



Board Report

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**OPERATIONS, SAFETY, AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE
MARCH 18, 2021**

SUBJECT: BETTER BUS PROGRAM

ACTION: RECEIVE AND FILE

RECOMMENDATION

RECEIVE AND FILE report on Metro's new Better Bus program, a Customer Experience initiative to improve service for our bus customers.

ISSUE

Metro is launching a new initiative, the Better Bus Program, to transform the bus riding experience in Los Angeles County to provide dignified experiences for the 75 percent of Metro riders who take the bus each day. This report describes the rationale for creating the program, the key focus areas, the current work plan, and next steps for advancing the program.

INTRODUCTION

Better Bus, a new agency-wide effort coordinated by the Customer Experience unit in the Office of the CEO, seeks to highlight and address bus rider needs by making improvements to bus services and stops. The purpose of Better Bus is to align Metro's collective efforts around elevating investments that improve bus speed, ease, safety and comfort. Metro aims to transform the bus riding journeys in Los Angeles County by providing dignified experiences for the three-fourths of Metro riders that take the bus.

Currently, the half-a-million daily riders on our bus system disproportionately represent Equity Focus Communities (communities Metro defines as high-need based on income, race, and car ownership), with significant numbers of essential workers and people in economic distress. Even prior to the COVID pandemic-driven service cuts, bus riders sometimes experienced pain points such as unreliable and slow buses, long wait times, insufficient delay or service advisory information, uninviting bus stops, concerns about homelessness, concerns about personal security, and cleanliness at bus stops and onboard. These aspects of service need to be improved to provide a dignified customer experience and advance social and racial equity for Metro customers.

Providing high-quality trip experiences for bus riders is more imperative now than ever before. During the

pandemic, the Metro's bus system retained more riders than other public transit modes. The bus is a lifeline for riders and non-riders alike, as it is critical to the functioning of LA County's health and economic systems. Bus ridership has continued to recover since early 2020, and as of January 2021, hovers at just around half of pre-pandemic levels. Metro buses continue to transport just under 500,000 riders each day, compared to around 120,000 riders on rail. There are more daily bus riders during the pandemic than on rail on a typical pre-pandemic day.

This report outlines key components of the Better Bus Program and how they relate to existing Metro plans and programs that seek to improve bus service, most notably NextGen and the 2020 Customer Experience Plan. This report also sets a broad vision for implementing Better Bus through the development of a comprehensive, multi-year funding plan.

Metro works to provide high-quality bus service to the residents of LA County through the everyday efforts of front-line employees, operations and maintenance staff, and projects such as the NextGen Bus Plan. However, despite this abundant attention, there has never been a consolidation of Metro's bus efforts into one unified program. The goal of Better Bus is to provide a framework for improving all aspects of the bus rider experience that will allow for ridership growth, equity, and increased effectiveness of the bus in delivering mobility and access to opportunity for all. The Better Bus Program also advocates for greater investment in all aspects of the bus system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the importance of bus as the workhorse of the public transit system in Los Angeles. Even prior to the COVID pandemic, nearly three-fourths of Metro's systemwide ridership was on bus, and many essential workers continue to travel by bus. In California, an estimated 36% of residents who commute by transit work in essential industries, and half of these commuters are service workers in the most critical sectors, including healthcare, food service, public safety, transportation and government services (2015-2019 ACS data).

Improving the bus is also key to Metro's commitment to racial justice, particularly during the pandemic, as racial inequities have been exacerbated by the parallel health and economic crises. Based on comparisons of Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 bus rider surveys, bus riders who have continued to ride during the pandemic are largely Latino (70%, up from 66% prior to the pandemic) and Black (18%, up from 15%), 15% of riders have at least one disability, and the median household income of bus riders is about \$18,000 (compared to about \$28,000 for rail riders).

The Better Bus Program incorporates the work contained in the NextGen Bus Plan and ties closely with several initiatives in the Customer Experience Plan.

The first phase of the NextGen Bus Plan was rolled out in December 2020, and subsequent phases will be completed in 2021. NextGen is restructuring the bus network to be more relevant to today's travel patterns, provide more frequent service on key corridors, particularly off-peak, and improve the speed of service via supportive infrastructure such as the new 5th and 6th Street bus-only lanes in Downtown LA. Metro recognizes, however, that more needs to be done to realize a high quality bus system, including more frequent service, improved on-time performance, bus stop seating, shelter and lighting, better security, improved cleanliness, and reliable real-time information. Better Bus will advance the work on these additional aspects of service quality beyond what was contemplated in NextGen.

The Board-adopted Customer Experience (CX) Plan also places bus-related improvements front and center, to reflect the large majority of Metro's riders who take the bus. The CX Plan set the stage for the launch of the Better Bus Program by outlining 25 bus-specific recommendations that are planned or underway, led by various departments across Metro that are a part of the Better Bus Team. Better Bus is housed in the Office of

the CEO and led by the Customer Experience Executive Officer, and the initiative enjoys active participation from all corners of the agency.

DISCUSSION

Bus Customer Pain Points

The Better Bus Program focuses first and foremost on bus customer pain points and seeks to develop solutions that are responsive to these issues. Staff has completed an annual Customer Experience Survey that will guide decision-making and investments in Metro transit service. From the results of this annual survey, Better Bus will focus on the pain points identified as target issues for current and lapsed bus riders, detailed in Table 1. Target issues are those that customers rate low but are most important to their trip experiences.

Table 1: Bus Results from 2020 Customer Experience Survey

Target Issues	Other Pain Points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delay advisories • Bus interior cleanliness/graffiti • Bus stop cleanliness/graffiti • Bus stop seating • Rule enforcement • Security • Rider concerns about homelessness on the bus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On time performance • Speed/travel time • Bus Frequency • Sexual harassment • Racial/ethnic harassment

Some pain points may receive lower or higher ratings among particular groups of riders. For example, safety from sexual harassment is lower among young women and especially among riders who are gender non-binary. Another example, bus on-time performance, frequency, and speed receive fairly high scores from current riders. However, as these are all important components of travel time competitiveness with driving, they are among the top reasons that potential riders choose not to ride Metro buses.

The customer input from the 2020 Customer Experience survey and past Metro surveys and studies has been central to the vision, workplan, and performance metrics of Better Bus. Bus riders have consistently experienced particular pain points and have shared their feedback with Metro for some time. The bullets below summarize feedback received through a variety of past surveys and public outreach efforts:

- **Vision 2028.** The Customer Satisfaction Survey conducted in 2017 for the Vision 2028 strategic planning process showed that speed, frequency, and reliability are top issues. Also, concerns over security on board and at bus stops also serve as major barriers to riding the bus.
- **NextGen Bus Study and Plan.** Metro staff began this project in February 2018 and received a total of 16,300 comments about how to improve bus service. When fully implemented, NextGen will help address the factors listed as concerns of “all riders” in the first column of Table 2: travel speed, frequency, and reliability. However, many of the documented customer needs extend beyond what is being addressed through the NextGen Bus Plan implementation. Among current, former, and infrequent riders/non-riders, staff identified key pain points for each customer group, also shown in Table 2. These include bus stop safety, first/last mile connections, on-board comfort, and other experiential aspects of riding the bus. NextGen found that the waiting experience (at bus stops) can be as important as the on-board experience for bus riders.

Table 2: Findings from NextGen Outreach and Engagement

	All Riders	Current Riders	Former Riders	Infrequent/Non-Riders
Key Pain Points	Travel Speed	More service	Security (women, certain geographies)	Information (non-riders)
	Frequency	Fares	First/Last Mile (elderly, higher income)	First/Last Mile (women, youth, elderly)
	Reliability	Information	Comfort (odor, crowding)	Comfort (odor, crowding)

- Understanding How Women Travel Study.** In 2019, Metro completed a study titled *Understanding How Women Travel* guided by the agency’s Women and Girls Governing Council. This study team surveyed current and previous riders, as well as non-riders, and analyzed gender data currently collected by the agency. The study found that women, who make up more than half of current bus riders, are largely impacted by concerns over personal security, service reliability, and rider amenities at bus stops and on board:

 - Personal security (all transit users and non-riders):** Based on a stated preference survey of current and previous Metro riders, as well as non-riders, concern over personal security is the largest barrier to riding transit for women. Just 13% of current female riders feel safe waiting for transit after dark (compared to 30% of male riders).
 - Bus reliability:** The top three complaints filed by female Metro bus riders are all related to reliability: bus pass-ups, no shows, late buses, and unreliable or absent real-time information. Considering that women are more likely to trip chain than men, service reliability becomes increasingly important.
 - Bus customer facilities:** Nearly 60% of female riders with children bring their kids on transit, yet many women express difficulty in riding Metro with children and strollers. Only 39% of women feel that there is adequate space on board for the items they need to carry.

This feedback underscores the need to focus more attention on our bus system going forward. Hence, Better Bus seeks to address these pain points and more. By doing so, Better Bus will dramatically improve service and attract more riders to the system.

Better Bus Work Plan

Better Bus was first established in 2019 as an ongoing, inter-departmental forum for staff to collaborate on bus-focused improvements. The initiative consists of an Executive Team and topical working groups. The Better Bus vision and early actions, detailed in Table 3, center on the core needs of Metro’s bus riders, evidenced by the various surveys and studies detailed above. To address these pain points outlined, staff structured a work plan around three key focus areas: speed and service quality, ease, and safety and comfort. These three areas of focus are core to improving the customer experience for Metro bus riders and merit taking a comprehensive approach to realize a Better Bus system.

Table 3: Better Bus Vision and Early Actions

Category	Vision	Working Group	Proposed Early Actions (FY21-22) – subject to funding	Lead Department
Speed & Service Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travel time is competitive • Wait time is minimal • Bus is on time 	NextGen Joint Bus Speed Working Group (with LADOT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securing approvals for 2-3 new bus lanes • Transit signal priority on all Tier I corridors • Bus stop and zone improvements • NextGen frequency improvements • Exploring policy changes and permitting agreements with local jurisdictions 	Service Planning and Analysis (Operations)
Ease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to pay and validate fare • Affordable • Trip planning is easy and real-time information is accurate • Accessing bus stop is convenient from home, and key destinations are easy to access from bus stops • The transfer experience is easy between 	Real-Time Arrival Information, Better Bus Customer and Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procure enhanced prediction engine to improve real-time data accuracy • Improve data feed for Transit App • SMS alert system and route-by-route scorecard • Coordination with the Fareless System Initiative to offer free rides for qualifying customers to make it easier and more affordable for more people to ride 	ITS, Marketing (Communications), TAP (Finance & Budget)

	modes and agencies			
Safety & Comfort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Riding the bus feels safe Crowding on board is at a comfortable level The waiting experience, and boarding and alighting the bus, is comfortable for people of all abilities Riders and operators are following mask requirements* 	Better Bus Stops, On-board security and cleanliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot tests of new features at bus stops Develop regional standards for bus stops Launch Flexible Dispatch Pilot to improve bus security Install vinyl seats on buses Pilot tests of midday layover cleaning of bus interiors and enhanced bus stop cleaning Exploring partnerships with local jurisdictions and municipal operators 	Stops and Zones (Operations); System Security & Law Enforcement; Environmental Compliance and Sustainability; Vehicle and Equipment Acquisition (Operations); Office of Civil Rights and Inclusion

*temporary measure during COVID

Core goals of the Better Bus program include:

- Prioritize highest-impact investments.** Better Bus focuses first on the top customer pain points to guide investments. Additionally, Better Bus will prioritize improvements for Equity Focus Communities and vulnerable riders, including riders with disabilities, the elderly and women and girls.
- Package a vision for a better bus experience.** Metro will work hand-in-hand with local and regional partners to communicate a vision for improving the bus system that emphasizes creative and nimble approaches to improve the experience of current riders as quickly as possible. Metro will be leveraging local, regional and federal opportunities to prioritize bus investments and collaborate on achieving shared goals. Better Bus will also look to national and international best practices for inspiration.
- Develop an ongoing dialogue with riders.** The program will solicit feedback on an ongoing basis and open a two-way dialogue with riders. The Better Bus team is developing an online tool that allows riders to gain access to critical information for their trip, including delay advisories and providing opportunities to weigh in on how to make their trips better. The team will also be engaging customers and community partners through rider listening initiatives, which could take the form of focus groups or telephone surveys.

The Better Bus Program takes an incremental approach, starting with innovative, lower cost, and scalable solutions wherever possible. For example, Better Bus is launching a series of pilot programs by mid-2021 to test improvements, such as e-paper signs, lighting and other customer amenities at select bus stops. Better Bus also looks beyond these pilots at long-term, enterprise-wide improvements that will require systems change and ongoing funding sources. For example, only about a quarter of bus stops served by Metro have shelter, and providing shade at the remaining bus stops will require larger investment and new partnership models with cities. This change will not happen overnight, but the Better Bus Program will formalize the effort to ensure long term investment for our riders.

The Better Bus Program is supported by the CX Plan, which sets deadlines and assigns responsible departments for each of the 38 bus improvement recommendations (Attachment A). A full list of proposed Better Bus investments through FY26 is included as Attachment B. In addition, the Better Bus team has also

identified 37 performance metrics that will be used to measure progress in completing each of the recommendations.

Better Bus Funding and Implementation

At the January 28th Regular Board Meeting Metro's CEO directed the Planning Department and Office of Management and Budget to work with the Chief of Staff and Executive Officers for Equity and Race and Customer Experience to develop a comprehensive multi-year financial plan for Better Bus.

Many of the line items within the Better Bus work plan are unfunded or partly funded. Some were approved by the Board through the FY2021 mid-year budget adjustment and are already being pursued. Per CEO direction in January, Metro will develop a funding strategy for the unfunded components.

With Metro's fiscal constraints, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, funding Better Bus improvements will require creativity, resourcefulness, and tradeoffs. The pandemic has significantly reduced bus ridership and fare revenue, and the sales taxes that provide the bulk of Metro's operating subsidy are also lower than anticipated. The lower revenue has increased our operating shortfall. Federal stimulus funding helps address the shortfall, but when it ends, Metro will need to identify other sources of funding. The Better Bus Team, with the support of the Planning Department and OMB, will present options that have the potential to fund the Better Bus program during the April Board meeting.

Funding of Incremental Improvements (FY21-22): Progress

Better Bus staff has prioritized projects based on four qualitative criteria (each rated Low/Medium/High):

1. Equity
2. Customer Priority (as determined by the annual customer experience survey results),
3. Project continuation (for example, for pilot projects that need funding to continue), and,
4. Cost/benefit.

Several Better Bus pilot programs received funding to get started via the FY21 midyear Customer Experience program (totaling \$2.2M), including:

- Homelessness: Limited emergency short term shelter (hotel vouchers) and regular statistically valid counts on bus and rail.
- Flexible Dispatch Pilot: enables Metro to respond to issues on the system with appropriate staff, such as homeless outreach or law enforcement as the situation demands.
- TransitWatch marketing campaign: Digital advertising campaign to increase TransitWatch app and text message use to help customers feel safe.
- Digital Rider Alert system: A robust system to enable riders to receive customized service and emergency alerts through text messages and other channels.
- Rescue Ride: A pilot program that quickly identifies customers impacted by a missed run or pass-up in real-time and offers them a free ride code for an on-demand shared ride service to get them where they need to go.

Metro's Environmental Compliance and Sustainability Department (ECSD), has been working on several climate impact reduction projects that strengthen the execution of future Better Bus related projects. The outcomes of the ECSD work allowed the Better Bus Team to: 1) develop priority criteria for shelter placements and other bus stop improvements, and 2) complete a conceptual design of a bus stop pole that can accommodate additional improvements, such as solar lighting, real-time information, shade/cooling options and seating for customers. These efforts align with the execution of climate impact-reduction strategies contained in the 10-year sustainability strategic plan, Moving Beyond Sustainability. Additional ECSD resources and efforts could potentially be leveraged alongside future grants to develop and execute bus stop improvement pilots, especially in Equity Focus Communities and high-heat areas.

Staff also continue to apply for, and secure, grants to support the Board-approved components of the Better Bus vision, including a SB1 grant that Metro received to install bus speed improvements along the NextGen Tier I corridors (\$25 million with 50% local match). The Board has also directed staff to use \$24.3 million of FY21 mid-year funds to support preparation to restore bus service to a 7.0 million Revenue Service Hour level by September 2021.

Additional FY22 Funding Needs

FY22 operating funds will be needed to continue pilot programs and make additional bus-focused customer experience improvements, such as:

- Additional staffing to cover expanding scopes for the Better Bus and Customer Experience programs to conduct annual customer experience surveys and to develop a comprehensive LA28 Mobility Concept Plan per Board motion 42, to prepare for the World Cup and Olympics.
- Bus stop cleaning enhancements
- Bus interior mid-day layover cleaning pilot
- Bus stop improvement pilots with shelter, solar lighting, real-time displays, and other customer features
- Acceleration of vinyl seat installations on over 300 buses per year
- Surprise and Delight Program: arts, music, and customer giveaways to surprise and delight customers, per Board motion 45.1

Long-Term Investments (FY22-26) Progress

The Better Bus Team is developing a five-year capital and operating plan for Better Bus (FY22-FY26) and applying criteria to prioritize high-need investments. Metro's Planning Department is currently identifying opportunities for potential funding of Better Bus investments through grants and where there might be other funds that can address the needs of the Better Bus program, while addressing Metro's expected growing operating shortfall.

The Better Bus Team is working with OMB, Planning, and Government Relations to identify funding sources and policies that could accelerate the implementation of the program by:

- Aligning State and Federal legislative agenda to the goals of Better Bus with specific requests for financial resources for homeless supportive services and for bus shelters to address rising heat and racial inequalities.
- Providing input on the Automated Bus Lane Enforcement (ABLE) pilot program enabling legislation, that would help address bus reliability issues sometimes faced by our riders by keeping bus lanes clear.
- Developing a list of grants that could support Better Bus improvements, understanding that Metro already receives and/or programs virtually all available transit-eligible grants to ongoing operations, essential state-of-good-repair, and the voter-approved expansion of transit service.
- Identifying, for Board consideration, tradeoffs for repurposing existing funds.

Full implementation of Better Bus is contingent on funding availability. Many of these improvements, such as customer features at bus stops, will require regional collaboration and cost-sharing.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

At the direction of the CEO, Planning and OMB are developing a funding strategy for the Better Bus program improvements over a five-year time frame. The funding strategy is expected for the April Board cycle.

IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

Metro's 10-year strategic plan, Vision 2028 calls for Metro to "invest in a world class bus system that is reliable, convenient and attractive to more users for more trips" (Goal 1.2). Central to this goal is a vision for "smooth trip" which includes both high-quality service features, such as faster and more reliable service, but also improved customer experience along the complete trip journey, from planning one's trip, accessing the transit stop, and arriving at one's destination on time (Goal 2). Better Bus is central to achieving both of these goals.

NEXT STEPS

Metro plans to publicly launch Better Bus and start a round of public engagement and outreach in 2021. Many of the early action items outlined in this report (Table 1) will begin in mid-2021.

Staff continues to develop the funding strategy for Better Bus and will update the Board in April.

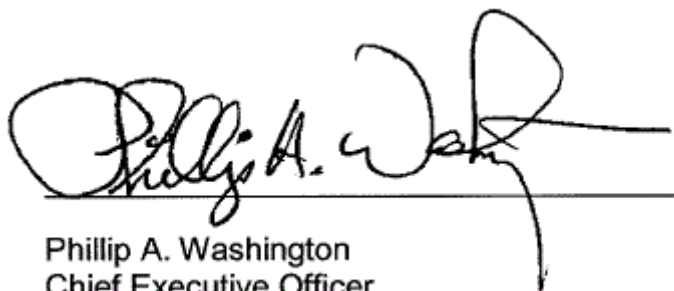
Attachment A - Better Bus Recommendations in 2020 Customer Experience Plan

Attachment B - Proposed Better Bus Investments through FY26

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