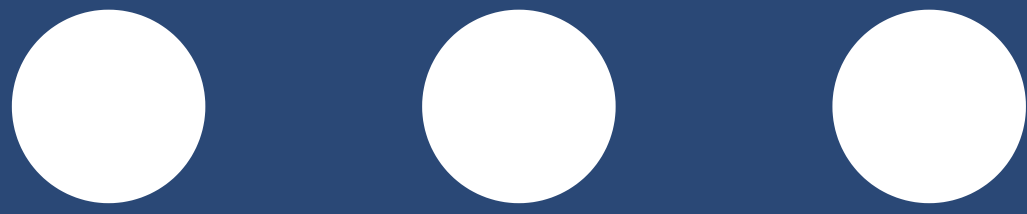


Montgomery County Better Buses Campaign

December 2020



This campaign was created by and has support from the following diverse coalition of community organizations, non-profits, unions members, and more:

- 350 MoCo
- Action Committee for Transit
- Affordable Housing Conference of Montgomery County
- Audubon Naturalist Society
- CASA
- Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church Environmental Justice Ministry
- Coalition for Smarter Growth
- Community Development Network of Maryland
- Glen Echo Heights Mobilization
- Habitat for Humanity Metro Maryland
- Housing Unlimited
- Identity
- Institute for Policy Studies, Climate Policy Program
- Interfaith Works
- League of Women Voters of Montgomery County
- Manna Food Center
- Montgomery County Democratic Socialists of America
- Montgomery County Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions
- Montgomery County Food Council
- Shepherd's Table
- Sierra Club, Montgomery County Group
- Takoma Park Mobilization, Montgomery County
- Transit Alternatives to Midcounty Highway Extended (TAME) Coalition
- The Climate Mobilization
- Progressive Maryland
- UFCW Local 1994 MCGEO
- Washington Area Bicyclists Association
- Young People for Progress

If you'd like to join this campaign,
please reach out to
jane@smartergrowth.net.



Credit: MW Transit Photos, Flickr

OUR GOAL:

We would like Montgomery County to conduct a comprehensive redesign and reimagining of the Ride On and Metrobus systems, with an improvement and investment plan for the next 15 years. Buses are the backbone of a sustainable, equitable transportation system and a thriving local economy. We seek to make buses: 1) the mode of choice, 2) fare-free, and 3) carbon neutral.

In the short-term, we seek a redesign with a budget-neutral option that maintains the same number of public jobs and is created through meaningful community engagement representing riders and their diversity and transit workers' experiences. Over the medium- and long-term, there will need to be increased investment in our bus systems, which will improve opportunities, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and create jobs. We also support regional collaboration, especially between transit providers in Montgomery County, Prince George's County, and the District of Columbia, to create a seamless, easy to use regional bus network.

OUR VALUES:

We value transit equity; frequency; reliability; affordability; environmental sustainability; accessibility; safety; connections to jobs, amenities, transit hubs, and other destinations; and reducing transit travel times. We also value the workers who operate and maintain our transit system, along with the public ownership and management of transit. Workers and riders should be central to the process of reimagining transit and creating a just transition to a healthier, more livable world.

Our platform below includes the priorities we would like to see Ride On and Metrobus embrace with a comprehensive route redesign, as well as other short-, medium-, and long-term improvements reimagining the bus system, to be implemented as quickly as possible over the next 15 years.



Credit: BeyondDC, Flickr

Ride On's routes haven't been redesigned in over 20 years



Credit: Elvert Barnes, Flickr

Together, free fares and frequent service will result in the most ridership gains

1. SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS:

- **Redesign Ride On and Metrobus' Montgomery County routes** with a focus on frequency; equity; safety; reliability; accessibility; connections to jobs, amenities, transit hubs, food access points, service providers, and other destinations; transit improvements in the Upcounty; and reducing transit travel times. This redesign should also consider:
 - how Ride On and Metrobus interact with Flash, Ride On Flex, and other efforts to bridge the first-mile/last-mile challenge;
 - other relevant planning efforts, such as Thrive Montgomery 2050, the Montgomery County Climate Action and Resilience Plan, and the Countywide Transit Corridors Master Plan; and
 - the impacts of climate change, so the system is resilient to unprecedented weather events and other climate-related shocks.
- **Establish interim express service** on all planned bus rapid transit (BRT) corridors.
- **Identify priority service corridors and establish a Bus Prioritization Team** within Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) to pilot and move forward initiatives such as bus-only lanes and transit signal priority, as requested by four councilmembers.
- **Reintroduce stand-by buses permanently and review bus interlining practices.** Stand-by buses help improve reliability by quickly filling in when buses break down or other incidents stop a bus from continuing its route.
- **Introduce all-door boarding** to improve efficiency and travel times.

2. OTHER IMPROVEMENTS:

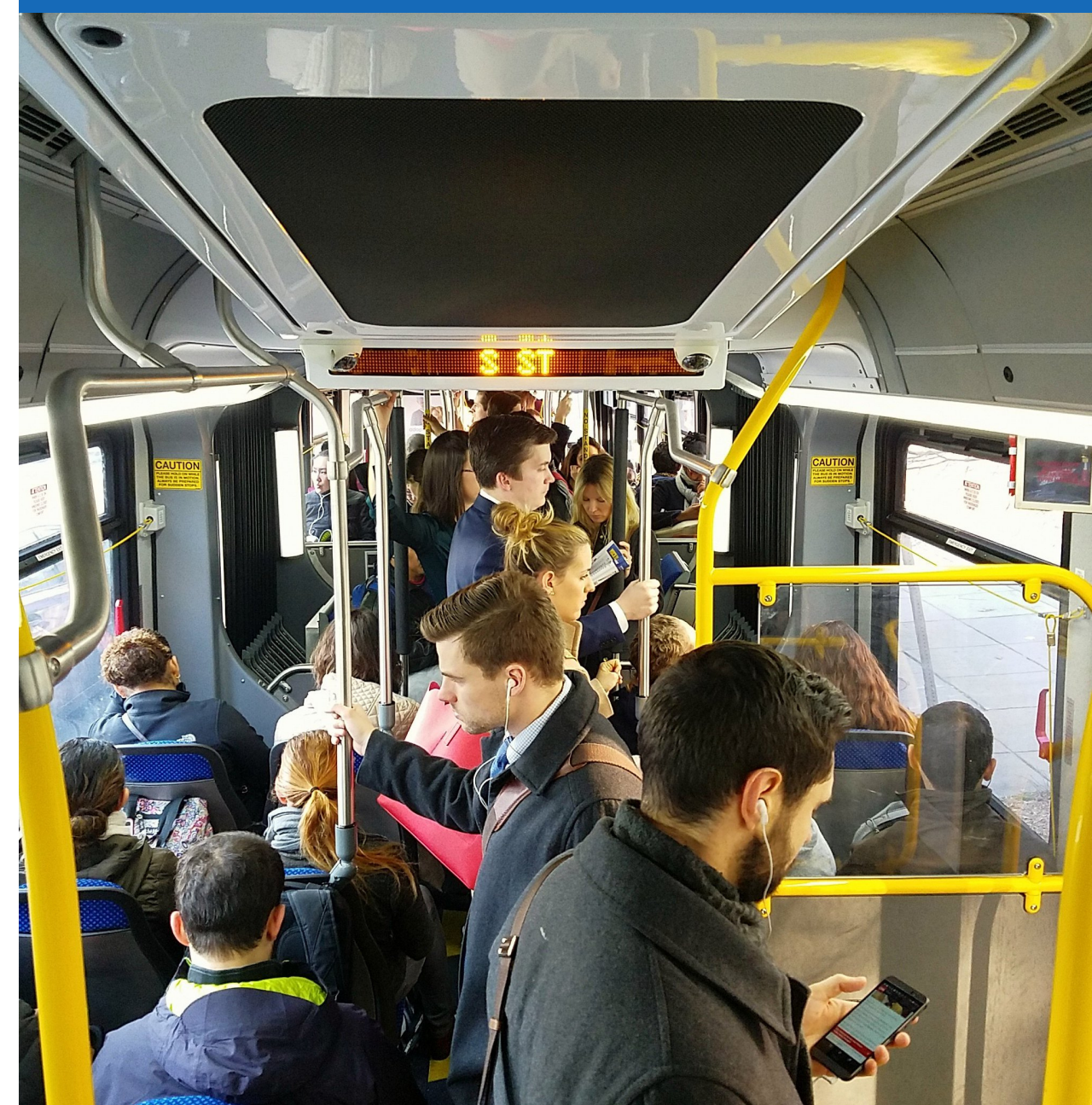
- **Keep Ride On and Metrobus fare-free.**
- **Create and implement an aggressive fleet electrification plan,** in coordination with Montgomery County Public Schools' bus fleet and other county agencies.
- **Upgrade bus stops;** re-evaluate and reimagine bus stop standards, including safety and comfort; and publicly publish the bus stop inventory detailing if criteria are met.
- **Improve pedestrian and bicycle access to bus stops.**
- **Revamp wayfinding** both on and off the bus so that the bus systems are easy to navigate for riders of all abilities. Add Spanish and other frequently spoken languages to all public-facing signs and communications.

2. OTHER IMPROVEMENTS, continued:

- **Collaborate with employers** to offer transit benefits until fares are permanently free and create transit plans.
- **Ensure bus ventilation and cleanliness meet standards to reduce exposure to viruses** for the safety of both riders and operators.

3. IMPLEMENTATION:

- **Create a funding strategy** for Ride On's 15-year improvement plan, based on public investment and continued public ownership and management of the system.
- **Conduct yearly multi-lingual, multi-format rider surveys** to track demographic information, ridership trends, and rider satisfaction and feedback.
- **Increase transparency** by publishing all Ride On reports and data on the county's website and improving data collection capacity.
- **Publish GTFS-Real Time bus data.** This data specification allows public transit agencies to publish transit data in a format friendly to a wide variety of software applications.
- **Reconfirm the county's commitment to keep Ride On jobs public, unionized, and of high quality.** If workers need to transition roles, they will be supported through training and other programs.
- **Improve rider engagement**, including on-bus/street engagement, and center rider feedback for any future route modifications. Provide a stipend for members of the Ride On Transit Advisory Group; select members to achieve geographic, racial, ethnic, and age diversity; include bus operators; and publicly publish the group's members, meeting dates/times, agendas, minutes, and contact information.
- **Publish guidelines** for revising and evaluating revisions to Ride On routes, including prioritization factors and outreach to riders.
- **Create minimum service standards** and performance goals with a scoring system. Present an annual report with performance metrics for each Ride On route and entire system to the County Council, County Executive, and MCDOT Director so that corrective actions can be identified and taken.



Credit: pinelife, Flickr

**Workers and riders
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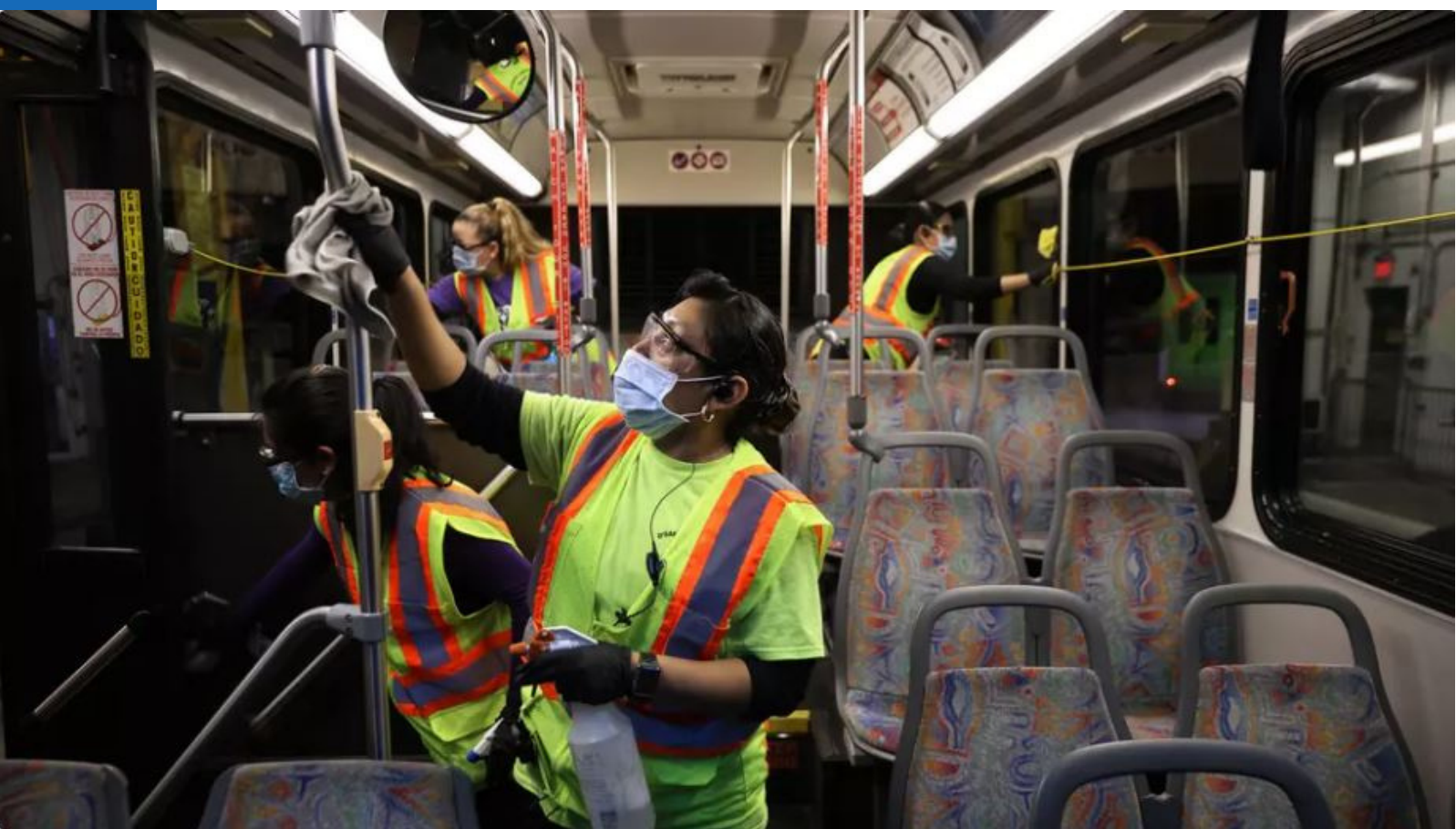


Credit: thisbossi, Flickr

Why is transit important?

Transit is a vital public service. Most bus riders have lower incomes and are people of color, and they deserve the same access to opportunities and amenities as those with private vehicles. That’s not currently the case in Montgomery County, where the average travel time for transit riders is 52 minutes, compared to 19 minutes for auto trips.

COVID-19 has revealed the truly essential nature of public transit, with front-line workers relying on Ride On and Metrobus to get to work. Although transit ridership took a sharp decline, bus ridership was more resilient. Many people continue to ride the bus to get to jobs, child care, food retail, and county services, but are met with long waits, inconvenient routes, and unreliable service. After the pandemic has subdued, we need to rebuild widespread trust in public transit by making it easier and safer for everyone to use.



Credit: CBS Baltimore

We also need to make sure that budget cuts don’t send transit into a “death spiral” where routes get cut away one-by-one and service slowly declines. Instead, let’s use every transit dollar as effectively as possible and plan for our future. Montgomery has an opportunity to “reopen” the transportation network in a way that furthers racial, environmental, and socioeconomic justice, as well as aids in our economic recovery. We don’t have to go back to the same congestion, dangerous roadways, and air pollution.

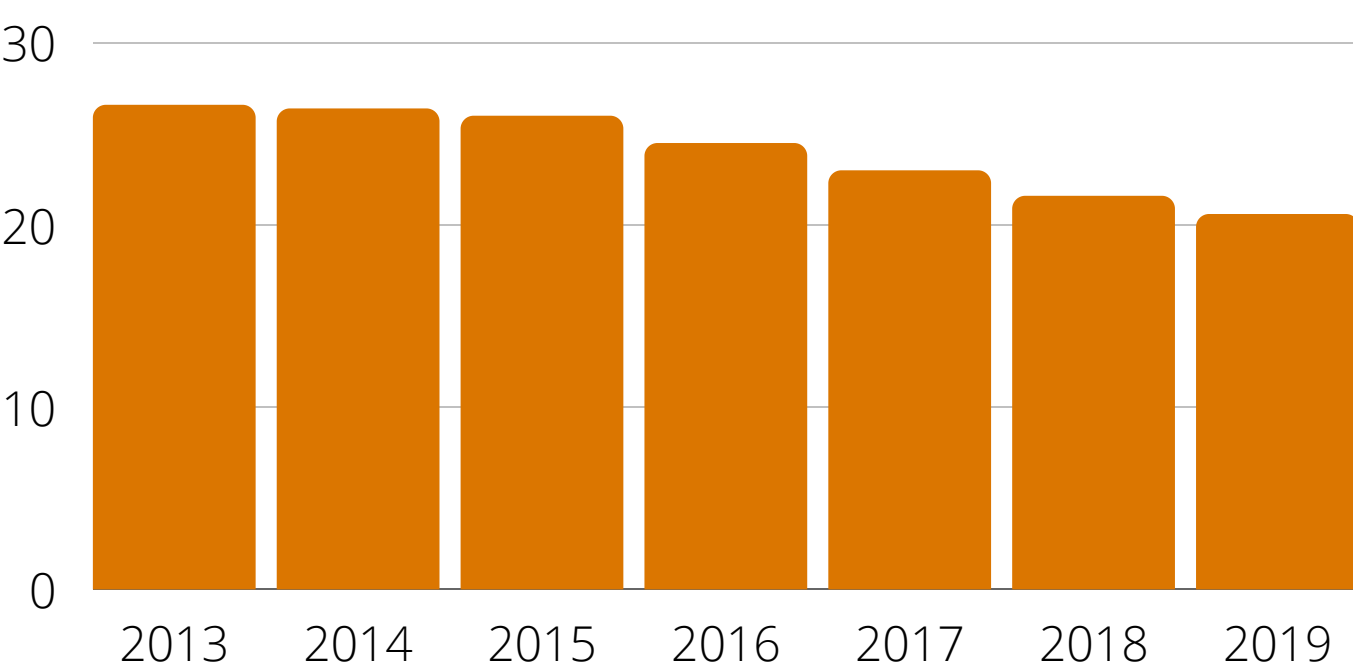
Why now?

Montgomery County’s Ride On system is the largest suburban transportation system in the United States, with an average daily ridership of 85,000 and over 80 routes. The system has not been comprehensively redesigned in over 20 years, but a lot has changed about where and how people live and work.

Buses are our best bet for better, greener, more equitable transportation

There is also a need to improve collaboration with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), the operator of Metrobus, to create the strongest local and regional bus system possible. In 2019, there were over 11 million total boardings on Metrobus in Montgomery County. Metrobus is a critical component of Montgomery’s transit network.

The past decades have brought and upcoming years will bring further changes to our transportation system, like micromobility, the Flash BRT, and the Purple Line. Ride On needs to work together with other modes of transportation so that people can easily get where they need to go. The county also has a rapidly aging population, who will need to be able to move around without relying on a private vehicle.



Ride On Ridership (Annual Unlinked Trips, in millions)
Source: National Transit Database

But this is about more than just transportation — it's about improving quality of life for all Montgomery residents. We believe that our platform will result in ridership, climate, congestion, equity, and economic gains.

Nearly 80% of bus riders in Montgomery are people of color

- **Equity:** Bus riders in Montgomery County are overwhelmingly lower income, without a car, have limited English proficiency, and nearly 80% are people of color. Almost half of riders have an annual household income under \$30,000. Transportation is crucial to escaping poverty; research has found that areas with low average commute times have the highest social mobility. Any improvement in transit service or reduction in fares overwhelmingly benefits vulnerable populations and the working class.
- **Environment:** Getting more people to use transit takes cars off the road, which is essential for our greenhouse gas emissions goals, to reduce congestion, and improve public health through better air quality and less dangerous roadways. Electrifying the fleet is also key to building a carbon neutral county by 2035.
- **Economy:** Transit connects workers with jobs and customers with businesses. However, only 134,000 jobs are accessible within 45 minutes by transit in Montgomery, while over a million jobs are accessible in the same time frame by car. During a recession, fewer people will be able to afford private vehicles, but we still need to make sure people can get to work.



Why go fare-free?

Ride On is likely to hit a sweet spot of being able to cover the cost of fares and provide a level of service that attracts new riders. This has been shown with existing free or reduced fare programs in Montgomery County, including for students, seniors, and people with disabilities, as well as in other jurisdictions.

The Kids Ride Free program was a huge success, creating a 57% increase in student ridership and a 51% increase in students on Metrobuses in only six months. Further, ending fare collections would speed up trips by reducing boarding times and making rear doors available for boarding, and it would allow bus operators to focus on safe driving.

The system's annual farebox collection is about \$20 million, which covers less than 20% of operating costs. However, collecting those fares has cost over \$21 million since 2017, due to a replacement of fare instruments. Let's get \$20 million out of the farebox and back into the local economy.

Let's put \$20 million back into the local economy

In conclusion:

We believe that buses are our best bet for better, more equitable, greener transportation. To get there, transit must be attractive, easy, affordable, frequent, reliable, fast, and safe.

