

Nashville bus ridership on the decline as Barry pushes \$5.4 billion transit plan

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November 29, 2017

As Nashville heads toward a May referendum on a \$5.4 billion light-rail transit plan proposed by Mayor Megan Barry, ridership on the city's buses has reached the lowest level since 2011.

Even amid Nashville's population growth, the Metro Transit Authority has now had two consecutive years of declining bus ridership, according to Nashville MTA data. The downward trend is on pace to continue for a third straight year.

From July 2016 through June 2017, MTA ridership dropped 3 percent to 9.2 million. That followed a decline of 2.4 percent from 2015 to 2016 after rides had risen each year since 2010, coinciding with the end of the Great Recession, when MTA faced cuts.

Through the first half of the current 2017-18 fiscal year, ridership has been lower in each month compared to last year.

Ridership on county-to-county regional bus service and van pools offered by the Regional Transportation Authority is also on a two-year decline, the data show.

Conversely, passenger trips on Music City Star — the area's only existing commuter rail service, which extends from Wilson County to Nashville — has gradually increased for three years.

Critics: ridership dip shows 'legacy transit' lacks demand

Barry intends to seek Metro Council approval to let Nashville voters on May 1 have the final say on raising four taxes — including the sales tax — to fund a transit plan centered on more than 26 miles of light rail connected by a downtown underground tunnel.

Her plan also includes longer hours, more frequent service, and more cross-town routes for existing MTA buses.

Barry last week called the notion that transit ridership is declining one of the biggest transit "myths" perpetuated by critics of her proposal. But she cited national figures, not local numbers, to justify that claim.

Barry said people in the United States took 10.2 billion transit trips in 2016 compared to 7.5 billion in 1996, a 35 percent increase. She called it the "highest levels since the highway boom of the 1950s." She said light rail ridership is up 20 percent in the U.S. over the last two decades.

She also pointed to a 10-year-old light rail system in Charlotte, N.C., which she credited with spurring new development. Charlotte is now extending its light rail line by 9.3 miles.

But the dipping bus ridership locally has armed opponents with data to fit one of their arguments — that Nashville lacks demand for high-capacity transit.

“That’s a big reason why the transit plan is just a colossal mistake,” said Ben Cunningham, president of the Nashville Tea Party, arguing there’s a variety of explanations for the dip. “Uber and Lyft are significant reasons. Crime on mass transit is a significant reason. And you’ve got all these technological changes that are coming down the pike — self-driving cars, on-demand buses.

“People are just saying very loudly and very clearly that traditional legacy transit is not what they want in the future.”

Barry: Better transit options would lead to more riders

MTA CEO Steve Bland has also cited the rising popularity of ride-share companies Uber and Lyft as well as cheaper gas prices as reasons why ridership has marginally decreased.

MTA spokeswoman Amanda Clelland said that although there are recent decreases, the agency has seen more than 1 million additional bus rides since 2009.

She also said that MTA has experienced ridership increases where MTA has invested in service improvements, most notably by introducing bus rapid transit “lite” lines along Charlotte Avenue and Gallatin, Murfreesboro and Nolensville pikes. These are bus lines with fewer stops and more frequent service.

Transit proponents, including Barry, say light rail would attract new riders to transit that don’t currently take buses.

In a statement, Barry said Nashville’s roads are “at a saturation point and we have a million more people coming to the area.”

“People take transit when its fast, affordable and convenient,” she said. “Those options don’t exist in Nashville today as buses are stuck in the same traffic as everyone else. Getting past cyclical numbers starts with investing in rapid bus and rail service and making sure that our transportation network keeps pace with our population — by expanding and connecting more neighborhoods with each other and with more job centers. We need to build that network.”

Transit opponents, proponents dispute

While Barry has made the case that transit ridership is on the rise nationally, opponents have highlighted situations in other cities to argue the opposite.

Randal O’Toole, a transit critic and fellow at the Cato Institute, recently cited Federal Transit Administration figures to claim “catastrophic drops in ridership” since 2010 in cities such as Detroit, Sacramento, Memphis, Austin, Texas and Cleveland.

He ripped Barry’s transit plan in a Wall Street Journal column this month called “It’s the last stop on the light-rail gravy train.” He called Nashville’s light rail proposal the latest of an

outdated model pushed by mayors nationally even though it lacks demand. He labeled it “questionable at best and reckless at worst.”

But Walter Searcy, a spokesman of the Transit for Nashville Coalition, said the “longer-term trends” of bus ridership over the past decade in Nashville shows that rides are up. He called the last two years a “downward dip,” not a trend.

He predicted bus use would spike again after the initial elements of Barry’s transit plan — extended bus hours, more frequent stops and more crosstown routes, for example — are adopted. And when the first light rail line is built a decade from now, he said it would further expand options for people who traditionally depend on automobiles.

“It’s an initial lift, but it has inertial impact that once you get people out of their cars it’s easier to keep them there,” he said.

“We have such a significant need for mass transit in Metro that it’s not unexpected that we experience a downward turn as people try to manage their options,” he added. “Once the options are available to them, we expect without issue that upticks will occur, and it will be sustainable.”