

MASS TRANSIT

Charlotte has been losing transit riders faster than any other large U.S. city

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Across the nation, most big cities are losing transit riders.

But nowhere is the decline more pronounced than Charlotte, which is shedding transit passengers faster than any of the other 50 largest cities, according to data from the Federal Transit Administration.

In February, the Charlotte Area Transit System's ridership fell 20 percent compared with February 2017. In January, CATS ridership fell by 21.4 percent compared with the same month a year earlier.

For the last six months, ridership has dropped by 19 percent. That means nearly 1 in 5 transit riders has left the system — for now at least.

Charlotte's losses have occurred on its buses, streetcar and "demand response," a service for the elderly and disabled. Light-rail ridership has been stable.

The urban area with next largest drop was Cleveland, which was down 16 percent in February compared with the month a year earlier.

Experts aren't sure why transit is struggling across the nation. Transit systems and experts have blamed low gas prices and ride-share companies, and some have said the strong economy has allowed more people to buy their own car.

But it's even more of a mystery as to why CATS is doing so badly. CATS has not discussed its struggles with City Council, and elected officials were surprised that the transit system has lost so many passengers.

Julie Eiselt, the mayor pro tem, said she wasn't aware of the large declines. But it isn't enough for her to reconsider the city's plans to spend as much as \$7 billion on more rail lines and bus service.

"In Charlotte's case, we are still pretty new to mass transit. We have had one segment (of rail). But until the system is built out, we don't know what the ridership will be," she said.

She said the city needs to find out why passengers are leaving.

Charlotte developer Ned Curran, the former chair of the N.C. Board of Transportation, said he believes ridership will bounce back.

"As congestion gets worse, people will come back to transit," he said.

But Curran said CATS may need to rethink the 2030 transit plan, which was designed 20 years ago. CATS has said it wants to finish the plan.

In past interviews, CATS chief executive John Lewis has said he believes gentrification is a major factor in the declining ridership. As more affluent people move closer to uptown, low-income residents are pushed out to areas where transit service isn't as robust, he said.

But other cities are also dealing with gentrification and haven't lost riders as much as Charlotte has. Atlanta's ridership is down, but at a much smaller rate than Charlotte. Atlanta ridership declined 6 percent in January and 1.5 percent in February. Raleigh was up 6.4 percent and 7.3 percent in January and February. Nashville was down 2.1 and 0.4 percent in the first two months of the year.

All three cities are growing rapidly and gentrifying.

Another question is why Charlotte is losing passengers so rapidly even when it's one of the nation's fastest-growing cities. City officials say that at least 60 people are moving to Charlotte a day, and presumably some of them would be open to taking the bus or train.

Roger Stacks, owner of Preferred Parking — one of the largest parking management firms in the city — said there has been a surge of cars coming into uptown.

"Five years ago there was space everywhere," he said about empty parking spaces uptown.

"There has been a dramatic difference. We are nearly full."

Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute, who compared transit usage at the nation's 50 largest urban areas, said transit is struggling to compete against market forces like cheap gas and ride-share companies.

"I think what's going on in Charlotte is the same thing that is going on just about everywhere else: transit just isn't that useful to people anymore, and it can't compete with moderate gas prices, ride hailing, walking, working at home, and other alternatives," O'Toole said.

The FTA, which helps fund CATS, requires transit systems to submit monthly ridership reports. CATS said those reports are based on a sampling of routes, per federal guidelines.

But CATS also produces its own ridership reports, which are distributed to the public and the Metropolitan Transit Commission. CATS said those reports are based on an attempt to count every rider on every route. Those internal reports are usually more favorable to CATS.

For instance, in February, CATS reported to the FTA that its ridership was down 20 percent compared with the same month a year earlier. CATS' other ridership report showed ridership was down 14 percent.

"One method is not better than the other, they are simply two different ways of measuring ridership," CATS said in an e-mail to the Observer.

CATS said that its own decisions to cut service have hurt ridership. It discontinued some routes, such as the Route 591 airport connector from the Archdale light-rail station, which ended in June. But the loss of the Archdale route hasn't been a part of the last six months of heavy losses.

CATS also said its decision last summer to end the free Gold Rush shuttle has also hurt ridership. CATS ended the uptown line because of streetcar construction.

Ending the Gold Rush has cost CATS between 20,000 and 25,000 trips per month. But even if those riders had stayed, CATS's losses in the last six months would still be about 18 percent.

The Census interviews people about their commuting habits. Of the nation's 50 largest cities, Charlotte had one of the largest declines — 15 percent — in people saying they used transit for work from 2013-2016.

There could be more disruption coming to transit in Charlotte.

Through a city pilot program, four companies have placed nearly 2,000 dockless bikes in the city, starting in November. Their use has increased each month.

Eiselt said she has spoken with people who have told her they walk to a light-rail station, and if the weather is nice, they will use a dockless bike to get to work.

At the of the year, the Interstate 77 toll lane project will open in north Mecklenburg. Buses will be able to use the lanes for free, improving service in and out of uptown. But for the first time, commuters will be able to pay a toll for a guaranteed travel time.

The opening of the Lynx Blue Line Extension March 16 has boosted CATS ridership.

In the first two weeks of the extension, CATS reported the entire rail line averaged 26,000 trips on weekdays. That's below the projection of about 33,500 trips, but ridership may grow.

The new riders helped CATS reduce its monthly loss in March. CATS said its ridership was down 8 percent compared with March 2017.

Lewis has started a program called Envision My Ride, which aims to redesign the bus system with more crosstown routes instead of having most routes start from the main bus station uptown. CATS also redesigned several routes to feed into the Lynx Blue Line Extension, and those routes went into effect in mid-March.

Ride-sharing companies have also been blamed with transit losing passengers. CATS recently started a pilot program with Lyft to give passengers vouchers if they use the ride-share company from two new light-rail stations, Parkwood and JW Clay/UNC Charlotte.