

Post-COVID – Transit Agencies Must Look Beyond Ridership

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Of all the information that U.S. public transit agencies track, none is more important to them than ridership—the number of people boarding its buses, trains, and subway cars. Monitoring of ridership is akin to a CEO watching a company’s stock price. In addition, ridership partly determines the amount of Federal funding allocated to each system.

However, the pandemic has shown that ridership is an imperfect measure of transit’s importance. With offices closed and transit agencies advising passengers to avoid all but essential trips, ridership declined by as much as 90 percent in cities such as Washington, DC and San Francisco, CA. Ridership is unlikely to bounce back quickly to pre-COVID levels, as work-from-home habits forged during the pandemic stand to leave lasting marks on commuting patterns in major cities. Few people argue that the societal value has fallen as steeply as ridership. The pandemic has reminded us that cities cease to function if public transportation is unavailable.

The pandemic is an extreme example of an external force that pushes transit ridership up or down for reasons no agency can control. Others include economic factors, socioeconomic changes, land use patterns and the price of other transportation modes. For instance, an agency can add bus frequency but still see ridership fall because inexpensive gas nudge drivers towards driving. Or an agency could do nothing differently at all, and then watch ridership grow during a prolonged period of unusually bad weather.

Can another metric provide a clearer picture of success? Potentially access, which is quantifying a transit system’s ability to help people reach the places they want to go. The basic method of calculating access can be done by looking at any neighborhood and then determine the time it would take for a person living there to use transit to reach jobs dispersed throughout the region. With commute data most readily available, it is easy to aggregate the time it takes to travel on transit vs. any other mode. Access is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for strong ridership. A drop in access will eventually lead to a drop in ridership due to the unavailability of an alternate means to commute. There is data that supports an improvement to access leads to an increase in ridership. An example is in Santa Clara, CA where a system re-design that improved access led to an immediate four (4) percent increase in ridership.

This concept of access can help transit agency leaders plan how to ramp back up when the pandemic ends. To avoid simply defaulting back to what an agency did pre-pandemic, some agencies, such as the Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas are adding this metric for access in maximizing the most amount of jobs in the most reasonable amount of time, particularly for low income and minority residents. In San Francisco, it has announced a similar plan, called the Equity Toolkit.

Ridership is still going to be the main barometer of an agencies success, but monitoring access will reveal how land use influences transit utilization. While transit agencies may not have a say in land use decisions, prioritizing the fundamentals of good service can trigger a virtuous cycle that helps create transit-friendly places. With transit ridership likely to recover slowly after the pandemic recedes, emphasizing the importance of access will lead to more robust conversations as to the importance and need of transit.

So what? How will OmniRide Balance Ridership vs Access?

OmniRide ridership has slowly increased from bottoming out during the early stages of the pandemic in spring 2020. Both commuter and local bus ridership have increased, albeit at different rates. While commuter ridership is hovering around 20-25 percent of pre-pandemic ridership, local bus ridership has increased to 50-60 percent of pre-pandemic ridership levels. The reason is mainly due to the type of jobs and activity centers these passengers commute to.

With teleworking still in full swing for most office workers, the segment of ridership that use the commuter services the most, ridership on this service remains low. On the other hand, the local services are an absolute necessity for those trying to get to jobs deemed essential (grocery stores, medical services, other service industry jobs) or for passengers to access those places to use those services, to shop for food, receive medical treatment, access pharmacies for medication, etc. Commuting habits have also changed out of necessity, which has also had an impact on ridership.

Currently, the “traditional” peak times have changed substantially. Transit agencies across the region note a shift in when more people are traveling. With the loss of the typical AM/PM commute rush to and from jobs in the Washington, DC area, the middle of the day is seeing a spike in traffic and ridership due to how people need to access certain jobs, or tend to their daily needs. What used to show defined spikes during certain times of the day is now essentially a more muted spike, or closer to a bell curve in when people are actually traveling to certain locations.

We, as transit planners, must keep this in mind as we monitor how commuting habits change as vaccinations are provided and employers determine when employees will report back to in-office working. For now, it is important to look at what shifts may be needed, even if temporary, to pull back on traditional commuter service to ensure that there is still the availability to commute for those that need to, but also be mindful of lower ridership and minimizing those resources until it becomes apparent they will be needed again. However, for local services, frequency of operation is lower to begin with, so taking away availability further hinders the ability for those passengers to access their jobs, healthcare, and other necessary destinations in order to function during the pandemic. In some cases where only one bus operates on a route for the entire day, that could mean no service at all. This availability of access to the community is vital for riding out the pandemic until we can get to a point where more normalcy in daily lives can take hold. As such, schedules are proposed to be adjusted slightly in spring 2021 to address the changing behaviors of local riders in the eastern part of the County by focusing on the middle of the day and providing more availability of service to reduce potential overcrowding and make the service more attractive.

Monitoring ridership patterns is critical for us to understand the new behaviors of passengers. The western restructure that took place just before the pandemic was intended to do just that: make transit more usable and adapt to the changing needs of our passengers. Unfortunately the pandemic halted any meaningful evaluation to understand what works and what doesn't.

Now that ridership is showing signs of increasing on the local service, it will be easier to develop a method to evaluate what changes may still be needed since this is still a pilot program. With certain

Government services not being available in person and with schools and colleges not open full-time, it is creating a somewhat different view of how transit is being utilized, at least for now. However, if this is the future of local ridership and we notice that where people need to go or how they use the service is changing for the longer term, it is easy for staff to evaluate what makes sense, talk to the community, work with local elected officials, and make sure that the best possible service is operating as long as it meets the access needs of the community. This rationale also helps us as we look at restructuring the local services on the eastern side of the County. Staff is continuing to look at various transit access models, whether it is with a transitional transit vehicle, or something similar to the Quantico shuttle that is currently in operation. The main focus is to keep as much transit as possible on the major corridors and finding the most efficient way to operate service to those areas that have lower density, but still have a need for access to transit, jobs, and services, etc.

We will continue to be adaptable and flexible, finding ways to be as efficient as possible, whether we return back to pre-pandemic type traveling or if we are operating in a completely different reality for years to come.