

Despite fewer people riding Metro in Houston, report makes case for more public transit

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Oct. 7, 2021

Transit use sank during the COVID pandemic, but remained a vital lifeline for many residents who said they boarded buses despite their fears to work critical jobs, according to a study released Wednesday.

“Public transit is an indispensable public service,” said Harrison Humphreys, Transportation Program Manager at Air Alliance Houston and lead author of the study, in a statement. “Yet, at the local, state, and federal level, we chronically underfund it.”

Air Alliance, transportation advocacy group LINK Houston and the Robert D. Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University cooperated for the report that examined COVID and public transit in the region.

The findings, authors said, point to more transit investment as a way to keep key employees showing up for work, offer a viable and safe option for travel and reduce pollution all at once.

The report relied on both ridership data and economic information related to where transit-dependent workers are most likely to live, as well as interviews with riders, the Metropolitan Transit Authority and city officials. Based on the feedback and data, authors found Fifth Ward, Third Ward, and Gulfton/Sharpstown showed frequent transit use even as other areas saw buses go empty. The neighborhoods have high concentrations of under-served minority communities and low-income workers.

“We cannot continue to build cities and hope to positively impact the health of our economy and communities without frequently assessing the impacts, deficiencies and user needs,” said Nikki Hawkins-Knight, who conducted some of the interviews. “The transit ecosystem must integrate safety, sanitation, connectivity and overall reliability for it to be a true asset.”

Overall, Metro ridership dropped to about one-eighth normal levels early in the pandemic, leading the agency to drastically scale back bus and train service. With ridership still rebounding, and half that of typical 2019 weekdays, Metro has not fully restored service. The agency also is combating a shortage of drivers and mechanics, as it competes with other employers rebounding from the economic slowdown.

The interviews also confirmed what many riders previously had said: Fear of public spaces, such as buses, prompted them to make other arrangements.

“Most Kashmere Gardens-Greater Fifth Ward participants explained that they stopped using public transportation due to COVID-related safety or cleanliness concerns,” the authors. “One participant mentioned that they had largely switched to using the rideshare service Uber.”

In Sharpstown and Third Ward, many said more safety precautions, including greater enforcement of mask rules and rigorous cleaning of buses could assuage some concerns, but more routine needs also played a role.

“Participants in these two communities also explained that improved service — increased reliability, comfort, accessibility, frequency, and greater range of service — would all encourage them to use public transportation more,” the authors said.

In addition, many noted service reductions by Metro made riding more difficult and trips take longer. Still, many said the service offered was a crucial lifeline.

Advocates in the report argue more investment at the federal and local levels is needed to make sure pre-pandemic service returns to the areas as quickly as possible.

“Metro must continue to restore service and equitably implement its Moving Forward Plan as the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the vital role public transit plays in the economic vitality of our region,” said Ashley Johnson, director of community affairs at LINK Houston and a study co-author.

Upcoming plans to add electric buses to Metro’s fleet also dovetail with rider suggestions in the report.