

A photograph of a white MTA bus with blue accents, number 5941, stopped at a bus stop. The bus has '852' on its front window and 'MTA' on its front. A person is boarding the bus. On the sidewalk, three people are waiting. A signpost next to the bus shows a 'NO STANDING' sign with a wheelchair icon and a route sign for 'Bx35'. The background shows a city street with trees and buildings under a clear sky.

The Big Bus Comeback

A 2021 pandemic recovery agenda for MTA bus service

Introduction

Making major strides on MTA bus service improvements in 2021 will be critical for millions of New Yorkers who ride the bus, the city as a whole, and the MTA's own long-term fiscal health.

The COVID-19 crisis interrupted MTA plans to overhaul New York City's slow, unreliable bus service. As the agency went into survival mode last year, it paused initiatives like redesigning bus networks for today's riders. But with substantial transit funding in Congress's new pandemic relief bill, the outlook for the MTA is much brighter than it was just a few months ago. Now is the time to move forward with an ambitious agenda for better bus service.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the bus network to New York City's wellbeing. Essential workers relied on buses to get to work and keep the city functioning. Buses consistently retained a greater share of riders than any other transit mode. Routes serving Black, brown, and low-income neighborhoods continued to carry hundreds of thousands of riders each day.

But as mass vaccination proceeds and something close to full activity resumes, bus service may decline if the MTA is not attentive to rider needs. The return of traffic congestion and long lines waiting to board at the front of the bus threatens to saddle New Yorkers with the same low-quality bus service that led ridership to dwindle for years before the onset of COVID. (It's one reason our coalition is also demanding 30 new bus lane miles of NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio during his final year in office.)

Fortunately, the MTA is primed to substantially improve service for bus riders. At this moment, the agency has several inexpensive yet effective bus improvement strategies at its disposal that can all be implemented quickly:

- The rollout of OMNY farecard readers on the agency's bus fleet makes systemwide all-door boarding possible--promising faster, more reliable trips on every route.
- Planning for the Bronx bus network redesign is finished, and the changes are ready to be implemented.
- DOT is adding bus lanes, busways, and signal priority at the fastest pace ever--the MTA must make the most of these upgrades by procuring more bus lane cameras and adjusting schedules to reflect improved bus speeds.

The main ingredient necessary is leadership from Governor Cuomo, MTA Chair Pat Foye, and NYCT President Sarah Feinberg.

In addition to benefiting millions of bus riders, acting on these opportunities now will help secure the MTA's fiscal position. The faster ridership and fare revenue bounce back, the sooner the MTA's pandemic-induced budget crisis will end. The recommendations in this report, if implemented, will generate tangible service improvements that New Yorkers notice, and lead more people to ride the bus.

The Bus Turnaround Coalition urges Governor Cuomo, MTA Chair Foye, and NYCT President Feinberg to act urgently to improve bus service. Better buses will help spark a fair, equitable recovery from the pandemic and strengthen the MTA's ability to serve all New Yorkers.

Main recommendations

- **Enact systemwide all-door boarding by letting riders pay with OMNY at the rear door on every bus route, not just Select Bus Service routes.**
- **Implement the Bronx bus network redesign and move forward with planning the Queens and Brooklyn bus network redesigns.**
- **Procure bus-mounted cameras for every route with a bus lane in 2021.**
- **Quickly revise bus schedules to reflect faster speeds as a result of bus lanes and signal priority, and stop penalizing bus operators on frequent routes for finishing runs early.**



Immediately enact systemwide all-door boarding

Extending all-door boarding to every bus route will immediately improve service for riders in all five boroughs.

Single-file fare payment is aggravating for riders and a drag on bus service. Typically, NYC buses spend more than 20 percent of the duration of their routes standing still at stops (known as “dwell time”). On Select Bus Service routes, which already feature all-door boarding, dwell time has improved by 40 percent or more.

By reducing touch points and enabling riders to disperse on-board more easily, all-door boarding will also reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. The public health benefits add extra urgency to the push to roll out this major service enhancement.

The MTA has previously committed to systemwide all-door boarding, and released documentation saying it would take effect in 2021. With the addition of OMNY readers at the rear doors of every MTA bus (except on Staten Island, where readers are still being added), the agency can let riders tap in at every door.

However, the MTA recently backed away from a 2021 timetable for all-door boarding, and now says it may not take effect until the MetroCard is retired in 2023. Riders can’t wait that long – they deserve better service now.

All-door boarding will be faster and safer for riders, improving service for hundreds of thousands of essential workers in neighborhoods that rely on buses. The introduction of systemwide all-door boarding is also an opportunity to overhaul fare inspection on buses in a way that prevents racial discrimination and the criminalization of Black and brown riders.

Despite the MTA’s hesitance, there’s ample reason to believe implementing systemwide all-door boarding now will help the agency achieve its goals. Promoting all-door boarding should encourage more riders to switch to OMNY, accelerating the transition from MetroCard. The performance improvements it generates will draw more fare-paying riders to the system and burnish the agency’s reputation by demonstrating the tangible service benefits of its investment in new fare media.

Implement the Bronx bus network redesign and move forward with other bus network redesigns

Before the pandemic struck, the MTA completed the process of redesigning the Bronx bus network. A draft of the Queens network redesign was released, and planning for the Brooklyn network redesign was well underway. By simplifying routes and making these bus networks more grid-like, the redesigns promise to expand access to all-day, frequent bus service, enabling riders throughout the city to reach more places in less time.

The disruption of the pandemic understandably paused these critical initiatives, but with massive fiscal relief en route to the MTA and wide-scale vaccination underway, it's time to resume work.

The Bronx bus network redesign is a finished plan and should be implemented as soon as possible. Ridership patterns in the Bronx during the pandemic reinforce the wisdom of many changes in the redesign: Routes that are designated to receive more frequent service also tend to be the ones that have retained the most ridership.

Agency officials should also resume work on the Queens and Brooklyn redesigns. Both are expected to entail more substantial changes than the Bronx redesign. The experience of conducting public planning and outreach during COVID offers important lessons to get these redesigns right.

The MTA should digitally canvass riders at bus stops and on buses, asking them to complete app-based surveys about their needs and desires for better service. Virtual charrettes and discussions of planning documents will also help reach more bus riders, many of whom don't have time to show up and give input in person. With large amounts of user data, gathered in-person and online, the MTA will be in much better shape to justify hard choices to elected officials and riders as a whole.



Bus lanes are for buses.

Are you a bus?



Say “cheese” if you’re driving in the bus lane.
We’ll mail you the pic.



Rapidly procure and expand the use of bus-mounted cameras to enforce bus lanes

In 2019, Governor Cuomo signed a bill that authorized the expansion of automated camera enforcement on MTA buses. Bus-mounted cameras are an important tool to keep bus lanes clear: When the only enforcement consists of the stationary cameras operated by NYC DOT, drivers can take advantage of segments of a bus lane where fixed cameras can’t see them. Bus-mounted cameras eliminate these cheating zones.

Currently, seven routes have bus-mounted camera enforcement. Dozens of bus routes are eligible, and the cameras should be deployed on all of them.

Procuring more bus-mounted cameras is a small expense in the MTA’s capital budget. Furthermore, the bus camera enforcement program is administered by NYC DOT, while revenues from bus-mounted cameras go toward the MTA. (Over time, revenues should decline as the cameras deter violations.)

Now that federal relief funds have solidified the agency’s finances, the MTA should move quickly to acquire more cameras and expand their use to every route with a bus lane in 2021.

Quickly adjust schedules on frequent routes in coordination with bus lane implementation

NYC DOT is adding bus lanes at a faster pace than ever, and there are now over 144 miles in the city's bus lane network. To fully realize the benefits of bus lanes, MTA bus schedulers and dispatchers must make adjustments to account for faster bus speeds. When the MTA doesn't revise schedules, bus operators slow down in order to "stay on schedule," losing much of the advantage conferred by bus lanes and making new bus lanes harder to justify.

Currently, the MTA often lets months or years elapse after the implementation of a bus lane before revising schedules, in order to observe bus speeds once motorists have adjusted to new traffic patterns. Not only does this practice delay the full benefit for riders, it may also prevent the MTA from accurately assessing the full potential to improve bus speeds, since bus operators are expected to adhere to the old, slower schedule while new schedules are developed.

This is a departure from previous practice with Select Bus Service (SBS). Each SBS route had new schedules reflecting faster speeds as soon as it debuted. The MTA should return to the practice of shortening the run times for routes immediately after a new bus lane launches. If the assumptions in a new schedule are too optimistic, the MTA can revise later. The default position should be to enact the maximum possible time savings for riders.

To accurately assess how to optimize run times, the MTA should also stop expecting bus operators on frequent routes with new bus lanes to hit "time points" (locations on a route that the operator is supposed to pass within a specific window of time). And because bus lanes can reduce traffic on segments of a route that remain without bus lanes, time points should not apply to those sections either. Nor should bus operators be penalized for finishing runs early on these routes.





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



NYSPRING
Straphangers Campaign



RIDERS
ALLIANCE

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