



## Milwaukee County Transit System Revamps Amid Declining Ridership

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Bus ridership is on the decline nationwide. Of 35 major metro areas, 31 saw less ridership in 2017 than the year before, and at the bottom of that list is Milwaukee.

Big changes to the GO Pass program made in 2017, which gave senior citizens and persons with disabilities free rides, deserve a lion's share of the blame according to Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) chief marketing and communications officer Brendan Conway.

Funding is also an issue. As operations costs have risen, MCTS receives less state funding, its largest revenue source, than it did in 2009. "Our problem is we don't have an adequate funding mechanism from the State of Wisconsin," said Milwaukee County Supervisor John Weishan Jr., who chairs the Committee on Transportation, Public Works and Transit. "We've had to eliminate and reduce routes because we get less funding from the State of Wisconsin," he added. "That's going to result in lower ridership numbers."

Two of the most commonly cited reasons for bus ridership decline across the country are the rise of rideshare services like Uber and Lyft and a recovering economy giving more people access to cars. Additional factors include increased home delivery from companies like Amazon, lower college enrollment and more people working from home.

While many of these issues are modern phenomena, it's worth noting that MCTS' troubles are nothing new. A 2008 Public Policy Forum report asserted that "the recent history of transit in Milwaukee County is one marked by desperation and false hope." Data compiled in 2015 by the same group showed a 37% decrease in ridership from 2000 to 2014.

Actions taken by MCTS show that the transit service understands something needs to change.

### Next Steps for MCTS

Over five public meetings held throughout June and July, MCTS met with community members about the most expansive redesign Milwaukee County's bus system has undertaken in at least 40 years. "We are looking at the system, and there is a goal of redesigning or reimagining it to better fit modern transit needs," Conway said. "With the map that we have right now, if someone went

into a 25-year slumber, and you woke them up and showed them our transit system, it wouldn't look all that different. Some of the bus lines are the exact same routes.”

Specific goals for the project—called MCTS Next—focus on faster service, more connections and increased accessibility. There are also some smaller changes that MCTS hopes to accomplish. Currently, Route 67 runs on 76th Street, and Route 76 runs on 60th Street. For simplicity's sake, Conway said that Route 76 would likely be moved to 76th Street. But other changes will be more politically difficult. By redesigning routes, some low-use stops may be moved or cut altogether. While this may improve service, it is likely to receive pushback from the riders used to using those stops.

Conway hopes that MCTS Next will help attract more riders. “In every other city where they have done these types of things—and there has been a dozen or more—they have seen some success in increased ridership,” he said. This is because as much as bells and whistles attract media attention, riders are really just looking for efficient service. “Wi-Fi on the buses gets attention; heated bus stops get the headlines. But, if you really get down to what people want, it's for the bus to come more often.”

MCTS is currently doing initial public outreach, which is the first of what will eventually be three or four phases. The next step will be creating a map of new routes with improvements and changes. After additional public input, MCTS would seek buy-in from local elected officials and then implement the changes. The redesigned system is likely another two years away.

In the meantime, MCTS has seen success with a new app that is nearing 25,000 downloads. “When you talk to people—particularly younger people who used to ride the bus but maybe don't anymore—the thing that we heard was that they don't want to own a card,” Conway said. “They don't have cash. It's on their phone.” The app allows users to plan their trip, track their bus and buy their ticket from a smartphone.

Increasing speed of service is the goal of another multimillion dollar project in the works for MCTS.

### **Rapid Transit for Wisconsin Avenue**

Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) has been in the works for Milwaukee County since 2016. The nine-mile route would begin at the much-delayed Downtown Couture high-rise and use dedicated bus lanes throughout 53% of the route, fewer stops, traffic signal priority and pre-board ticketing for higher-speed travel through Wisconsin Avenue and Bluemound Road to the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center in Wauwatosa.

BRT works best in dense urban areas like much of this proposed route. The one-mile strip of Wisconsin Avenue between the Milwaukee River and Marquette University serves about 10,000 transit passengers every day according to UW-Milwaukee urban planning professor Robert Schneider, who teaches a course on BRT.

“If you just think about all those people on those buses going up and down Wisconsin Avenue, that's an incredibly large number of people being moved very efficiently and using that valuable

public space very efficiently,” Schneider said. “BRT is going to help enhance that service along that corridor and ultimately connect even more people to the west.”

Another benefit Schneider sees for BRT is the potential for increased investment along its route, which was a selling point for the streetcar. “Ultimately, if you have high-quality rapid transit like this, you can see an increase in development potential near the station,” he said. “There are parts of the Near West Side that have not seen development in decades, and this can be an opportunity for more activity, more investment, more businesses and more jobs in that corridor.”

As for whether BRT will help increase ridership, Conway is confident. “Bus Rapid Transit projects across the country time and time again increase ridership not only in that specific corridor, but also across the whole system,” he said. “As you get people out of their car and they ride the bus, they become more comfortable riding other places.”

MCTS hopes to fund 80% of the estimated \$53.5 million project through the Federal Transit Administration’s Small Starts program. Conway said MCTS will find out about the funding this fall, though he admits that he may have to “knock on wood” because, “as you may have read, things in Washington, D.C., are a little crazy these days.” If all goes according to plans, the BRT route will begin operations in 2020 or 2021, around the same time as MCTS Next. The [project’s website](#) claims the BRT project will only add about 1% to MCTS’ overall operating and maintenance costs.

### **The Value of Public Transit**

It’s easy to see declining ridership numbers as a sign that the bus is an obsolete form of transportation in the days of Uber, Lyft and other mobility options. This narrative is partly fueled by talking points from rightwing interests sponsored by the fossil fuel industry. Randal O’Toole, a senior fellow at the Koch Brothers-founded Cato Institute, [recently wrote](#) that “there seems to be no positive future for public transit.”

But, according to Schneider, the value of public transit is obvious—not just for those who are unable to drive or can’t afford a car, but also for those who want to use public space more effectively, reduce parking demand, increase safety for pedestrians and cyclists, ease traffic congestion and protect the environment. He also said that achieving the best possible transit system for Milwaukee needs to be a group effort.

“It’s not just MCTS that is a part of this conversation,” Schneider said. “It needs to be urban planners and developers, too, because how we arrange our city, the urban form itself, needs to be supportive of transit if we are going to make it as efficient as possible.”