

TIME

COVID-19 Has Been 'Apocalyptic' for Public Transit. Will Congress Offer More Help?

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July 21, 2020

While trying to get to work over the past few months, Brittany Williams, a Seattle home care worker, has often been passed by two or three buses before one stops to let her board. Buses in her area that once carried anywhere from about 50 to 100 passengers have been limited to between 12 and 18 to prevent overcrowding in response to coronavirus, and Williams' commute, typically a half-hour ride, now takes more than double that time. Other Seattle transit riders have described budgeting as much as an extra hour per trip to account for the reduced capacity, eating into their time at work, school or with family.

Even with the ridership limits in place, Williams, 34, doesn't feel safe on public transit. Some passengers don't wear face coverings, and bus drivers sometimes ignore capacity limits, she says. On one ride with her seven-year-old son, she decided to get off at a stop far from her home after a driver allowed a crowd of people to board. "It's very trying. I'll put it in those terms," Williams says. "These past couple months have been really hard." (Seattle's public transit operator, King County Metro, says it's asking customers to allow for additional travel time, and that it has instructed drivers to call in more service on overcrowded routes.)

Adding more buses could help boost capacity while reducing overcrowding. But King County Metro is in dire financial straits, making that next to impossible. System officials are projecting what they're calling an "unprecedented loss" of more than a quarter of a billion dollars this year due to falling fare revenue and sales tax collections. While King County Metro received some federal aid for short-term survival, its prospects in the longer term are dismal, with the agency projecting more than \$600 million in lost revenues through 2022. Last month, the agency announced fall service would be cut 15% from pre-coronavirus levels.

What's happening to public transit in Seattle is happening across the country. Public transit use has plummeted nationwide as people work from home or avoid buses and subways for fear of contracting COVID-19, resulting in less revenue from fares. And as the economy cratered, so too have the tax revenues upon which many transit systems rely. Philadelphia's SEPTA is looking at upwards of \$300 million in lost revenue through mid-2021.

Maryland's Transportation Trust Fund is contending with a \$550 million shortfall in the fiscal year ending June 30, with similar losses expected next year. Los Angeles Metro is preparing for \$1.8 billion in pandemic-related revenue losses. Chicago's CTA is facing a half-billion dollar falloff in 2020. "I've been in this industry for over 30 years, and I have never experienced

anything like what we've been dealing with in this pandemic," says CTA President Dorval Carter, Jr. "There was no playbook for what we encountered." In New York City, home to the largest transportation agency in the country, losses could add up to a staggering \$8.5 billion in 2020. "'Apocalyptic' is a good description," says Sarah Feinberg, who was appointed interim president of New York City Transit after the resignation of former president Andy Byford in January following repeated, high-profile clashes with New York governor Andrew Cuomo.

In these cities and more, public transit is the backbone of the local economy, and serves a wide swath of residents across socio-economic groups. If cities are to recover post-COVID, a thriving public transit system will surely have to be part of the mix.

Economically, U.S. public transit systems have endured a devastating one-two punch. Ridership rates have been decimated (subway ridership was down as much as 92% in New York at the height of the outbreak there) severely cutting into fare collections. And with the economy floundering more broadly, tax revenues that help subsidize transit systems have also taken a dramatic hit. But many transit systems' costs are up as they engage in expensive cleaning campaigns meant to keep their buses and trains safe. Furthermore, many systems have been reluctant to cut service, which could result in dangerous overcrowding that could exacerbate viral spread.

Some help has already pulled into the station. The CARES Act, a \$2.2 trillion stimulus bill signed in March, included \$25 billion for public transportation relief, which covered some of this year's funding gaps. But as the COVID-19 crisis worsens in much of the country, it's becoming clear that the nation's transit systems will need more help from Congress. An independent analysis commissioned by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), a non-profit advocacy group, found that, even after the CARES Act, public transit agencies nationwide still face a \$23.8 billion shortfall through the end of 2021. "The CARES Act probably put a band-aid on the problem," says Robert Puentes, president of the non-profit Eno Center for Transportation.

Another big issue with the CARES Act: the formula used to divvy out the funding gave enough money to smaller transit agencies to tide them over for a longer stretch of time, but left larger systems with only a few months of respite, according to an analysis by TransitCenter, a transit advocacy group. (That's partially because larger transit systems tend to rely less on government funding, and more on fares and dedicated taxes, two income streams that the analysis projected would take a bigger hit during the pandemic.) Those major systems not only carry the most riders, some are also located in areas hardest-hit by COVID-19 early on, like New York and Seattle. For the 10 largest transit systems, the analysts estimated that the CARES Act funds would cover shortfalls for about five to eight months. In Seattle and New York City, which got 15% of the total CARES Act relief despite handling more than a third of national transit ridership, the funds were predicted to last less than six months.

More help from Washington could be on the way. Congress returned to work on July 20, and passing further COVID-related economic relief is top of mind for most lawmakers. But it's unclear what the next major relief bill might look like. Back in May, House Democrats passed the \$3 trillion HEROES Act, which included nearly \$16 billion for public transit assistance, aimed primarily at the big systems that got relatively stiffed by the CARES Act. But Republicans

called the bill a “liberal wishlist,” and the GOP-controlled Senate has refused to take it up. Republican leaders are expected to unveil their version of a relief bill as soon as this week. With August recess quickly approaching and plenty of political points on the line, it’s likely that Congress will pass some form of additional relief soon—what such a bill will ultimately include for buses, subways and rail is, at this point, anybody’s guess.

Not everybody is mourning the sorry state of American public transit. Some have long viewed it as a waste of government spending and resources, and say we’re better off letting it die. Transit opponents often point to data showing that national ridership had been slumping since 2014 as evidence that Americans were choosing other forms of transportation even before the pandemic, though the dropoff began to reverse last year.

“We had very strong trends before the pandemic that transit was becoming, outside of New York City, increasingly insignificant and irrelevant in America,” says Randal O’Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. “What the pandemic has done is just underscored that and accelerated that and maybe in some places brought it to a final conclusion.”

But public transit’s defenders have a laundry list of reasons why it ought to be saved: it reduces the number of private vehicles on the road (generally meaning better air quality and less congestion); it results in fewer fatal car wrecks; and, when done well, makes urban mobility more accessible across socio-economic groups. “You can decry what you see as an inefficient system, but I don’t know how you have a functioning economy without people being able to get to their jobs,” says Beth Osborne, director of advocacy group Transportation for America.

For those who don’t rely on mass transit, heated debates over budget cuts, canceled routes and so on seem far afield. But transit is a lifeline for millions of Americans. Take, for example, the nearly half-million Chicago-area residents who live in “transit deserts.” Long before the pandemic, areas like the city’s Far South Side were starved for transit options, making it difficult for residents to get to work and access other essential resources. If Chicago’s CTA winds up reducing service even further because of COVID-related funding issues, advocates say, such a move could disproportionately affect people who’ve already been cut off from the rest of their city.

“If they cut service any more that would be a tragic thing for people who depend on transportation, not just to go to work but just to get to the grocery store,” says Andrea Reed, a transit advocate and co-chair of the Coalition for a Modern Metra Electric, a local advocacy group. “They can’t cut where people are already down and hurting.”

Any cuts in public transit service stand to disproportionately impact non-white Americans, who have already borne the brunt of the pandemic in so many other ways. People of color account for less than 40% of the U.S. population, but make up 60% of transit riders, according to the APTA. Further underscoring non-white Americans’ reliance on public transit, a CityLab analysis published in June found that, during a period at the height of the outbreak in New York, subway ridership dropped substantially more in whiter neighborhoods compared to less-white areas, perhaps because white New Yorkers were more likely to be able to work from home or afford alternate modes of transportation, like Uber rides. Furthermore, public transit has throughout the pandemic offered essential workers of color from doctors and nurses to kitchen staff a reliable way to get to their jobs; 67% of essential workers using transit are non-white, according to an April TransitCenter analysis.

With these disparities in mind, some transit agencies are trying to ensure equitable service amid the pandemic, despite the drain on their resources. Chicago's CTA, for example, has been running at full service since the beginning of the outbreak in an effort to avoid overcrowding. "We had to make very tough operational decisions that were not necessarily in the financial best interests of the CTA, but were necessary because we recognize the importance of the people we were serving," says Carter, the CTA president.

But good intentions don't negate financial realities. "When the CARES Act money runs out, I don't know what the system's going to do," says Stephen Schlickman, former executive director of the Regional Transportation Authority of Northeastern Illinois (RTA) which oversees the CTA. "This pandemic is clearly going to go into next year. The COVID money is expected to maybe stretch into early next year, so what happens after that? It's a big unknown."

Perhaps nowhere is public transit more vital, or the budget crisis more serious, than in New York City. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which oversees the city's subways, busses and commuter rail lines, dwarfs other U.S. transit agencies in size, serving a colossal 40% of the nation's total public transit users. Over the spring, New York City experienced what remains, for now, the worst coronavirus outbreak in the U.S.: more than 226,000 people have tested positive in the five boroughs as of July 20, and nearly 23,000 have died. Ridership in the city plummeted as people stayed home or sought out alternate modes of transportation they perceived to be safer. Furthermore, the city's transit workers were hit particularly badly: more than 4,000 MTA employees have gotten sick so far, and 131 died. "It's like being in a hospital, but without [personal protective equipment]," says MTA subway conductor William Mora, 50, who was out of work for a month with COVID-19; two coworkers he knew died of the virus.

The MTA received the most CARES Act money—\$3.9 billion—of any public transit agency, but it was still shortchanged relative to its size, according to a TransitCenter analysis. The MTA, which anticipates a \$10.3 billion loss through 2021, expects to burn through its CARES Act funds this month; it requested nearly \$4 billion in more federal relief back in April.

"This is just the worst of all possible outcomes if we don't get federal help," says Andrew Albert, chair of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA (PCAC) which represents riders' interests. He cites the possibility of layoffs, service cuts, fare hikes or even abandonment of transit lines. "I just don't want to anticipate what could be happening," Albert says.

The pandemic struck just as the MTA was turning a corner. Subway on-time performance had been deteriorating for years. Safety was becoming an issue, too, underscored by a 2017 subway derailment that left 34 people injured. But just before COVID-19 struck, reliability was improving, with weekday on-time performance hitting 83.3% in January, up from a dismal 58.1% two years prior. A massive \$51.5 billion capital investment plan went into effect at the start of 2020, \$15 billion of which was to be funded by a new congestion pricing plan wherein drivers would be charged when entering the heart of Manhattan. But the pandemic and ensuing chaos has left that plan facing about a year of delays due to holdups over a Federal Highway Administration environmental review. Transit insiders say the New York system now stands to lose its recent progress.

“Right now we’re seeing that the region is coming out of pause, but the MTA is going into pause as relates to its construction program, and that could have even more long-lasting, dire consequences, not just for riders but for the entire economy of the region,” says Lisa Daglian, the PCAC Executive Director.

Public transit’s future is equally uncertain nationwide. While it’s likely many systems will receive at least some federal help, that probably will not be enough to get them off life support, at least until some degree of normality returns. Despite studies that show fears of COVID-19 infection on mass transit could be overblown, it may not be until a vaccine is widely available that riders who have a choice between private and public transportation will feel safe enough to once again pack into buses and subway cars. “People are expected to keep away from each other, and that just doesn’t work out for mass transportation,” says Schlickman, the former Illinois RTA boss.

Some transit advocates see opportunity in this crisis. In an effort to free up badly needed public space for safe enjoyment of the outdoors, many cities across the U.S. and worldwide have closed some streets or entire areas to car traffic. As residents saw first-hand the benefits of having fewer cars around—more space, safer streets, less air and noise pollution—some cities have moved to make those changes permanent. Seattle, for instance, closed 20 miles of streets to most cars in May. Other cities are building or revamping their cycling infrastructure, opening up yet another form of transportation for many residents. “If we use this as an opportunity to do a makeover of our transit systems, our transit funding, and our transit infrastructure itself, we could come out of this exceptionally strong,” says Alex Hudson, executive director of Seattle-based nonprofit Transportation Choices Coalition.

But in general, the mood among transportation officials and advocates is far from cheery. Large systems still await short-term relief, while a gigantic new infrastructure proposal has stalled in a deadlocked Congress. Transit planners have little to go on in guessing when the money, and riders, will return. If transit systems are left to die, some say, their cities will die along with them. “New York city is tied to their transit system,” says Philip Plotch, a professor of political science at Saint Peter’s University and author of *Last Subway: The Long Wait for the Next Train in New York City*. “It’s like if you have a big hundred-story building and the elevators were having a problem.”

Plotch, who served as director of World Trade Center redevelopment and special projects at the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, has watched his city recover from a devastating crisis before, and he’s optimistic it can do so again. “It wasn’t clear in the days after 9/11 if anybody wanted to work in a skyscraper ever again,” he says. “The people who had that sort of dark outlook were totally wrong.” But even if transit systems recover in the long-term, the millions of Americans currently relying on mass transit to get to work are desperate for those buses and trains to keep running.

“We depend on [transit] not just to go to our clients, but to do their grocery shopping, pick up their medicine...go out and pay their bills,” says Williams, the Seattle home care worker. “It’s a very dangerous slope if they take transit away. It’s part of what I would call another signature on the death certificates of thousands of Americans.”