expand the program. The draft Brooklyn network redesign plan contains a proposal for a new SBS route between Kensington, Brooklyn to JFK Airport, but its implementation is not yet guaranteed.[46]

The Queens redesign is set to go into effect in June 2025 and the MTA will unveil a final plan for the Brooklyn bus network in the second half of the year. The full impacts of these redesigns will only become clear following implementation.

All-Door Boarding

MTA never implemented all-door boarding, citing concerns over fare evasion.

Dwell time, or the time a bus spends loading and unloading passengers at a stop, can account for up to one-third of total trip time.[47] All-door boarding helps cut down on dwell time by allowing riders to enter through any door. In New York City, SBS routes have used all-door boarding since MTA introduced the service in 2008. An early evaluation found that SBS routes were approximately 19% faster than equivalent local routes, due to interventions that included all-door boarding.[48] In 2021, MTA announced plans to pilot it on 10 local bus routes alongside the ongoing rollout of OMNY, the agency's contactless fare payment system, on buses. MTA intended to use the pilot as a first step towards implementing all-door boarding on all buses by 2023.[49] However, MTA subsequently reversed course, first delaying and then scrapping the pilot over concerns around high rates of fare evasion rates on buses.[50] As of 2025, all-door boarding remains unimplemented, with no plans to proceed.

Fare Payments and Discount Programs

Fare Collection and Evasion

Unreliable proof-of-payment technology and limited fare enforcement operations on buses keeps fare evasion rates high.

Transit agencies frequently pair all-door boarding with off-board fare collection to reduce the amount of time buses linger at stops, or dwell time. This is standard on SBS routes where fare payment machines are located next to bus stops. In 2019, MTA launched OMNY, a contactless fare payment system to replace MetroCards. OMNY allows riders to pay for transit using smartphones, or debit and credit cards, and incorporates automatic fare-capping technology, granting riders who pay for 12 rides within seven days using OMNY free rides for the remainder of the week. In December 2020, the MTA announced that approximately 15,000 OMNY readers had been installed on the MTA's 5,800 bus fleet. By the end of 2024, MTA reported that 60% of New York City transit riders used OMNY, with more subway riders using it than bus riders.[51] MTA anticipates completing the rollout of OMNY and retiring MetroCards entirely by 2026, when vending machines allowing riders to purchase new fare cards with cash will be available systemwide.

Despite plans to enable all-door boarding across New York City's bus system by 2023, this policy remains unimplemented as of 2025. The implementation of OMNY across all buses and subsequent integration of fare discount programs is a major accomplishment for the MTA that should have enabled all-door boarding systemwide. However, high rates of fare evasion on buses led MTA to indefinitely postpone implementation. MTA estimated $315 million of losses due to fare evasion on buses in 2022, suggesting that up to 45% of riders were not paying.[52]

Despite persistently high rates of fare evasion on buses, fare enforcement activities are primarily concentrated on subways. The NYPD spent millions on police overtime to patrol stations, while MTA announced a $1.1 billion investment in new fare gates in its 2025 capital plan.[53] MTA EAGLE teams, consisting of about 250 civilian security inspectors, are responsible for conducting fare enforcement on buses. Traditionally, these teams focused exclusively on SBS buses but now patrol some local routes as well. Fare evasion rates on buses declined by 9.1% by the end of 2024, an improvement MTA attributed to enhanced EAGLE team operations and targeted enforcement on routes with the highest fare evasion rates.[54]

The OMNY system is expected to enable more efficient fare enforcement practices, and allow inspectors to verify proof-of-payment instead of monitoring passengers as they board a bus. EAGLE team inspectors currently use handheld Onboard Validation Devices (OVDs) to verify fare payment. These devices can validate proof of payment from a smartphone, contactless credit card, or OMNY card, but not a MetroCard. Failure to produce proof-of-payment results in a summons that carries a $100 fine. Once the MTA completes OMNY rollout and phases out MetroCards, OVDs can verify proof-of-payment across buses and subways. However, these devices often experience technical failures, including failure to connect to bus WiFi and inconsistent detection of recent fare payments.

Fare Discount Programs

The Fair Fares program does not cover the New Yorkers who stand to benefit from it the most.

The MTA and City of New York offer multiple fare discount programs to make transit more affordable. The two largest programs are:

- *Fair Fares*: The City-funded Fair Fares program offers New York City residents whose household incomes are at 145% of the federal poverty level (FPL) a 50% discount on subway and local and SBS bus fares. Launched in 2019, Fair Fares originally provided discounted fares to New Yorkers with incomes below the FPL. The City expanded eligibility to 120% in 2023 and again to 145% in 2025 to reach more low-income and working New Yorkers. The recent expansion of the program makes another 200,000 people eligible to receive a 50% discount. Funding for Fair Fares was $115 million in the FY 2025 budget, a $20 million increase from the previous year.[55] As of February 2025, New Yorkers enrolled in the Fair Fares program can use OMNY to pay for trips. Notably, the Fair Fares discount does not apply to express buses.

  Fair Fares is critical for providing affordable transit to low-income New Yorkers, but remains less generous and covers a smaller share of residents compared to similar programs offered in other US cities.[56] By the end of 2024, approximately 360,000 New Yorkers were enrolled in Fair Fares, representing just 38% of the total eligible population.[57] The limited uptake of the program is possibly due to low awareness of the program, but more likely attributable to the reality that most regular commuters earn too much to qualify for the program. Even at the 145% threshold, a family of four making $47,000 would not be eligible to enroll. Of New Yorkers who do qualify for the program, many report infrequent public transit use.[58] Advocates have called on the City to expand eligibility to 200% of the FPL, the threshold used by other transit discount programs across the country. A study by the Community Service Society of New York estimates that such an expansion would cost approximately $150 million per year, $35 million more than current spending levels.[59]

- *Reduced-Fare Program*: MTA administers a Reduced Fare Program for people with disabilities and adults over the age of 65. The program provides a 50% fare discount on subways and buses, as well as on express buses, Metro North, and the LIRR during certain times of day. There are currently over 1.5 million New Yorkers enrolled in the program, serving four times as many people as Fair Fares.[60]

- *Student OMNY Cards*: The City and State jointly fund a program granting NYC public school students free OMNY passes, allowing students to take up to four free transit trips per day. The current iteration of the program allows students to use their passes seven days a week and year-round, instead of just on school days. The New York State Department of Transportation provides $25 million in annual funding for the program while the City contributes $50.5 million.[61] Approximately 500,000 to 600,000 K-12 students are eligible for student OMNY passes.[62] The Student OMNY Card program does not cover CUNY students, although nearly half of students come from families with incomes within the threshold to qualify for Fair Fares.[63]

Recommendations

Plan, design, and build a world-class bus rapid transit network for New York City, building on the success of existing initiatives.

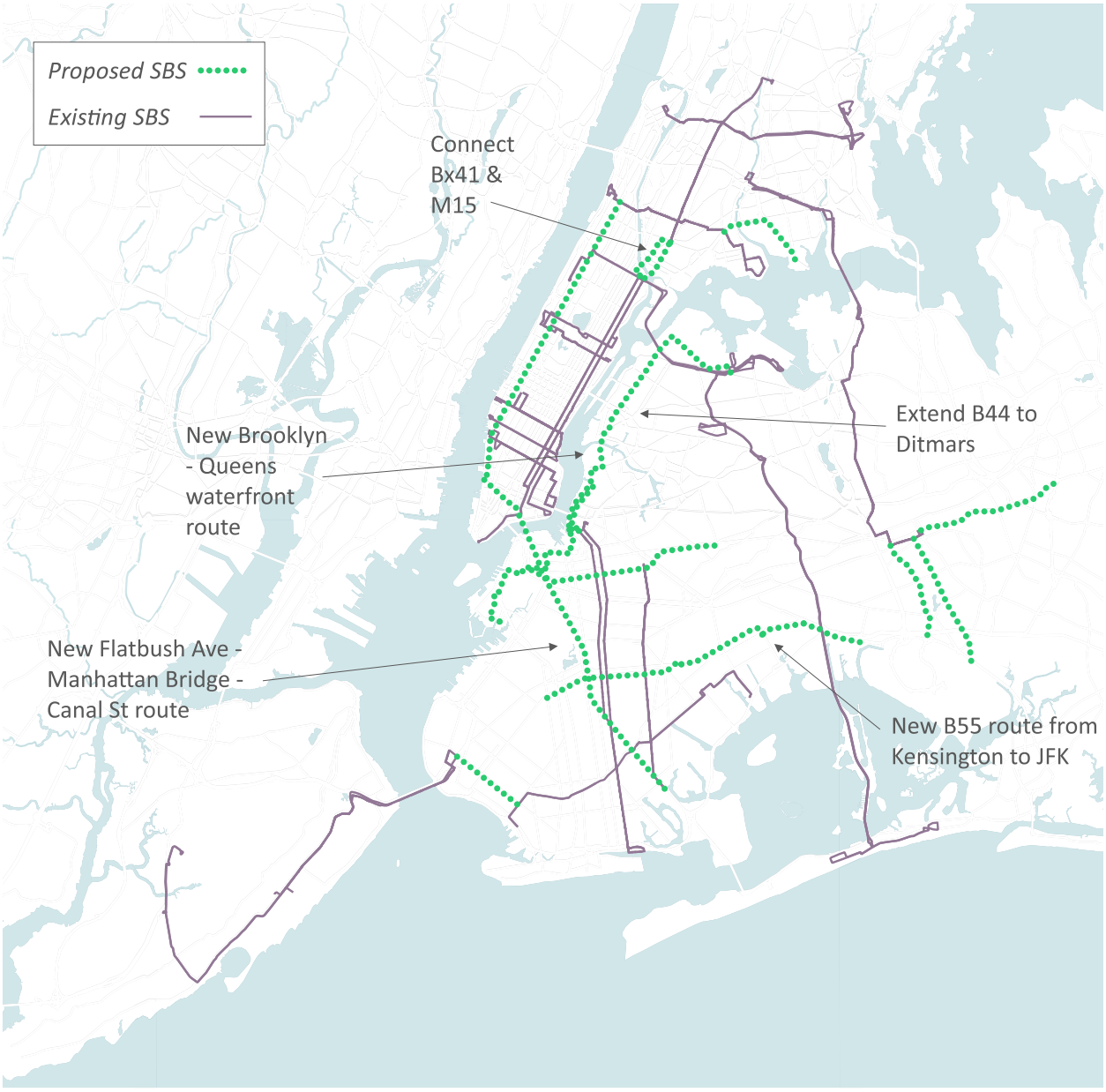
Boosting bus speeds and better serving New York City's existing bus riders while attracting new ones demands the design and construction of high-quality bus infrastructure. Elevating NYC's bus system to the international gold standard is possible by strengthening existing bus priority tools and design strategies. Bus rapid transit systems in international cities feature center-running lanes, architecturally attractive bus stations instead of small shelters, stops with platforms level to the bus for easier boarding, and off-board fare collection. The City and MTA can take steps towards creating a high-quality BRT system in New York through the following measures.

1. **Design and implement new or expanded Select Bus Service routes, New York City's equivalent of a Bus Rapid Transit system, with a focus on creating more interborough connections.** NYC DOT and the MTA jointly implemented 18 SBS routes across 16 corridors between 2008 and 2019, half of which debuted within just three years. These routes make up New York City's bus rapid transit system and have higher speeds, reliability measures, and ridership than the bus network overall. However, no plans for new SBS routes are underway and multiple routes first proposed in 2009 never materialized. Plans to roll out new routes alongside MTA's borough-based bus network redesigns did not materialize for either the Bronx or Queens redesigns. Existing SBS routes are concentrated in Manhattan, with just three each in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. MTA and NYC DOT should coordinate to:

    - Revive and implement all 20 SBS routes originally proposed in 2009, creating new, crosstown connections between Downtown Brooklyn and Bushwick, across Southeast Queens, and down both Hillside Avenue and Flatbush Avenue.
    - Create new interborough connections by extending SBS routes across bridges and between boroughs. Only three SBS routes, the M60, Bx6, and Q44, offer interborough connections. The Bronx and Queens bus network redesigns contained few new interborough routes and even cut some existing ones. It remains difficult and inconvenient to travel between Brooklyn and Queens and Manhattan and the South Bronx. Specific interborough connections to prioritize include:
        - Connect Manhattan to the South Bronx by combining the M15 SBS and Bx6 SBS routes.
        - Create a new SBS route along Flatbush Avenue extending to Canal Street via the Manhattan Bridge.
        - Create a new SBS route along the Brooklyn-Queens waterfront between downtown Brooklyn and Long Island City.

- Extend the B44 SBS to Ditmars/Steinway.
- Create a B55 SBS route between Kensington, Brooklyn and JFK Airport.

Figure 3: Proposed and existing SBS routes



2. **Take advantage of the "street space dividend" created by congestion pricing to implement new, large-scale busways throughout Manhattan's Central Business District, modeled off the successful 14th Street Busway**. The MTA estimates that nearly 30,000 fewer cars enter the congestion relief zone each day following implementation. The elimination of traffic frees up street space previously occupied by vehicles for new uses.

It is critical that NYC DOT act quickly to capitalize on these gains and prevent traffic from rebounding. The City can translate the success of congestion pricing into improvements in bus speed and reliability by pursuing existing proposals to pilot new busways on 34th Street and 42nd Street, the corridors used by the city's two slowest bus lines. NYC DOT should plan additional projects along other major crosstown routes to meet the mandates set forth by the NYC Streets Plan. Manhattan-based projects should advance alongside an equal number of comparable bus priority projects in the outer boroughs.

3. **Implement more high-quality busways and center-running bus lanes citywide**. Most of New York City's 162 miles of bus lanes are curbside or offset. These designs are well-suited for narrow streets but result in lanes prone to encroachment from vehicles making right turns or accessing parking spots, undermining potential improvements in bus performance. Only 6.8 miles (4.2%) of the city's bus lanes are center or median running, despite their strong potential to improve bus speeds and deter vehicles from illegally parking or driving in them compared to curbside lanes. The City should prioritize high-quality, center-running lanes along appropriate corridors where streets are wide enough to accommodate them. Outer borough corridors, like Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, are strong candidates for center-running lanes.

Maximize the effectiveness of existing bus service and priority tools through better enforcement, payment, and accessibility measures.

Over the past 10 years, the City and MTA have secured authorization to use automated enforcement technology, rolled out a new fare payment system, and made progress towards ensuring transportation systems are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). These developments have produced tangible improvements to the bus system but gaps and opportunities to further strengthen benefits for bus riders remain.

4. **Improve the effectiveness of automated enforcement to protect bus lanes and routes**. Drivers receive tickets for driving in bus lanes and parking or stopping in one for extended amounts of time but entering the lane to make a right-turn, access a parking spot, or complete drop-offs and deliveries are currently legal. NYC DOT and MTA can ensure automated camera enforcement (ACE) enables better bus performance through the following actions:

    - Standardize bus lane operating hours. Many of the city's bus lanes are only operational during a limited number of hours, outside of which vehicles can legally access the lane. These schedules vary based on day of the week and are not consistent across all bus lanes, potentially confusing drivers. Creating more consistent, predictable operating hours for bus lanes can improve familiarity with rules, increase compliance, and keep lanes clear for buses.

    - Restrict the legal reasons for private vehicles to enter a bus lane. It is currently legal for vehicles to enter a bus lane to access a parking spot, conduct pickup and drop-offs, make deliveries, or complete a right turn. Bus lanes are frequently blocked by vehicles

as a result, diminishing their ability to speed up buses. NYC DOT should further restrict bus lanes by requiring vehicles to pick up and drop off passengers on cross streets, instead of at the curb. NYC DOT should also consider banning right turns at certain intersections or along some routes.

- Create and enforce the use of loading zones to prevent delivery vehicles from blocking curbside lanes. NYC DOT should install more dedicated commercial and neighborhood loading zones, enforced with automated camera technology, to prevent delivery vehicles from double parking or blocking bus lanes.

5. **Enable all-door boarding by refining the proof-of-payment system established by OMNY**. As of 2025, all-door boarding remains unimplemented as MTA backtracked from plans for a pilot first announced in 2021, citing concerns about widespread fare evasion on buses. The installation of the new OMNY fare payment system on all buses, including at the back door entrance, makes all-door boarding logistically possible and creates a path for more efficient and effective fare enforcement. Fare inspectors on buses use handheld OVDs to verify recent payments made with a smartphone, credit card, or OMNY card. An MTA blue ribbon panel, convened to study and address fare evasion across the system, referred to OVD technology as the "future of fare evasion enforcement," and recommended using it to check proof of payment from passengers on all buses and subways. However, this technology is flawed, often failing to connect to on-board bus WiFi and detect recent payments made with contactless devices.

   MTA anticipates completing the phaseout of MetroCards and transitioning to OMNY systemwide by 2026, at which point all riders will pay with a smartphone, contactless credit card, or OMNY card. MTA should commit to enabling all-door boarding across all buses by the time the rollout is complete and use the intervening months to clear up technical issues present in OVD technology to ensure its reliability to consistently check fare payments. MTA should also position OMNY fare readers to prevent queueing at bus entrances and at a level accessible to riders with disabilities.

6. **Expand fare enforcement operations to deploy MTA EAGLE teams on more local routes.** Enforcement operations on local buses are extremely limited, despite a nearly 50% rate of fare evasion across the bus system compared to 13% on subways.[64] MTA's EAGLE teams are responsible for conducting fare enforcement on the bus system and focus primarily on SBS buses with little to no attention paid to local routes, according to a Blue Ribbon panel on fare evasion commissioned by the MTA. Current strategy for enforcement on buses involves deploying EAGLE team security inspectors (SIs) to evasion "hot spots" to conduct fare checks and write summonses. MTA should expand these operations to cover more local bus lines and conduct more ubiquitous enforcement across the bus system using its force of 250 EAGLE team SIs.

7. **Ensure all buses are accessible to riders with disabilities**. Despite the MTA's assertion that their bus fleet is fully accessible, riders with disabilities still experience challenges using the bus system. Accessibility barriers are especially pronounced on the express bus

system, effectively cutting off wheelchair users and riders with ambulatory disabilities from one-seat rides between Manhattan and the outer boroughs. An observational study conducted by the NYC Comptroller's Office in 2024 found that express buses are inaccessible to wheelchair users and riders with ambulatory disabilities. Unlike the low-floor buses used to provide local and SBS bus service, express buses have high floors and cannot "kneel" to deploy a front-door ramp. Instead, express buses rely on wheelchair lifts which take longer to deploy and use to board passengers. Express bus riders further shared that operators frequently lacked proper training on how to deploy the lifts or secure wheelchair users onto the bus, a finding corroborated by the observational study. Passengers with mobility disabilities also reported feeling unsafe while forced to back into lifts to board express buses – an issue specific to high-floor bus models. Wheelchair and mobility device users who rely on local buses also experienced boarding challenges whenever heavy snow or vehicles blocked the bus entrance.

The MTA, in coordination with NYC DOT where appropriate, should swiftly enact the following measures to improve bus system accessibility:

- **Regularly retrain bus operators on the use of wheelchair lifts, ramps, and protocols around providing service to disabled riders**, especially under heavy traffic and inclement weather conditions. In addition to covering how to board and offboard wheelchair and mobility device users, trainings should instruct bus operators on how to assist Deaf and Hard of Hearing people using text, gestures, ASL, or other visual communication.
- **Pilot additional low-floor or otherwise accessible buses on express bus routes** and engage disabled riders in efforts to improve express bus service.
- **Consult with the disability community on bus stop siting and spacing**, to ensure riders with disabilities receive high-quality service. MTA and NYC DOT should also consider a metric reflecting the value of travel time for people with disabilities when planning bus projects.
- **Ensure signage and announcements about service changes or emergencies are legible to deaf and low-vision individuals**, and use well-lit and high-contrast visuals, large print, and minimal background distractions. Signage should be displayed at eye-level for individuals in wheelchairs.

The NYC Comptroller's Office's full report on express bus accessibility for wheelchair users, detailing the results of the observation and a full list of recommendations is available here.

Strengthen agency management over bus priority initiatives.

Current agency staffing levels are inadequate to meet existing mandates, let alone execute a large-scale upgrade of New York City's bus system. Additionally, agency performance mandates remain unlinked from tangible outcomes for bus riders. DOT and MTA must take an enhanced approach to planning, performance evaluation, and staffing.

8. **Evaluate bus performance and agency progress using new performance-based targets.** NYC DOT's 2018 Better Buses plan set a goal of increasing bus speeds by 25% citywide, from about 8 to 10 mph. Seven years later, average bus speeds still sit at 8 mph and this goal goes unmentioned in more recent DOT and MTA planning materials. DOT's current goals for buses require the agency to build or upgrade an average of 30 miles of protected bus lanes and implement transit signal priority at 750 to 1,000 intersections per year. City law requires DOT to report on annual progress towards these mandates. DOT has also published the total number of bus lanes built by the agency each month since 2021 as an indicator in the Mayor's Management Report (MMR). However, the outcomes and impacts of these projects on bus performance are missing, as are tangible bus performance standards.

   The MTA publishes a vast amount of agency performance data, including bus speeds by route and street segment. MTA also publishes annual performance metrics reports, summarizing ridership, passenger satisfaction, and service performance measures. Similar to DOT, the agency does not define or disclose targets to contextualize performance alongside these published metrics. MTA's 2018 bus plan listed tasks for the agency to pursue (e.g. redesigning bus networks, expanding TSP) but did not link these actions to specific performance goals. Agencies should shift to a performance-based approach to bus improvements, focused on improving outcomes. Potential performance targets include:

   - A renewed commitment to increasing average bus speeds by 25% citywide. (DOT and MTA)
   - Increase bus speeds and adjust schedules for routes traveling in the congestion relief zone. (DOT and MTA)
   - Cut wait times in half on the 20 bus routes with the worst on-time performance rates. (MTA)
   - Reduce bunching on high-frequency bus routes from 14% to 5%. (MTA)

9. **Empower DOT to hire and retain qualified staff**. Despite mandates in the NYC Streets Plan to scale up design and implementation of bus lanes throughout the city, the number of projects completed by DOT annually since 2021 has not increased. This is in part due to inadequate staffing to support the mandates, hiring freezes, elimination of vacant positions, and delays in hiring for approved positions.

   The City's Independent Budget Office reports that staff headcounts at the four DOT work units dedicated to bus project planning, traffic engineering, and design and construction have either declined or stayed at 2019 levels. The planning, design, and engineering work required to both meet Streets Plan mandates and implement a true bus rapid transit system will require additional staffing resources. Building the strong workforce DOT needs to fulfill these objectives requires the City's Office of Management

and Budget to expedite hiring for approved positions, allow DOT to offer new hires higher salaries, and prioritize the retention and promotion of employees with unique skills and experience.

Make buses more affordable.

Existing programs to provide New Yorkers with fare discounts are critical for keeping transit affordable. However, these programs have gaps and restrictions that the City and MTA must correct to improve their effectiveness, uptake, and usefulness to riders.

10. **Expand Fair Fares to New Yorkers with incomes at 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL) and CUNY students**. Fair Fares is the City's only program directed at making transit more affordable for low-income New Yorkers. 360,000 people are currently enrolled in the program at a cost of $115 million per year. Currently open to any New Yorker with a household income at 145% of the federal poverty level, only 38% of those eligible are enrolled. The low uptake is at least in part due to the low limits on income needed to qualify. Under its current design, Fair Fares excludes most regular commuters whose incomes are too high to qualify. Most individuals who are covered do not participate in the workforce and report infrequent public transit use. A threshold of 200% of the FPL would cover more working commuters and be more appropriate for New York City, where the cost of living is higher than almost anywhere else in the country. The City could implement such an expansion for an annual cost of $150 million, about $35 million more than the program's current budget.

    In addition to increasing the income threshold, the City should further expand Fair Fares by offering enrollment to all CUNY students. Nearly half of CUNY students come from families with household incomes levels that already qualify for the existing Fair Fares program. The City could make the full student body, an additional 118,000 students, eligible for about $57 million per year. The enrollment process should be seamless and allow students to enroll directly on campus, using their CUNY IDs.

11. **Expand fare discount programs to cover express buses across all times of day**. The MTA's Reduced-Fare program only provides disabled riders and adults over age 65 with discounted service during certain times of day. Participants can ride subways and local and SBS buses at a 50% discount at all times of day, any day of the week. However, the discount only applies to express bus trips outside of weekday peak periods. Furthermore, riders cannot apply Fair Fares discounts to express bus trips, where a roundtrip fare costs $14. The City and MTA respectively should ensure express bus trips receive 50% discounts under the Fair Fares and Reduced-Fare programs, at all times of day.

Conclusion

Buses are an essential element of New York City's transportation landscape and provide transit service to hundreds of millions of riders every year. For disabled riders and New Yorkers living far from a subway stop, buses remain the primary mode of transit and means of connecting to the rest of the city. Yet New Yorkers are overwhelmingly choosing other modes of transportation, like subways and private vehicles, over buses. While bus ridership has been slipping for over two decades, it has stagnated at enduringly low levels since 2021. At the same time, bus performance and the system's ability to provide convenient, high-quality service to riders remains poor.

The MTA and NYC DOT have the tools to transform bus service. The Select Bus Service (SBS) program could be the foundation for a high-quality bus rapid transit system in New York City. Both agencies already have the authority and expertise to build more center-running bus lanes, dedicated busways, and interborough bus lines. Further refinement of tools like automated enforcement, OMNY, and transit signal priority can also deliver tangible improvements to bus riders citywide. The success of congestion pricing in clearing traffic and boosting transit ridership presents another opportunity the City can capitalize on right away.

This report examines both the missteps in past attempts to improve the bus system as well as the opportunities available to NYC DOT and MTA to do better. Failing to act would resign millions of bus riders to substandard service, risk further ridership losses, and render future investments more difficult. Swift, bold action is New York City's best chance to deliver for bus riders and create a system worthy of its riders.

Methodology

Bus on-time performance and reliability

Data

Data for measures of on-time performance and reliability come from MTA's real-time Bus Time data feed.[1] These data report each bus's location, distance along its route, and anticipated time at its next stop, in near real time, based on GPS position. The Comptroller's Office began recording this data feed in June 2024, taking a snapshot every five minutes of the position and anticipated next arrival time of every bus in service. These recorded snapshots, from June 17, 2024, through February 24, 2025, yielded 119 million unique bus observations.

Additionally, MTA's static GTFS bus schedules (for February 2025, for each borough and for the MTA Bus Company) were used to determine scheduled frequencies. [2] Speed data were calculated using MTA Bus Speed data published on Open Data.

On-time performance

On-time performance is most meaningful for infrequent bus routes, so this measure was computed across bus line-hours where the scheduled time between buses (headway) was 10 minutes or more.

The Bus Time source data includes each bus's next stop, the scheduled arrival time at that stop, and the anticipated actual arrival time at that stop. For each observation with these times reported, the observation was categorized as on time if the anticipated arrival was les than five minutes later than the scheduled arrival. For each bus route, the on-time rate was calculated as the number of observations when a bus was on time, divided by the total number of observations when the bus is either on time or late. Twelve percent of observations for these filtered times did not report either a scheduled or anticipated time; these samples were removed from the on-time calculation.

Reliability

The consistency of spacing between buses is a more meaningful measure of performance on frequent routes, so this measure was computed for bus line-hours with a scheduled headway of 10 minutes or less.

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[1] https://bt.mta.info/wiki/Developers/SIRIVehicleMonitoring

[2] https://www.mta.info/developers

Headways between each bus run were estimated based on actual observed bus times and locations. First, each unique run was identified (by the combination of vehicle unique key and route identifier) and the time each run passed the midpoint along its line was estimated (by interpolating the time based on the immediately preceding and following observed times and locations). Headways were computed as the differences between these interpolated times (so a single headway was estimated for each observed run).

Bunched buses were identified as instances when the observed headway was one quarter or less of the scheduled headway (e.g., a headway of 2 minutes or less for a time when scheduled headway was 8 minutes). The bunched rate per line is the number of bunched instances, divided by all estimated headways.

A rider's scheduled wait time is one-half the scheduled headway (assuming the rider arrives at their stop at a random time and buses arrive with even frequency).

The actual expected wait time for this rider is mathematically defined by the actual headway between buses, plus a penalty for uneven spacing between buses. An established mathematical model used for computing expected wait times shows that the expected wait (E(W)) is computed as follows:

$$E(W) = \frac{1}{2} * \left(E(H) + \frac{Var(H)}{E(H)} \right)$$

This formula calculates expected wait time as one-half of the mean actual headway plus the variance of headways divided by the mean headway.[3] In this model, the inconsistency of headways—summarized by the variance to mean ratio—represents riders' additional wait time due to irregular service. This formula was used to compute expected wait times across each line.

Additionally, riders' "worst-case" wait times were computed as the 90th percentile wait time across each line. The 90th percentile (the wait time at which 10 percent of waits are this long or longer) equates to the longest wait per week for a ride who commutes to and from work five days a week.

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