Seizing the Opportunity: Making the Queens Bus Redesign Successful

Analysis and Recommendations

March 2020
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Who We Are
Riders Alliance, Tri-State Transportation Campaign, and Straphangers have worked to improve NYC buses together for over three years. Together, we represent thousands of riders across the city.

Preparation of this Document
Our organizations engaged a wide body of stakeholders in the preparation of this document. Over 200 Queens bus riders were consulted, through 1-1 conversations, an online survey, and in meetings. In addition, the coalition engaged over a dozen Queens elected officials and multiple community-based organizations, unions, and transit experts throughout the borough and city. We would like to thank everyone who gave their feedback to this analysis, and believe it is stronger as a result.

The Problem: Queens Buses are Slow and Unreliable
Every weekday in Queens, riders make nearly 700,000 bus trips to get to work, school and appointments. Despite how critical buses are in riders’ lives, service is often too slow, too unreliable, and too infrequent to adequately meet riders’ needs. Our bus network needs a redesign. Some additional facts:

- NYC buses are the slowest of any big city in the country, and Queens buses move at an average speed of 8.7 mph;
- Queens buses are infrequent. In the current network, only 10 of 97 local bus routes have a frequency of 8 minutes or better during midday hours;
- Queens buses are out of date. Many follow old trolley and private bus company lines, and do not provide sufficient connectivity within the borough or to Brooklyn and the Bronx;
- Currently, the average time per ride in Queens is 50.8 minutes.

When buses are slow, riders are disconnected from the potential and promise of the city. Bus riders are more likely to be low-income, immigrant, senior, and disabled than the population as a whole. This means that when bus service suffers, we exclude the very people we as a city want to support. And it means faster buses create a fairer city.

The Promise: A Network Redesign
Redrawing the bus map is an opportunity to improve service and invest in our bus infrastructure. Given that the MTA has not undertaken an effort of this type in over a generation, we must take advantage of the opportunity.

This document outlines our reactions to the MTA’s first draft of the redesign. It highlights successes in the first draft, the principles that we bring to an analysis of the redesign, and specific recommendations we believe the MTA and our elected leaders at the state and city level must take in order to make this effort successful.
**The MTA's First Draft**

Every bus network redesign should be judged according to how it improves service for riders. Do the changes improve bus riders' lives, and therefore make the city a fairer place?

The MTA released its first draft of the Queens bus redesign at the end of 2019. Since then, the agency has done a number of forums and town halls and has aggressively solicited feedback from riders and other stakeholders. The initial roll-out was flawed and created unnecessary confusion, but the MTA has since made itself open for feedback and proactively engaged with thousands of people to share their plan and discuss its implications across Queens. It is now incumbent on the MTA to take the feedback and make concrete adjustments to respond to stakeholders. We hope the MTA will continue this type of proactive engagement and solicitation in the next rounds of this redesign, and in future redesigns in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

The Draft Queens Redesign is ambitious. It takes a clean slate approach to the decades-old bus network. We believe it improves service for riders in the following ways:

- The plan creates new routes and a more grid-like service pattern, allowing riders to reach more destinations in less time;
- The MTA plan combines duplicative, complex service patterns into simpler routes, which should enable more frequent service and shorter waits;
- The plan redesigns some meandering routes as straighter, more direct routes, saving time and improving reliability;
- The plan consolidates bus stops so riders spend more time in motion and less time standing still, speeding up trips;
- The plan creates interborough connections linking riders to jobs and new destinations:
  - Bronx to LGA (QT50)
  - Jackson Heights to Brooklyn (QT4)
  - Southeast Queens to Gateway Mall in Brooklyn (QT7)
  - Astoria to Downtown Brooklyn (QT1)
- The plan clearly designs routes to achieve specific purposes: local neighborhood service, high-capacity service in areas of high demand, long-distance service connecting to major destinations, and fast connections to the subway;

What follows are the Bus Turnaround Coalition's core principles concerning redesigns, and our specific recommendations to make the undertaking successful.
Principles:

1. Invest in the Bus Network
2. Equitable Service
3. Increased Frequency
4. Optimizing Routes
5. Better Stop Amenities
6. Better Connections
7. Better Communication

Principle #1: Invest in the Bus Network

The current Queens draft plan is presented as a cost-neutral proposal, meaning no additional investment will be added. As context, the MTA is expected to have a half-billion dollar operating budget deficit by 2022.

A redesign is the perfect time to invest in the bus network to increase routes and service. Otherwise, the effort risks being seen as code for service reductions. In order for bus riders in Queens to see substantial improvements in new routes and frequency, both Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio must commit additional operating funds to run more bus service. Unlike other boroughs, Queens buses are run by two different agencies, New York City Transit (NYCT) and MTA Bus which impacts funding and the consistency in service across the borough. NYCT is funded by the Governor Cuomo and NYS, while MTA Bus relies on City funding. In order to provide 700,000 bus riders with reliable and more frequent bus service we need leadership from our elected officials in Albany and City Hall.

Recommendations:

- Governor and the State Legislature should increase funding for bus service in the 2020 state budget in order to meet the frequency goals outlined below;
- Mayor de Blasio and City Council should increase funding for bus service in the 2020 city budget in order to meet the frequency goals outlined below;
- Governor Cuomo should invest in transit options that are adjacent to the bus, which when coupled together will help unlock the city for riders in Queens. Such programs could include additional LIRR discounts for rides within NYC.
- Express bus service MetroCard should be integrated with the monthly local bus and subway pass and end the need for separate pass;

Principle #2: Equitable Service

In Queens, 86% of all bus riders in the borough are people of color, 62% of all bus riders are immigrants and on average the median income of riders is $28,000. Because people of color and people with low-incomes are more likely to depend on the bus, improving the bus network means making the city more equitable. In addition, when bus trips are long, they take away valuable time
from riders. However, the MTA should pay explicit additional attention to ensuring the network redesign addresses equity.

Recommendations:
- The MTA should provide additional service to low-income neighborhoods in Queens. According to HUD, a 4-person household is considered low-income if they make an average salary of $31,300. The MTA should prioritize service improvements for low-income neighborhoods in Queens, including Far Rockaway, Rockaway Beach, Flushing, Ridgewood, Corona, Jamaica, East Elmhurst, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, Murray Hill, Hillcrest, Jamaica Hills, Rego Park;
- The MTA should maintain high frequency for routes serving low-income subway deserts where the bus is a critical lifeline to opportunity, even where the routes do not have high ridership;
- The MTA should ensure that all 22 NYCHA developments in Queens have access to bus service with frequencies as outlined below;
- The MTA should maintain or add routes that serve job centers, prioritizing sites with high numbers of hourly workers like JFK, LGA, malls, hospitals, senior centers and universities;
- The MTA should set a goal of reducing the time riders spend on the bus by 15%

Principle #3: Increased Frequency

The redesign of the network is a perfect opportunity to add service and reduce the amount of time riders wait for a bus. The Governor and the State Legislature should fund the MTA to increase frequencies on weekends, during midday hours, and overnight, to better meet the needs of riders. The redesign should not be a cost-neutral endeavor. Increased frequency will bring more riders to buses who know they run more often and will improve the lives of current riders.

Recommendations:
- The MTA should increase frequency on bus routes that serve over 10,000 daily bus riders to 10 minutes or better during the day (5am-11pm);
- The MTA should increase frequency on buses that operate overnight to frequencies of 20 minutes or better (11pm-5am);
- The MTA should operate buses 24/7 to both JFK and LGA airports.

Principle #4: Optimizing Routes

Given that buses spend 20% of their time at stops, reducing the overall number of stops can dramatically speed trips for riders. Balanced bus stop spacing decreases the number of times a bus must exit and re-enter traffic along its route. The Bus Turnaround Coalition supports an average stop spacing of 1,300 feet, a metric this redesign plan meets. At the same time, the MTA should have a clear rationale for which stops are removed and why, ensuring that the redesign doesn’t make it harder for riders to reach key destinations. In addition, routes can be optimized by straightening circuitous ones and ensuring a more direct route, when possible.
Recommendations:

- The MTA should ensure bus stops serve as major transfer points to accessible subway stops with elevators, schools, universities, large employment centers, NYCHA and hospitals;
- The MTA should not eliminate or significantly alter bus stops directly outside large institutions with substantial amounts of riders, such as middle and high schools, churches, and hospitals.

**Principle #5: Improving Stop Amenities**

Bus stop balancing will sometimes result in a longer walk for riders, so it’s important to make sure riders are as safe and protected as possible when they do reach the stop. Bus riders wait in the rain, snow, sun, heat and cold for buses. Having a bus shelter can be a saving grace for many riders and substantially improve their quality of life.

**Recommendations:**

- Mayor de Blasio should commit to adding bus stop amenities like shelters, benches, countdown clocks, improved lighting, borough maps, enhancing curb cuts and crosswalks for at least 1,500 bus stops in Queens.

**Principle #6: Better Connections**

An effective redesign should expand where people can travel to and simplify the network to make it easier to get around. This is true both within Queens as well as between Queens and other boroughs. In addition, this does not mean simply adding more connecting routes. It also means having a transfer policy that does not penalize the people who must make multiple transfers.

**Recommendations:**

- Add more direct North to South buses to connect Southeast Queens with Northeast Queens
- Prioritize bus connections to accessible subway stations, major train hubs and commuter rail stations including the Bayside, Rosedale, Laurelton and St. Albans;
- Provide direct routes into JFK airport and cargo areas
- Facilitate intra-borough and connectivity to other neighborhoods in the borough;
- Add more local bus routes that connect into Manhattan, express bus routes should not be the only option because it's high cost can be a barrier to many;
- Subway deserts in Northeast and Southeast Queens should have access to frequent service beyond the rush hour time-frame;
- While a redesign will have many positive aspects, some changes may result in the need for additional transfers. Riders should not have to pay double for a trip just because they have to transfer. Governor Cuomo change fare policy to unlimited transfers within a 2-hour period, regardless of whether a rider pays with a MetroCard or OMNY;

**Principle #7: Better Communication with Riders:**
Given the diversity of communities in Queens, the MTA should create simple and digestible information for riders in multiple languages and using multiple mediums (videos, infographics, etc.) to better explain the benefits and changes the redesign will bring to riders. In addition, the MTA should proactively reach out to a variety of communities in Queens through community leaders, ethnic media, schools, and other methods.

**Recommendations:**

- The MTA should better communicate benefits and rationale for proposed changes. Include sharing data;
- MTA promotional literature should be available in all languages covered under the NYS language access Executive Order 26 (Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Russian, Bengali, Korean);
- The MTA should prioritize harder-to-reach communities, such as non-English speakers, immigrants, the disabled community, the elderly, and low-income people with specific outreach activities.