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San Antonio bus ridership — after a long decline — is up sharply on some routes

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For four consecutive months, bus ridership statistics in San Antonio have shown year-over-year increases, and riders have flocked to busy routes where they can board more frequently, thanks to a \$10 million infusion of city funds.

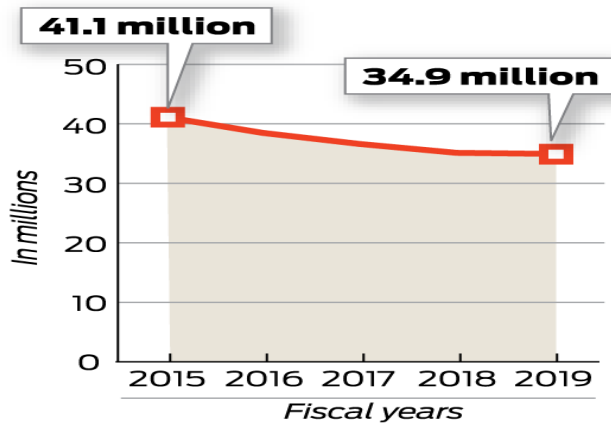
In the four closing months of 2019, total VIA Metropolitan Transit ridership was up 3 to 6 percent over the same months in 2018, a trend CEO Jeff Arndt attributes to the addition of buses on key routes, which reduced wait times from 60 minutes to 30, from 30 to 20 or from 15 to 12.

“Four months of increases - not just one - gives me more confidence,” he said. “Twelve minutes is really the sweet spot in urban bus transit. That’s when people don’t need a bus schedule.”

But Arndt acknowledged a VIA news release from Jan. 28 saying “more people are riding VIA today than in the past five years” simply was wrong. VIA’s own figures show 2019 systemwide ride totals are down some 6 million from 2015, mirroring a yearslong national trend that urban planners say has little to do with how people feel about mass transit.

Arndt said he hoped the reduced wait-times would be the norm across VIA’s 1,226-square-mile service area if and when voters agree to a sales tax transfer this year that would add funding under the banner of “VIA Reimagined.”

Total VIA ridership



Source: VIA

Mike Fisher/Staff artist

The 10-year program promises some 57 new buses on the existing 96 routes, some on dedicated lanes arriving as quickly as every 7 1/2 minutes. Eventually it would deploy “advanced rapid transit” vehicles that might look like passenger rail cars but run on pavement with rubber tires.

The newly released stats show the effect of putting more buses on 18 busy routes starting in October 2018, when the city began its annual infusion of \$10 million into the bus system.

The biggest gainer of all the routes was the No. 3 “skip” bus on San Pedro Avenue. From May 2018 to October 2019, it gained an average of 2,741 riders per weekday, up almost 42 percent over the previous year.

“A lot more of my peer group are riding buses in general and this one in particular,” Sara Guizar, 28, said as she waited for the No. 3 one recent afternoon at the San Pedro Avenue and Oblate Drive.

She works at a bakery downtown, often visits a sick relative during the day in a downtown hospital, and does her grocery shopping and banking with VIA’s help.

Within four minutes, a bus pulled up. At about the same time, one of Guizar’s new bus friends, Christa Williams, rolled up in her wheelchair from a nearby home for addicts in recovery.

“I’ve been using the bus for about two years,” said Williams, whose long red hair almost reached her muscular forearms. “I go to Palo Alto College. I go to Rolling Oaks Mall. I’m headed to a feed store off Bandera, then later to the Family Dollar. I go a lot of places. I like the community that’s on the bus.”

With that, she hugged Guizar and took off across San Pedro, rocking side to side like she was racing someone to beat the pedestrian crossing signal.

The two women weren’t atypical of No. 3’s working-class ridership. A scaffolding assembly worker from Gadsden, Ala., said he had been riding the bus for several months after losing his job and car.

An older couple, the husband using a walker and on oxygen, had just returned from the H-E-B across the street and said they did all their doctor visits by bus.

That particular day in that part of town, no one was riding the bus because they just wanted to reduce their carbon footprint. People said they had sold their cars to pay the rent and buy medicine.

More frequent VIA buses

With \$10 million in annual city funds, VIA put more buses on 18 routes and decreased wait-times. VIA says ridership increased.



Corridor/Route	Minutes between buses during peak operation hours		Average weekday ridership		Percentage change
	Before buses added	After buses added	Before buses added	After buses added	
20 New Braunfels	15	12	3,730	4,670	25.19%
26 Martin Luther King	15	12	1,493	1,792	20.02%
502 Thousand Oaks	30	30	1,146	1,248	8.92%
602 North Star/ Medical Center	30	30	999	1,066	6.69%
607 Medical Center/ Ingram	60	30	335	453	35.13%
611 Valley-Hi/ Kel-Lac	60	30	358	393	9.84%
613 Heritage NW/ Kel-Lac	30	30	590	619	4.85%
615 Kel-Lac/ Heritage Park	30	30	618	512	-17.21%
616 Sky Harbour/ Kel-Lac	30	30	603	555	-7.89%
617 Kel-Lac/ Rainbow Hills	30	30	459	474	3.22%
618 Ingram/ Westlakes	60	30	316	399	26.30%
3 San Pedro Skip	15	12	1,936	2,741	41.57%
24 E. Houston	15	12	1,584	1,923	21.41%
76 W. Commerce Skip	15	12	2,482	2,817	13.48%
43 S Flores	30	20	1,065	1,189	11.64%
44 Pleasanton	30	20	1,407	1,620	15.17%
82 Culebra	30	15	2,111	2,049	-2.95%
88 Bandera	30	15	2,061	2,590	25.67%

Source: VIA

Mike Fisher/Staff artist

As former Mayor Henry Cisneros told the City Council recently: “We are a poor city. We have the lowest per capita income of any major Texas city. ... If you want to break your heart, ride the bus and ask people about their lives.”

Ten other VIA routes showed double-digit percentage gains in average daily ridership compared to the final months of 2018. They included No. 607 (Medical Center/Ingram Road), up 35 percent; No. 618 (Ingram/Westlakes), up 26 percent; No. 88 (Bandera Road), up 26 percent, and No. 20 (New Braunfels Avenue), up 25 percent.

Five other routes made gains of 3 to 9 percent. Three routes — No. 615 and No. 616, connecting the Kel-Lac bus hub with Heritage Park and Sky Harbour, and No. 82 (Culebra) — lost average daily ridership despite the addition of buses.

The gains and losses are a small piece of a complex mosaic of urban bus ridership in San Antonio and throughout the United States. In cities across the country, fewer people have been taking the bus, a trend that has been developing since about 2014.

In 2009, VIA had almost 43 million riders annually. By 2015, those numbers had dropped by nearly 2 million. They declined further to about 35 million in 2019.

In the past year, according to the American Public Transportation Association, there were bus ridership declines of 3 to 9 percent in Phoenix; Orlando, Fla.; suburban Chicago; Minneapolis; Cincinnati; Cleveland; Philadelphia; and Milwaukee, among the largest urban bus agencies.

Mass transit critics like the Cato Institute’s Randal O’Toole suggest America is rebelling against regimented, expensive and heavily subsidized government transportation, but the real reasons behind the decline do not reflect sustained negative feelings about mass transit, other analysts said.

“No one has identified a scientifically-certain explanation” for the decline, said Michael Walk, a research scientist and urban planner for the Texas A&M Transportation Institute. But several factors contribute to the steady drop in transit riders, he said, including:

Cheap gas prices and low-interest car loans that have made car ownership more affordable.

Ride-hailing companies such as Uber and Lyft, which have cut into short-trip mass transit.

The suburbanization of jobs. Millions of people living in or moving to suburbs are finding closer jobs there, where mass transit is less efficient compared to the city center.

More people work at home. U.S. census figures showed in 2017 that 5.2 percent of workers, about 8 million, labored at home, up from 3.3 percent in 2000.

New passenger rail lines in cities such as Dallas, Houston, Seattle, Denver, Cincinnati and Kansas City, among others, which have cut into bus ridership.

The gig economy, which has allowed many people to take mass transit less often.

“Just working from home one day a week is a 20 percent drop in transit ridership,” Walk said. “Those people aren’t saying they dislike mass transit.”

It’s difficult to get someone to use transit if they can afford a vehicle, which remains two to three times faster than transit on average, though less safe and more polluting.

Walk acknowledged that in urban planner circles there is an awareness of “the bus stigma” among some people, though he knew of no empirical data supporting that.

“I know it’s out there. We talk about it, but I don’t know whether it’s real or perceived,” he said. “I think there may be a perception among nontransit riders that there is a safety or security concern on the bus. That’s a real challenge to attracting some new riders.”

The amount of federal funding that agencies like VIA receive is only partly affected by levels of ridership.

Arndt said VIA has been receiving about \$12 million annually from the Federal Transportation Administration for the past five years, the same five years that have seen a decline in riders from 41 million to 35 million. It’s a significant but not a huge revenue stream — VIA’s 2019 budget was \$250 million.

The federal funding formula would impress a calculus major, but the basics are that VIA loses more in funding because of its lack of mass transit than from declining ridership. Funding also is determined by factors like population density - Texas cities are far less dense than those in the Northeast and on both coasts - and the total miles an agency’s bus fleet travels annually.

But the popularity of VIA buses clearly matters to Arndt, perhaps now more than ever, because VIA Reimagined is the region’s only effort at to create something resembling mass transit in an auto-dependent city that has \$5 billion in state highway construction currently underway or in the planning stages.

Making VIA buses more popular by reducing wait times and introducing them to a new generation of young urban workers in downtown San Antonio might help ensure a victory at the polls when voters are asked to divert sales tax revenue that funds the city’s aquifer protection program to mass transit needs.

That money would plant the seeds of bus rapid transit — mainly more frequent buses on more routes — and, supporters hope, whet the civic appetite for longer, faster buses on dedicated lanes that would cross the city like efficient light rail, but cost hundreds of millions fewer dollars.

“VIA Reimagined is like a 10-year snapshot of our 2040 plans that people have heard of lately through the ConnectSA strategy,” Arndt said. “And now with the data showing conclusively that more frequent buses increases ridership, we no longer say we believe this. Now we say we have proven it.”