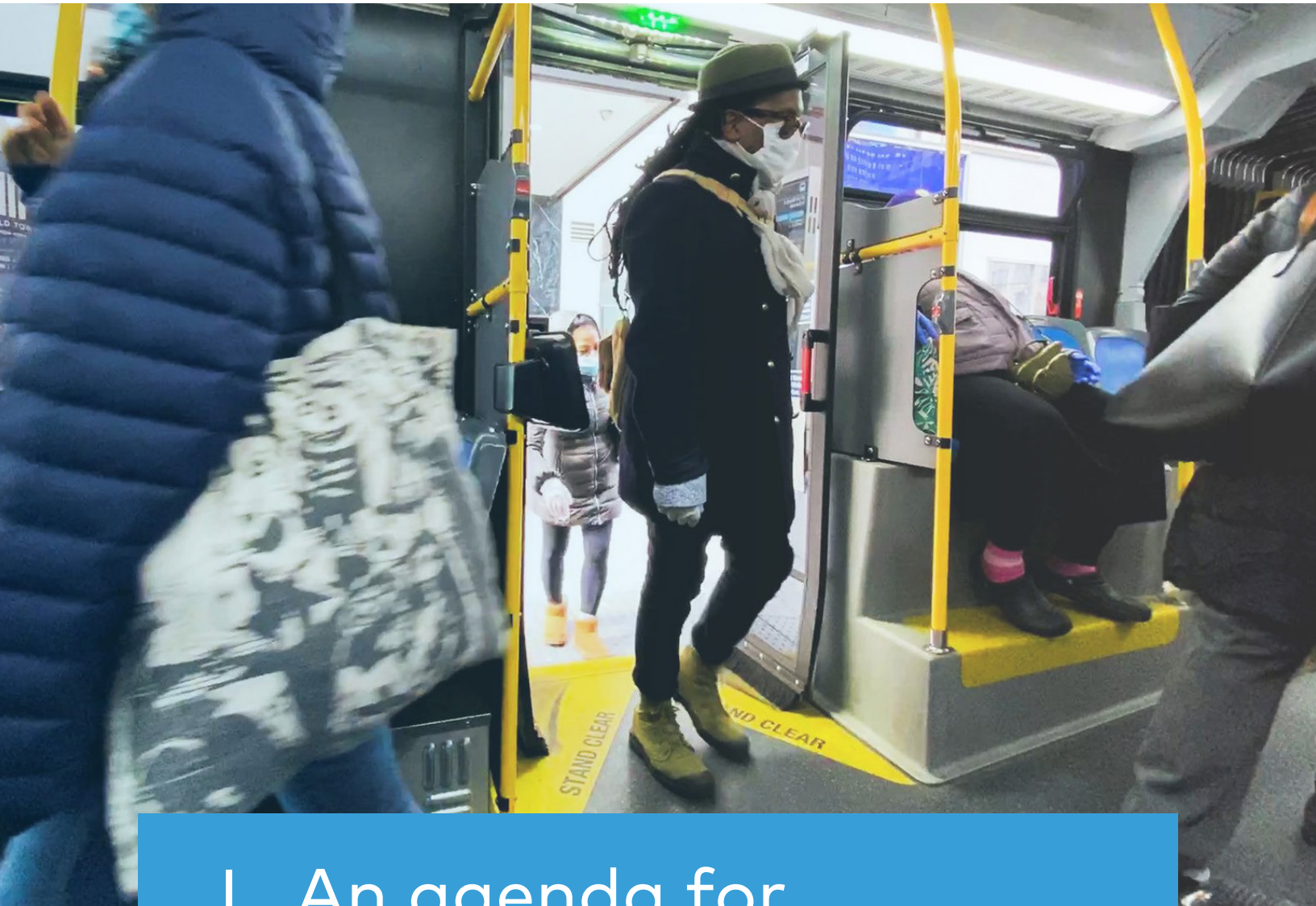


FAST BUS, FAIR RECOVERY



An agenda for
better bus service
in NYC during and after
the **COVID-19 crisis**

Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, public transit has ensured that hundreds of thousands of essential workers can get to their jobs and keep New York functioning.

In New York, over 840,000 essential workers typically depend on transit for their commutes. People of color account for a disproportionate share of these workers, and Black people account for an especially high share¹. Despite overall declines in ridership, many of these workers continue to commute on crowded buses, exposing them to greater health risk.

Prior to the pandemic, daily ridership on NYC buses was about 2 million trips. Relative to the population as a whole, these riders are more likely to be people with low incomes or people of color. Following a pattern seen in other cities, bus ridership is rebounding faster than subway ridership.

Ensuring a fair recovery for NYC will mean making bus riders a priority. But as New York turns to reopening, transit faces severe challenges. The MTA and NYC DOT must respond to these challenges by prioritizing the needs of Black and brown New Yorkers, otherwise the longstanding disparities magnified by COVID-19 will be exacerbated.

The imperative to protect public health during the pandemic led the MTA and NYC DOT to revise service patterns, change boarding procedures, and commit to on-street transit priority treatments with unprecedented urgency. These changes were essential to meet the needs of New Yorkers who could not work from home during the peak of the pandemic.

Not coincidentally, the agencies' pandemic response relied on hallmarks of good bus planning and operations. Those short-term measures should prime the MTA and NYC DOT to enact much-needed changes to improve bus performance going forward. Reallocating service to meet the needs of Black and brown communities with high bus ridership, for instance, is the same approach that should guide the MTA's bus network redesigns.

1. <https://transitcenter.org/tailoring-transit-service-for-essential-workers-is-a-matter-of-racial-justice/>

The Bus Turnaround Coalition presents five recommendations for the MTA and NYC DOT to follow through on the urgency of this moment. This is an agenda for better bus service and a fair recovery, both for New Yorkers who relied on transit throughout the pandemic, and New Yorkers who return to transit as the city reopens.



FIVE ACTIONS

- ① Revise schedules each month and reallocate service to meet needs of Black, brown, & low-income New Yorkers
- ② Transition seamlessly from rear-door boarding to all-door boarding
- ③ Remove police from fare compliance on buses and decriminalize fare evasion
- ④ Make mask-wearing on-board the easy choice
- ⑤ Preserve service improvements for essential workers and prevent car traffic from overwhelming bus service by quickly expanding busways and bus lanes

1. Revise schedules each month and reallocate service to meet needs of Black, brown, and low-income New Yorkers

Responding to the COVID-19 crisis demands agile redistribution of bus service by the MTA.

Ridership patterns have changed rapidly and will continue to evolve. While overall ridership has fallen, trips to places like hospitals and distribution centers remain high. Compared to typical ridership, Black New Yorkers comprise a higher share of the essential workforce most reliant on transit during pandemic conditions. Essential workers are also more likely to commute outside the 9-5 office schedule.

The MTA adapted bus networks to these conditions in April and May, shifting service to some high-ridership routes and reducing service on low-ridership routes. With New York City starting to reopen in June, the agency restored full scheduled service in the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, and brought Manhattan service levels back to 75% of "normal."

Adding back service hours will help, but implementing pre-pandemic schedules is not enough. To minimize crowding, the MTA should continue to shift service from lightly-used routes to heavily-used routes. NYC DOT's upcoming slate of busways and bus lanes will also enable increased frequency of service on some routes, like the MTA did on 14th Street. As long as the uncertainty caused by COVID-19 persists, the MTA should pursue substantial scheduling changes more often than its typical quarterly adjustments -- ideally every month.

When the pandemic struck, the MTA was in the middle of redesigning bus networks in all five boroughs to give riders faster, more reliable trips. These networks are largely unchanged since the mid-20th Century. Much like the MTA has had to adapt service to changing ridership patterns during the pandemic, the agency must still adapt these outdated bus networks to the needs of New Yorkers in 2020.

Change and disruption related to COVID-19 may make advancing the network redesigns infeasible for the time being, but they will be critical to New York's recovery in the long run. By untangling current bus networks and making them more grid-like, the MTA can help riders reach more jobs, schools, stores, and other daily destinations in less time. The agency should at least indicate when it will resume the process of redesigning bus networks.

The MTA should intentionally redesign bus networks to improve access for Black, brown, and low-income New Yorkers. Applying an equity lens to the proposed service changes will ensure that people who rely on bus service the most will benefit the most, and help the MTA communicate how the bus network redesigns will tangibly improve people's lives.



2. Transition seamlessly from rear-door boarding to safe, contactless all-door boarding

Like many transit agencies, the MTA instituted rear-door boarding and suspended fare collection on buses during the pandemic -- a necessary protection that prevented contact between riders and bus operators. As New York reopens, the MTA must expand on these changes and accelerate its commitment to system-wide all-door boarding.

Contactless fare payment using the MTA's new OMNY fare system will be faster and reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Riders will not only be able to pay without touching surfaces on the bus, they will be able to disperse throughout the vehicle more easily. Service will also improve systemwide, since MetroCard payment at a single door is a significant source of delay and unreliability, further reducing crowding and transmission risk.

The MTA recently said OMNY will be operational system-wide by the end of the year. This roll-out should include a specific commitment to contactless, all-door boarding on buses. As part of the all-door boarding plan, the MTA should install machines at major bus hubs and establish a network of retailers near bus stops where riders can load cash onto OMNY cards.

Returning to the old, slow slog of dipping farecards single-file would be a confusing and unnecessarily hazardous interim phase on the way toward systemwide all-door boarding. By switching seamlessly from rear-door boarding to contactless all-door boarding, the MTA will make bus service safer and faster for riders citywide.



3. Remove police from fare compliance on buses, and decriminalize fare evasion

In its Action Plan For a Safe Return, the MTA has directed police to make no arrests or summonses related to mask-wearing or crowding. This is one step toward a much-needed overhaul of the MTA's approach to safety and fare compliance. As riders return to the system and the MTA moves toward all-door boarding on buses, it's critical that the agency avoid criminalizing New Yorkers, in particular Black, brown, and low-income New Yorkers.

Fare inspection should not be done by police. Over-policing has disproportionate and devastating impacts on BIPOC communities, and the role of police on transit must be reexamined. Transit systems across the world use unarmed, non-police personnel to inspect fares, and New York should be no different. Fare inspection on buses should not be handled by NYPD, transit police, or any armed force. The MTA's civilian "Eagle Teams" should also be renamed and overhauled to approach fare compliance with a customer service orientation, guided by anti-bias and de-escalation principles. The teams should not stop buses to conduct fare checks. To address issues of safety, the MTA should join the ranks of transit agencies increasing the presence of unarmed ambassadors on buses, as well as social workers and mental health professionals who can provide information and resources on fares, render aid to New Yorkers in crisis, and work with New Yorkers experiencing homelessness to meet their needs.

Penalties should not criminalize people. The response to fare evasion should be proportional to the severity of the offense and not result in any interactions with the criminal justice or immigration enforcement systems. The MTA should work with district attorneys to keep fare evasion cases out of the criminal courts. Bus riders, like commuter rail riders, should be given the opportunity to pay on board, and to enroll in the Fair Fares program in lieu of financial penalties. The MTA and City Hall must work in tandem to ensure all New Yorkers who are unable to pay the full fare have access to the program, and that all eligible New Yorkers are aware of it. Fines, if assessed, should come in the form of a small surcharge on top of the regular fare, like on Metro-North or LIRR.

Fare payment should be efficient and easy. The MTA should make purchasing bus fares with OMNY easy, including for bus riders who may not be able to pay through an app or credit card. Locations near bus stops to buy and reload fare cards with cash should be plentiful, and signage at bus stops should indicate these locations, especially in low-income communities where the uptake of the new OMNY payment system will likely be lower than wealthy ones.



4. Make mask-wearing on-board the easy choice

For bus service to truly be available to every New Yorker who might use it, buses must be safe from COVID-19 transmission. New Yorkers also need to feel safe on the bus. A combination of mask-wearing, intensified cleaning, and steps to prevent crowding will minimize transmission and provide a psychological sense of safety.

Several recommendations in this report will help reduce crowding by reallocating service and increasing the capacity of the bus system. The MTA's ramped-up cleaning and disinfecting procedures should also continue.

The foundation for safe operations with significant ridership, however, is universal mask-wearing. Evidence from other countries shows that once cities achieve very low rates of new cases, buses can operate safely even during standing-room-only conditions as long as everyone wears a mask. Each day, transit systems in Seoul, Taipei, and other large cities are now transporting millions of riders -- almost all of whom wear masks -- with no outbreaks.

The MTA recently observed a 92% mask compliance rate, and has a stock of 2 million masks to distribute to riders who do not have a mask as they board. This supply should be continually replenished, and masks should be available on buses via on-board dispensers. On-board mask dispensers were an early hallmark of the COVID-19 response in Seoul, and in Portland, Oregon, Tri-Met is now installing mask dispensers on its entire fleet.



5. Preserve bus speed improvements for essential workers and prevent car traffic from overwhelming bus service by quickly expanding busways and bus lanes

As car traffic plummeted during New York's "PAUSE" order, essential workers experienced faster, more reliable bus service than ever. Speeds increased 15% as buses sailed through congestion-free streets. Bus riders should benefit from service this fast every day, not because of extreme conditions during a pandemic. But unless Mayor de Blasio acts urgently as the city reopens, rapidly rising car traffic will make fast, reliable bus service a distant memory.

To preserve gains in bus speeds, the mayor and NYC DOT must quickly add bus lanes, busways, and signal priority for buses at traffic lights.

By prioritizing bus service on city streets, Mayor de Blasio will reward the essential workers who got the city through the worst of the pandemic and help create safer conditions for everyone who rides the bus. When buses travel faster, the MTA can run service more frequently, which increases the capacity of the bus system and enables riders to spread out more on board.

The 20 miles of busways and bus lanes the de Blasio administration intends to install this summer and fall are an encouraging step forward. The projects address some of New York's worst transit bottlenecks, including Jamaica Avenue in downtown Jamaica, Flushing Main Street, 149th Street in the Bronx, and 181st Street in Upper Manhattan. These upgrades must move forward rapidly to prevent intensifying congestion from slowing bus service to a crawl. Building on last year's accelerated pace of transit signal priority installation, NYC DOT should keep the momentum going and program signals to prioritize buses at 500 intersections this year.

The MTA has requested 60 miles of bus lanes from City Hall. Mayor de Blasio should set his sights higher and strive for this goal, which is possible if he responds to the COVID-19 crisis with the sense of purpose and ingenuity that other mayors around the world have mustered. NYC DOT's first 20-mile slate of COVID-era bus lanes signals a new urgency to prioritize transit riders on city streets using nimble, low-cost methods. If these methods effectively clear a path for buses, Mayor de Blasio should replicate and expand their use to build out the full 60-mile bus lane expansion sought by the MTA.



About the Bus Turnaround Coalition

The Bus Turnaround Coalition is a diverse group of New Yorkers determined to turn around the poor service that plagues the city's bus system and the more than 2 million rides taken on it every weekday.

We are winning increased attention from our leaders and greater resources for high quality, fast and reliable bus service for all neighborhoods in New York City.

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



NYPIRG

Straphangers Campaign

