



Madison Area Bus Advocates

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Let's Redesign the Bus System Redesign

Like its predecessor, Madison's redesigned bus network cannot succeed without more funding. Regardless of any benefits the network's new Bus Rapid Transit spine could have brought to the rest of the city, as long as its funding is a zero-sum game structurally requiring it to operate at the expense of "local" routes, it is doomed to fail. The new system provides Madison with a chance to expand funding and cover improved service, but will it? **Madison needs to reprioritize its transportation budget so sufficient funds go to transit.**

Options

Though the 2019 \$40 Vehicle Registration Fee (VRF or "wheel tax") could have provided additional funding, the mayor mandated that the system remain at pre-VRF levels. Madison's transit consultants – Jarrett Walker + Associates – have provided other cities with both "revenue neutral" and incrementally increased options, and their [follow-up survey](#) on Madison's draft transit plan seemed to consider that possibility too when it asks "If Metro Transit had additional money they could use to expand service, what is the ONE improvement you think they should invest in FIRST...?" Do we in fact have the groundwork for a better system?

"Frequency is Freedom"

The new plan promises riders frequency to give them more freedom to travel, without being beholden to sparse service, but only provides a handful of core routes frequent service, leaving most with 30-minute intervals (and some with 60-minutes on weekends and late evenings in many areas that currently have 30-minute service). Some outlying areas actually see an improvement, but many neighborhoods see no improvement, and sometimes significant downgrades, measured by the distance to a stop.

The system's budget limits created these deficits. Madison must dedicate enough funding to improve bus frequency outside a handful of corridors or we're stuck with reshuffling the status quo.

True Paratransit Equity

Planning staff does not seem to realize just how expensive, and what a step backwards, relying on paratransit is for disabled people. Metro's own [2019 Annual Report](#) estimated per ride paratransit average operating costs at \$46.10 compared to \$3.85 for a regular ("fixed-route") bus ride. Madison once seemed to understand that mainstreaming, rather than

"separate but equal" segregation made moral and economic sense. Madison modified buses for handicapped accessibility; insisted the Transit and Parking Commission always had a disabled person as a voting member (not the case now with the Transportation Policy and Planning Board); and additionally had an advisory ADA Transit Subcommittee. Only people who still could not ride the mainline services used paratransit.

Further, though Madison's Civil Rights department has a division dedicated to [Disability Rights](#), and the city's [Metro Forward](#) blueprint's number one goal is to "expand accessibility and service" for **all**, it nevertheless curiously forgets its history: Madison Metro had actually started ["elderly and handicapped" services](#) before the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed over thirty years ago. The new transit system's purported goal, to improve social equity, ends up pitting natural allies against each other when it narrowly defines accessibility in terms of race and income, but forgets disabled people who will struggle greatly with increased distances to bus stops, crossing busy streets, and navigating steep inclines.

Transit and Land Use

To accommodate an anticipated 70,000 people and 37,000 jobs arriving in Madison over the next 20 years, we need to use minimal land while developing transit, bicycling, and walking transportation instead of the Single Occupancy Vehicle. That will require transit to have the finances to complement those land use efforts.

Running transit past new areas of "infill" – efficient development on vacant or under-used land within existing urban areas – would prepare those areas for future use, possibly as affordable housing. Some likely areas include areas on Odana and High Point Roads, areas inside the beltline, and state-owned land between Park St. and Fish Hatchery (which is scheduled to lose service without better funding.)

A redesign for another 30 years should reflect the fact that Madison has grown way beyond having a focus on downtown or the University. Transit routes should encourage development along arterials such as Highway 51 or Gammon Rd., with local routes that connect riders to both a BRT line that gets them across town rapidly, and to nearby employment locations, a diversity of housing options (including affordable housing), health and education centers, grocery stores and other shops and services.

Conclusion

Madison has needed a network redesign plan for a long time. Initially at least, we unfortunately have a plan without options, that misleadingly hails "frequency is freedom," that reverses our understanding of equity, and that does not coordinate land use with transit. But we also have the skeleton of an amazing transit plan that needs funds to put flesh on its bones.

We are constantly being told that we cannot afford a full-bodied transit system, but we have the money. We are just not being told the honest truth of how our transportation money is being spent. Give us the choice. What if we opted for a successful transit system that provided access, equity, and frequency, that coordinated with infill, efficient land use and environmental sustainability?

Madison needs to reprioritize its transportation budget so sufficient funds go to transit.