Fast and Free

How Better Buses Can Lower Costs and Cut Emissions Across the United States

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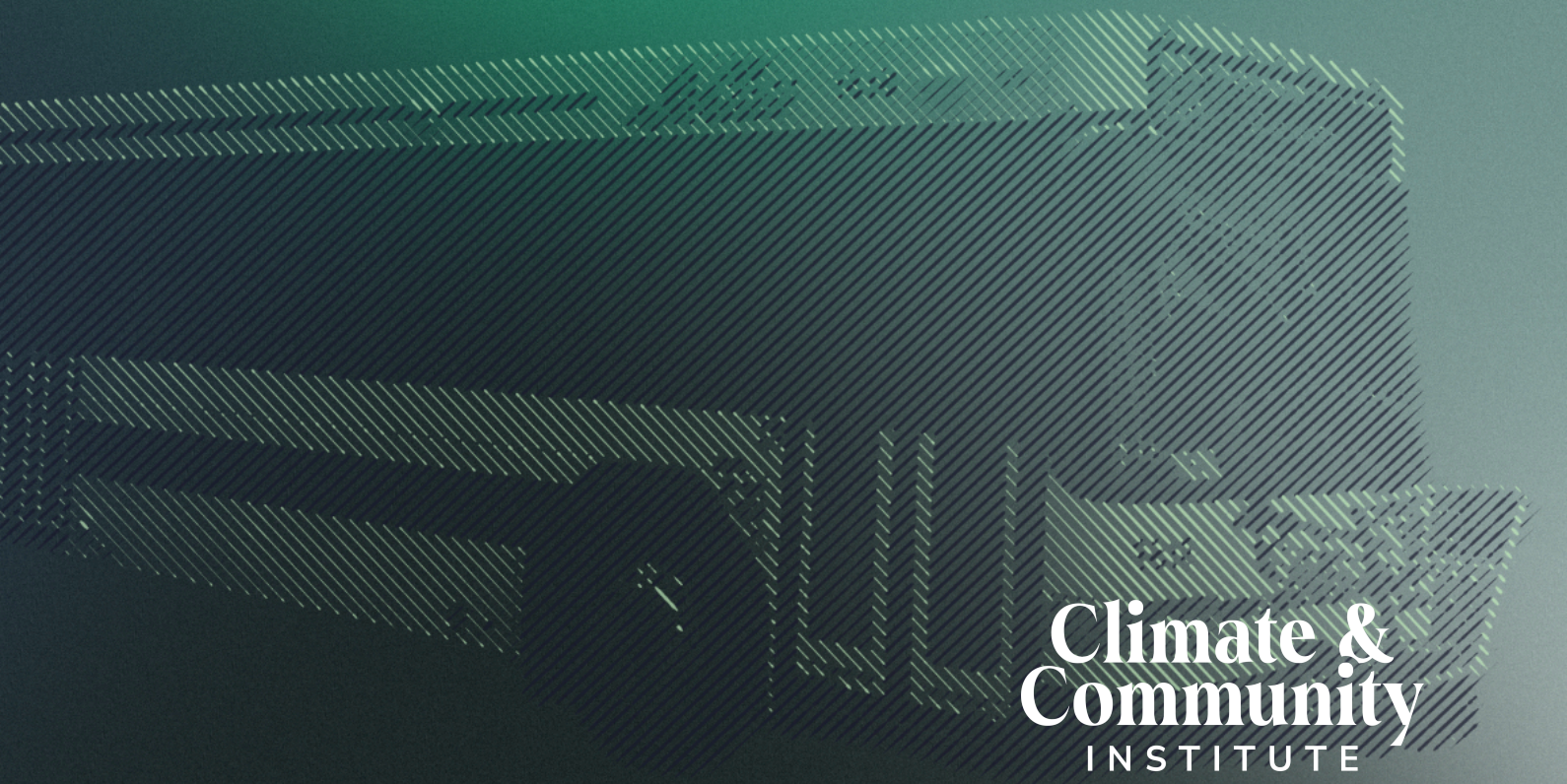

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The Climate and Community Institute (CCI) is a progressive climate and economy think tank. Our growing staff and network of over 60 academic and expert fellows create and mobilize cutting-edge research at the nexus of inequality and the climate crisis. We fight for a transformational agenda that will rapidly and equitably decarbonize the economy by focusing on material benefits for working people.

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Suggested citation
Emmett Hopkins, John Stehlin, and Lucy Block, "How Better Buses Can Lower Costs and Cut Emissions Across the United States," Climate and Community Institute, May 2026, https://stopgreedbuildgreen.climateandcommunity.org/posts/fast-and-free.

Acknowledgements
The authors wish to thank the following people for generously providing valuable information and consultation during the writing of this report. Climate and Community Institute staff and fellows: Rithika Ramamurthy, Patrick Bigger, Timi Koyejo, Yonah Freemark, and Kira McDonald. Additional reviewers: Danny Pearlstein, Rider's Alliance; Abby Griffith, Bus Riders Unite; Carter Lavin, Transbay Coalition. Our gratitude also extends to Will Fraser for copy editing.

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Executive summary

Zohran Mamdani's proposal to speed up New York City's buses and make them fare-free provoked excitement and debate during his campaign for mayor of New York City. However, New York City is not the only place where there is political momentum for better public transit: municipalities all over the United States—from Iowa City to Birmingham—have already been eliminating fares for all riders and making strategic improvements to speed up bus service.

Buses are the anchor of the public transit landscape in the United States, particularly outside of the largest cities. Across the country, about half of all public transit trips are made on buses. **Fast and free buses provide expedited travel and lower costs to the multiracial working class who either rely on transit or struggle to cover the cost of car ownership,** including fuel, repairs, and insurance.

With the potential to deliver quickly for working families while investing in high-quality public goods and cutting carbon pollution, fast and free buses reflect core pillars from Climate and Community Institute's "Stop Greed, Build Green" agenda, which advances a "Green Economic Populist" policy framework.[1]

Fast and free buses are cost-effective and feasible

Since the 1970s, US cities have successfully experimented with speeding up buses by separating them from car traffic to make them function more like rail. Common strategies include:

- **Traffic signal priority,** which allows buses to trigger green lights along their routes, can singlehandedly decrease travel

[1] Climate and Community Institute, "Stop Greed, Build Green: A Working Class Climate Agenda," April 2026, https://stopgreedbuildgreen.climateandcommunity.org/posts/agenda.

times by up to 12 percent.[2] The cost for installing signal priority hardware is $10,000 to $20,000 per signal.[3]

- **Dedicated bus lanes,** which give buses their own travel space apart from cars, can decrease travel times by 25 to 45 percent.[4] The basic cost for converting a traffic lane to a painted dedicated bus lane is about $100,000 to $200,000 per mile.[5]

- **Bus rapid transit (BRT)**, which typically combines dedicated bus lanes, signal priority, and features to speed the boarding process—can reduce travel times by as much as 55 percent.[6] BRT projects can cost $1 million to $29 million per route mile, and have been implemented in US cities such as Cleveland, El Paso, Grand Rapids, Miami, Omaha, Richmond (VA), and San Francisco.[7]

Even before the recent wave of fare-free public transit (FFPT), a wide range of cities were also demonstrating the feasibility and popularity of free bus service. Considerations include:

- **The revenue foregone when switching to fare-free is often low and can be covered by other sources,** including city and agency budgets, local taxes, or grants. The average percent of

[2] "Transit Priority Toolkit: Key Messages and Evaluation Methods," Nelson\Nygaard, Presentation to American Cities Climate Challenge Transit Priority Working Group, May 2021, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.nelsonnygaard.com/ideas/nrdc-transit-priority-toolkit.

[3] US Department of Transportation, Intelligent Transportation Systems Joint Program Office, "In Los Angeles, California, Transit Signal Priority for BRT Cost Approximately $20,000 per Intersection, or $100,000 per Mile," *ITS Deployment Evaluation*, September 9, 2008, accessed May 14, 2026, https://www.itskrs.its.dot.gov/2008-sc00156; US Department of Transportation, Intelligent Transportation Systems Joint Program Office, "The Average Installation Cost per Intersection of an Adaptive Traffic Control System (ATCS) is $65,000," *ITS Deployment Evaluation*, January 12, 2012, accessed May 14, 2026, https://www.itskrs.its.dot.gov/2012-sc00249; Baruch Feigenbaum, "Bus Rapid Transit Systems Need to Use Transit Signal Priority," Reason Foundation, May 20, 2022, https://reason.org/commentary/bus-rapid-transit-systems-need-to-use-transit-signal-priority/; National Association of City Transportation Officials, "Move! That! Bus! Tactic for Transforming Transit in Two Years," accessed January 1, 2026, https://nacto.org/publication/move-that-bus/, 33.

[4] "Transit Priority Toolkit," Nelson\Nygaard; Transportation Research Board, *Transit Capacity and Quality of Service Manual, 3rd ed. (TCRP Report 165)* (Washington, DC: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2013), https://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp_rpt_165fm.pdf, 6-39; "Prioritizing Bus Priority: Finding the Right Place to Put Buses First," Swiftly, January 13, 2020, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.goswift.ly/blog/prioritizing-bus-priority-finding-the-right-place-to-put-buses-first.

[5] John Gahbauer and Juan Matute, "Best Practices in Implementing Tactical Transit Lanes," UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies, February 2019, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1tj0974b; "Dedicated Bus Lane Projects," Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization, April 25, 2019, https://www.ctps.org/data/calendar/pdfs/2019/RTAC_0508_Dedicated_Bus_Lane_Program.pdf; Jonathan Maus, "Portland's Cheap and Easy Bus Lane Projects are Working Well," *BikePortland*, November 26, 2019, https://bikeportland.org/2019/11/26/portlands-cheap-and-easy-bus-lane-projects-are-working-quite-well-308032; National Association of City Transportation Officials, "Move! That! Bus!," 28.

[6] Time savings range from 25 percent (Boston) and 37 percent (Las Vegas) to 49 percent (Honolulu) and 55 percent (Pittsburgh). See Federal Transit Administration, "Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Brochure," accessed February 4, 2026, https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/BRTBrochure.pdf; International Association of Public Transport, "50 Years of BRT: 5 Advantages of BRT Buses," UITP, November 5, 2024, https://www.uitp.org/news/5-advantages-of-brt-buses/.

[7] Centre of Excellence for BRT and EMBARQ, *Global BRTData*, accessed February 3, 2026, https://brtdata.org/.

operating expenses covered by fares across all US transit agencies in 2024 was just 13 percent.[8]

- **Fare collection and enforcement are also themselves expensive.** In 2020, Intercity Transit in Olympia, WA found that the $1 million cost of upgrading fare collection systems would cost more than the fares they collected. The city went fare-free instead.[9]
- **Transit agencies' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic showed that FFPT can be rapidly implemented.** Hundreds of transit agencies across the country quickly and completely eliminated fares. By June 2020, 259 transit agencies were operating fare-free.[10]
- **Even as other popular pandemic-era social programs expired in 2022, many agencies that eliminated fares during or after the pandemic have kept their systems fare-free due to broad social, environmental, and economic benefits.** The City Council in Iowa City, for example, voted in 2025 to extend a two-year pilot and pay for it with a 1 percent increase in utility taxes and an increase in public parking fees.
- **State governments, such as Virginia and Colorado, have recognized the value of FFPT as well,** stepping in to support fare-free operations through grant programs once federal pandemic relief funds expired.

[8] Justin Tyndall, "Fare-Free Transit in the United States: Effects on Ridership, Service, and Finances," working paper (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2025), https://www.justintyndall.com/Tyndall_farefree.pdf, 1.

[9] Abby Spegman, "IT Board Approves Fare-Free Bus Rides Starting Jan. 1," The Olympian, December 6, 2019, https://www.theolympian.com/news/local/article238068489.html.

[10] Wojciech Kębłowski, "No Fare, No Fear? Exploring the Rationales and Actors behind the Rise of Fare-Free Public Transport during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States," *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives* 34 (November 2025): 101624, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2025.101624.

Fast and free buses deliver tangible benefits:

Getting more people where they need to go more quickly and comfortably

	FAST	FREE
Getting more people where they need to go more quickly, keeping people better connected to housing, health care, school, work, groceries, recreation, and loved ones	In Grand Rapids, the Silver Line BRT reduced travel time from 45 minutes to 27 minutes and increased ridership by 34–40%.[11]	Eliminating fare collection can reduce the time a bus spends at a given stop.[12] In Boston, free routes saw dwell times decline by 20 percent.[13]
Improving quality of life for existing riders by enabling people to fulfill needs while also enjoying nearby opportunities, social ties, and leisure	After an Oakland route gave buses signal priority, riders reported saving 15 minutes per trip, which could translate into 10 hours per month—time that could be used for earning wages, spending time with family, running errands, or leisure time.[14]	A pilot study in Washington, DC found that riders who did not pay fares took four times as many trips, experienced lower transportation insecurity, and scored higher on an overall well-being index.[15]

Saving people money

Reducing expenses for both current and new bus riders by saving current riders time and money, while also giving car drivers a viable alternative to spending hundreds of dollars per month on vehicle ownership, operation, and maintenance costs	A Grand Rapids BRT rider cited cost as a reason she was riding the Silver Line instead of driving her Ford F150 truck to work: ". . . it's forty dollars for me to do unlimited rides for the month, and it was costing forty a week in gas. So it's a no-brainer for me."[16]	In Richmond, VA, a survey of riders revealed that more than half spent at least $50 per month on fares prior to FFPT. Once that cost was eliminated, most people spent these savings on food and rent.[17]

[11] Ybette Ochoa, "Breaking Down Bus Rapid Transit Lane Options," CDM Smith, accessed April 28 2026, https://www.cdmsmith.com/resources/insights/breaking-down-bus-rapid-transit-lane-options.

[12] Tyndall, "Fare-Free Transit in the United States."

[13] City of Boston, *Fare Free Program: Mid Program Report* (Boston, 2023), https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2023/03/Fare%20Free%20Mid%20Program%20Report.pdf, 24.

[14] Cheryl Thole and Alasdair Cain, *The San Pablo Rapid BRT Project Evaluation, Final Report* (Tampa, FL: National Bus Rapid Transit Institute, Center for Urban Transportation Research, University of South Florida, June 2006), accessed March 22, 2026, https://nbrti.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/San-Pablo-Rapid-Evaluation_Final-Report_June-2006.pdf.

[15] Alyssa Huberts, Roxanne Oroxom, Kayleigh B. Campbell, Katherine N. Gan, Danielle Moore, and Sam Quinney, "Do Free and Discounted Fares Increase Transit Use, Well-being, and Employment for Low-Income Residents? Evidence from a Pilot Program in Washington, DC," The Lab @ DC, August 26, 2025, accessed March 22, 2026, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d2361aa11fed60001f7ab3a/t/68fb86d6e8a6182240e818b7/1761314682571/LIFT-Report-August-2025.pdf.

[16] WOOD TV8, "Silver Line One Year Later: Success?" YouTube video, August 25, 2015, accessed March 21, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FibP4sM_aAY.

[17] Faith Walker, "Free to Move: The Role of Zero-Fare Transit in Advancing Health and Justice in Richmond," RVA Rapid Transit, March 2025, https://vcnva.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/RVA-Rapid-Transit-Report-Free-to-Move-The-Role-of-Zero-Fare-Transit-in-Advancing-Health-and-Justice-in-Richmond.pdf, 16.

	FAST	FREE
Reducing overpayment by unbanked riders (riders without a checking or savings account)		Many transit agencies have implemented a daily maximum fare for transit card users, but riders paying cash may inadvertently exceed this cap. A study of transit users in Ohio found over 15 percent were unbanked.[18]
Stimulating local economies	According to Omaha Metro Transit's CEO, "In 2020 and 2021 there were over $500 million in permits for new development and redevelopment" issued along Omaha's new BRT corridor.[19]	A study of Kansas City's zero-fare implementation estimated the program generated up to $13.6 million in added local economic output.[20]
Improving safety and comfort on city streets and public vehicles		
Improving safety and comfort on city streets and public vehicles	San Francisco included safety features in its Van Ness rapid bus route and saw a 54 percent reduction in traffic injuries along the corridor.[21]	Level boarding, without payment, can improve the travel experience for many bus users, in particular people with disabilities.
Improving working conditions for bus drivers		"Reduction in disputes over fares" was listed by Denver's Regional Transportation District drivers as the top benefit of the zero-fare pilot.[22]
Reducing carbon emissions and improving air quality by getting more people out of cars		
Reducing the number of cars on city streets, which reduces greenhouse gas emissions, improves local air quality, and reduces the risk of asthma, lung	A 2003 route upgrade in Oakland, which gave buses priority on 96 traffic signals over 12 miles, reduced annual vehicle miles traveled by as much as 1.6 million, greenhouse gas emissions by 566 metric tons, and collective	Iowa City's fare-free buses led to ridership increases and an estimated reduction of 1.8 million vehicle miles traveled in the city, eliminating nearly 800 tons of carbon dioxide.[24]

[18] Samuel Owusu-Agyemang, Robert A. Simons, Mark Henning, and Katherine Conrad, "Travel Behavior of Unbanked, Underbanked, and Ultra-Low-Income Transit Riders in Ohio under Covid-19," *Journal of Public Transportation* 25 (January 2023): 100059, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubtr.2023.100059.

[19] Regional Metropolitan Transit Authority of Omaha, "Metro Awarded $15 Million TIGER Grant for BRT System," *Metro Transit Press Releases*, September 15, 2014, accessed April 15, 2026, https://www.ometro.com/press-releases/metro-awarded-15-million-tiger-grant-for-brt-system/.

[20] Mid-America Regional Council, "Transit Zero-Fare Impact Analysis," April 2022, https://www.marc.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Transit-Zero-Fare-Impact-Analysis.pdf.

[21] City and County of San Francisco, "San Francisco's First Bus Rapid Transit Project Receives Internationally Recognized Designation," *SF.gov*, press release, September 3, 2024, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.sf.gov/news—san-franciscos-first-bus-rapid-transit-project-receives-internationally-recognized-designation.

[22] Denver Regional Transportation District, "Zero Fare for Better Air 2023 Evaluation Report," 2023, https://cdn.rtd-denver.com/image/upload/v1701363542/2023_ZFBA_Evaluation_Report_2023.11.27_54_mukmbl.pdf, 19.

[24] Cara Buckley, and Annick Sjobakken, "Iowa City Made Its Buses Free. Traffic Cleared, and So Did the Air.," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/18/climate/iowa-city-free-buses.html.

cancer, and other respiratory illnesses	annual driving expenses by more than $1 million.[23]	
Anchoring transit-oriented development (TOD) as part of a holistic model of urban decarbonization that centers walkable, bikeable, and wheelchair-accessible neighborhoods	Within two years after Birmingham's 10-mile BRT line opened in 2022, ridership had increased by 194 percent above the system's baseline post-pandemic recovery.[25] The county is taking advantage of the new public resource by developing affordable housing and mixed-use spaces on property owned by the transit agency along the BRT line.[26]	

Fast and free: stronger together

Improving bus speeds and eliminating fares can work in concert to deliver greater benefits. While the practical constraints of agency budgets and city politics can force transit planners into difficult decisions between fast and free, it is also true that planners, city staff, and policymakers can collaborate to find creative solutions. That said, an enormous overall expansion of transit funding is still needed to fully fund transformative changes that would include increased operating funds to run more buses over more routes and longer time periods.[27] Such a commitment of funds—most likely from the federal government—would allow every city to offer fast, free, and frequent buses without compromise.

[23] Authors' calculations based on Cheryl Thole and Alasdair Cain, *The San Pablo Rapid BRT Project Evaluation, Final Report*. See FN 135 for more details.

[25] Olivia Gauthier, "Growth, Speed, Convenience: $14M for Public Transportation in Jefferson County," *ABC 33/40*, November 1, 2024, accessed March 22, 2026, https://abc3340.com/news/local/growth-speed-convenience-the-future-of-public-transportation-in-jefferson-county-birmingham-bus-train-public-safety-community-growth-and-development-economic. Ridership on the route increased 207 percent from 2022 to 2024. To account for post-COVID-19 ridership recovery that transit systems have been experiencing universally, we can compare the 207 percent increase to the Birmingham transit system's overall ridership increase of 13 percent over the same period (as calculated by the authors using the FTA transit agency profile 2022–2024 to arrive at a 194 percent increase over the baseline).

[26] Gauthier, "Growth, Speed, Convenience."

[27] "World-Class American Transit," Transportation for America, January 14, 2026, accessed March 22, 2026, https://t4america.org/resource/world-class-transit/.

Strategies for unlocking fast and free service

In the meantime, states and cities can strategically use existing resources to enact fast, free buses relatively quickly. Strategies include:

- **Transit agencies can access capital funding streams that would be closed to other types of interventions to improve service.** By using the flexible capital dollars provided to them by various federal highway programs, all state departments of transportation (DOTs) have the opportunity to immediately direct more funds toward planning and building fast and free bus infrastructure.
- **Advocates and policymakers can also press more states to follow the lead of Virginia and Colorado by explicitly supporting fare-free operations.** The funding required for fare-free operation may be onerous at the local level but negligible to the state budget. For example, the $5 million Virginia spends annually to make Richmond's buses fare-free is just 0.4 percent of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation's annual budget of $1.27 billion.[28]
- **State legislatures can do away with mandates for minimum farebox recovery ratios, which effectively require transit agencies to impose fares.** This would create a baseline for facilitating each municipality's choice in how and whether to collect fares.
- **Localities can also support fast and fare-free service with local bonds, property taxes, and other revenue streams.**

[28] Wyatt Gordon and Faith Walker, "The Bus Should Be Free," *Richmond Racial Equity Essays*, 2021, https://doi.org/10.21974/0N10-2C31, 115-17; Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, "Annual Budget Fiscal Year 2026," accessed May 26 2026, "https://drpt.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/FY26-CTB-Revised-Final-9-12-2025-Annual-Budget-Document.pdf".

Cornerstone of a broader opportunity

Fast and free bus service has broad *and* deep benefits. Universal public services are more popular and ultimately more durable than micro-targeted, means-tested interventions that can be steadily whittled away.[29] At the same time, people who need fare-free transit the most receive it and benefit from the faster speeds typically reserved for higher-income riders on express or restricted services.

Fast and free bus service also contributes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving urban air quality, not as a private amenity but as a public investment in a flourishing and shared future. In other words, fast and free buses can promote solidarity among transit users and build the political will to push for more and better public transit.

Fast and free buses can be a cornerstone of a larger agenda that prioritizes economic benefits, emission reductions, and public sector capacity. Fast and free bus service can foster the freedoms that our car-centric transportation system promises but is not meaningfully delivering. These benefits are not only necessary—they are extremely feasible with the tools at our fingertips today. Delivering fast and free buses can help build momentum toward a broader Green Economic Populist agenda that fights greed, builds the public sector, and mobilizes investment toward a resilient, low-carbon economy that works for everyone.[30]

[29] Katia Savchuk, "Why Universalism Trumps Targeting in Social Policy," *Polis* (blog), May 6, 2012, https://www.thepolisblog.org/2012/05/why-universalism-trumps-targeting-in.html.

[30] Patrick Bigger et al., "Stop Greed, Build Green: A Working Class Climate Strategy," Climate and Community Institute, April 2026, https://stopgreedbuildgreen.climateandcommunity.org/posts/strategy.

Introduction

The surprise success of Zohran Mamdani's 2025 campaign for mayor of New York City placed a number of issues related to housing affordability, food access, and elite power on the agenda. One of the most prominent was his proposal to speed up the city's more than 3,000 buses and make them fare-free. Mamdani's proposal has provoked excitement and debate, but **fast and free bus service** is more than just a campaign slogan for transit-rich New York City. Municipalities all over the United States—from Iowa City to Birmingham—have already been eliminating fares for all riders or making strategic improvements to speed up bus service. States like Virginia are creating grant programs to support fare-free service, and lawmakers like Senator Ed Markey and Representative Ayanna Pressley have advocated for federal support for such initiatives.[31] With the potential to deliver quickly for working families while investing in high-quality public goods and cutting carbon pollution, fast and free buses reflect core tenets from Climate and Community Institute's "Stop Greed, Build Green" agenda, which advances a "Green Economic Populist" policy framework.[32]

Improving public bus service while simultaneously cutting fares can provide immediate relief to the multiracial working class who either rely on transit or struggle to cover the cost of car ownership. These are also some of the most direct ways for many communities to address economic and racial disparities while improving environmental conditions and quality of life more broadly. Fast and free buses offer an opportunity for the growing fare-free transit movement to join with more established transit advocacy to build a larger pro-working class, pro-decarbonization agenda. In this report, we analyze the landscape of fast and free bus service in the United States, demonstrate the cost-effectiveness and feasibility of these initiatives, and explore the potential to expand these strategies.

[31] US Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts Press Office, "Markey, Pressley Announce Freedom to Move Act, Legislation to Enact Fare-Free Transit, Close Transit Equity Gap," press release, July 25, 2025, https://www.markey.senate.gov/news/press-releases/markey-pressley-announce-freedom-to-move-act-legislation-to-enact-fare-free-transit-close-transit-equity-gap.

[32] Climate and Community Institute, "Stop Greed, Build Green: A Working Class Climate Agenda," April 15, 2026, https://stopgreedbuildgreen.climateandcommunity.org/posts/agenda.

The state of transportation for the US working class is dire. One in five adults in the United States experiences transportation insecurity—meaning they lack the means or access to get where they need to go in their daily life. In fact, transit insecurity surpasses both housing and food insecurity as the most common challenge facing working people.[33] The necessity of private car ownership is the most direct factor in transportation cost burdens. AAA estimates the average annual cost of vehicle ownership at over $11,000.[34] The lowest-income households with a car spend 38 percent of their income toward transportation, while the lowest-income households without a car spend just 7 percent.[35] Yet those without a car often struggle with less direct cost burdens, such as poor access to work, groceries, school, and medical care.[36] Public transit users also pay a time penalty: just 16.4 percent of US workers who drive to work (including carpooling) have commutes of more than 45 minutes, compared to over half of public transit commuters.[37]

Buses are the anchor of the public transit landscape in the United States, particularly outside of the largest cities. About half of all public transit trips are made on buses (more than 60 percent if New York City is excluded).[38] Sixty percent of transit riders overall, and 65 percent of bus riders, are people of color; more than 50 percent of bus riders are Black and Hispanic.[39] Fast and free buses can significantly reduce travel times *and* costs for many of these riders, while also providing good transportation alternatives to drivers looking to save money on fuel, repairs, and insurance.

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[33] The Transportation Insecurity Project, "Transportation Insecurity Index," accessed May 15, 2026, https://transportation-insecurity.umich.edu/

[34] American Automobile Association, "AAA Releases Annual Report on Vehicle Costs," news release, September 17, 2025, https://newsroom.acg.aaa.com/aaa-releases-annual-report-on-vehicle-costs/.

[35] Transportation expenditure as percent of (after-tax) income for the lowest-income quintile of US households in 2023 that own or lease a vehicle versus households that do not own or lease a vehicle. Source: US Department of Transportation Bureau of Transportation Statistics, "Transportation Cost Burden: Transportation Spending by Income Quintile and Vehicle Ownership," 2023, accessed May 15, 2026, https://data.bts.gov/stories/s/v67s-yiqd.

[36] Sara Semborski, Julie S. McCrae, Dominic Cappello, and Katherine Ortega Courtney, "Transportation Insecurity as a Critical Social Determinant of Health," *Journal of Social Service Research* 52, no.2 (August 2025): 1–7, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01488376.2025.2542269.

[37] Authors' calculations based on US Census Bureau, "Means of Transportation to Work by Travel Time to Work," *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B08134*, 2024, accessed on March 14, 2026, https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2024.B08134.

[38] Authors' calculations based on American Public Transportation Association, *2025 Public Transportation Fact Book* (Washington, DC: American Public Transportation Association, 2025), 4–5, 32–42, https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/APTA-2025-Public-Transportation-Fact-Book-1.pdf and US Census Bureau, "Sex of Workers by Means of Transportation to Work," *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B08006*, 2024, accessed on February 9, 2026, https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2024.B08006.

[39] American Public Transportation Association, *Who Rides Public Transportation: The Backbone of a Multimodal Lifestyle* (Washington, DC: American Public Transportation Association, 2017), https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/APTA-Who-Rides-Public-Transportation-2017.pdf.

The past few decades have seen a range of experimentation in speeding up city buses by separating them from car traffic to make them function more like rail. The most comprehensive of these interventions, bus rapid transit (BRT), has been implemented in a range of US cities like Cleveland, El Paso, Grand Rapids, Miami, Omaha, Richmond (VA), and San Francisco.[40] BRT systems typically include a combination of features—such as dedicated bus lanes, priority for buses at traffic signals, boarding from an elevated center platform, and payment prior to boarding—that speed up the boarding process and streamline the route. In the absence of funding for full-scale BRT, cities have also incorporated elements of the BRT design on an ad hoc basis to rapidly improve the operation of ordinary bus routes.[41] These strategies improve service quality at a relatively low cost and, especially when combined with eliminating fares, can form the basis for a model of transit as a universal public service across a wider range of places.

More recently, a growing chorus of activists, planners, and policymakers have called for eliminating fares on public transit as a way to improve conditions for transit-dependent riders. While most transit systems have means-tested and age-based fare subsidies, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, which decimated public transit ridership, a number of transit agencies across the country eliminated bus fares completely to ease burdens on essential workers. By June 2020, some 259 transit agencies were operating fare-free.[42] Most initially eliminated fares by using federal funding through the CARES Act and American Rescue Plan Act, which provided funding to maintain service despite revenue losses. The most prominent post-COVID-19 example of fare-free public transport (FFPT) was Kansas City, Missouri—with a population of more than 500,000—which eliminated fares on its bus system to great public fanfare in March 2020, demonstrating the potential of free service beyond small cities and college towns.[43] Although

[40] Centre of Excellence for BRT and EMBARQ, *Global BRTData*, accessed February 3, 2026, https://brtdata.org/.

[41] Paul Redelmeier, Rodrigo Victoriano-Habit, Miles Crumley, and Ahmed El-Geneidy, "Bit by Bit: A Method for Using Bus Data to Develop Plan Bus Priority Interventions in Portland, Oregon, USA," *Journal of Public Transportation* 27 (January 2025): 100135, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubtr.2025.100135; National Association of City Transportation Officials. "Move! That! Bus! Tactic for Transforming Transit in Two Years," accessed January 1, 2026, https://nacto.org/publication/move-that-bus/.

[42] Wojciech Kębłowski, "No Fare, No Fear? Exploring the Rationales and Actors behind the Rise of Fare-Free Public Transport during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States," *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives* 34 (November 2025): 101624, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2025.101624.

[43] Joel Volinski, Transit Cooperative Research Program, Transportation Research Board, and National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Implementation and Outcomes of Fare-Free Transit Systems: A Synthesis of Transit Practice* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 2012), https://www.nationalacademies.org/read/22753; Tyndall, "Fare-Free Transit in the United States."

Kansas City is poised to reintroduce fares in June 2026, roughly 30 of the cities that initially eliminated fares after March 2020 remain fare-free today due to their success and popular support.[44]

Improving service and eliminating fares are often discussed as an inherent trade-off.[45] But there is increasing evidence that fast and free can be complementary.[46] Fast and free bus service is not just feasible; it can anchor an approach to urban mobility as a low-carbon, high-quality public good rather than an exclusive and private service. It can deliver and democratize freedom of movement by reducing car dependence and cost burdens for everyone. These relatively rapid changes to urban transportation can build toward broader transformations like redesigning routes, expanding service hours, and aligning transit service with investments in social housing and other universal public services. Building a cross-class constituency for public transit as a universal public good can challenge resignation to existing transportation budgets and cost constraints. Examples from diverse US cities show the broad benefits and feasibility of making buses fast and free.

This report details the economic, social, and environmental benefits of both speed improvements and fare elimination across a range of real-world cases in the United States. Fast and free buses can be cost-effective and feasible to implement, and can complement each other as part of a broader agenda to restore the capacity of the public sector to address the twin crises of economic inequality and climate change.

[44] Authors' verification of "Free Public Transport," *Wikipedia*, last modified May 6, 2026, accessed May 15, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Free_public_transport. Cross-referenced with Monika Maciejewska, Wojciech Kębłowski, and Merlin Gillard, "From the Fringes to the Mainstream and Back? The Geography of Pandemic-Driven Evolution of Fare-Free Public Transport in the United States," *Journal of Public Transportation* 27 (January 2025): 100119, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubtr.2025.100119.

[45] Jarrett Walker (@humantransit.bsky.social), "A Leading Candidate for New York City Mayor Wants Free Local Bus Fares. But Studies Have Repeatedly Shown That Any Money You Spent on That… [Forum Post]," Bluesky post, June 10, 2025, https://bsky.app/profile/humantransit.bsky.social/post/3lrb5ujaubc26; Scott Feeney, "Consultant's Mindset, or Why Jarrett Walker Is Wrong about Free Buses," *scott.mn* (blog), June 11, 2025, https://scott.mn/2025/06/11/consultant_mindset_jarrett_walker_free_buses/.

[46] Dave Colon, "Free Buses Would Mean 12% Faster Rides And 20% More Riders: Study," *Streetsblog NYC*, April 14, 2025, https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2025/04/14/free-buses-would-mean-12-percent-faster-rides-and-20-percent-more-riders-per-year-study.

Fast and free buses are cost-effective and feasible

Fast and free buses are cost-effective and eminently feasible, as evidenced by data from the wide range of cities that are already implementing these strategies. Cities do not have to wait for large, transformative projects to improve the speed and affordability of mobility. They can act quickly and strategically with the resources at hand, while simultaneously pressing for more fundamental transformations that could include rail investments, corridor planning, and more broadly aligning transportation and land use to create mixed-use, walkable communities with fully supportive transit systems.

FAST TRANSIT ▸

Among the performance measures that transit planners and bus riders care about, the following three characteristics help explain the impact of **fast buses:**

- **Speed** refers to the rate at which a bus travels over a particular distance. It can be measured as the time that it takes to travel from its starting point to its final destination.
- **Frequency** refers to how often a bus stops at a particular location. A 10-minute frequency means that a bus arrives at the stop on average every 10 minutes.
- **Reliability** refers to the consistency of service, or how close a bus stays to its schedule. If the schedule shows buses arriving every 10 minutes, but the actual gap between buses ranges from 2 to 18 minutes, this would be a low measure of reliability.

Each of these measures is important to a transit user's experience as well as the agency budget, making each critical to the success of the transit system.

Of course, speedier buses get riders to their destinations sooner, but they also contribute to frequency and reliability. Transit agencies can increase frequency by adding more buses and drivers to a route, which would require increasing operating costs. However,

they can also improve frequency simply by increasing existing bus speeds and thereby keeping operating costs steady. Faster speeds allow each vehicle to complete its route in less time, so the same number of vehicles pass more frequently by each stop. Similarly, the infrastructure that leads to fast buses can also help with reliability: a bus that operates in its own dedicated lane and has priority at traffic lights is less likely to run behind schedule during rush hour traffic. With these benefits in mind, transit agencies have successfully initiated various physical upgrades that increase bus speeds.

BRT systems are ideal for congested, high-capacity corridors and offer a flexible analog to light rail. Bus priority interventions (BPIs), on the other hand, deploy aspects of full-scale BRT systems on a tactical, as-needed basis to quickly improve bus performance and reduce travel time on a lean budget relative to other transportation infrastructure projects.[47] Speeding up buses with this approach has direct budgetary benefits, allowing agencies to move more people per personnel hour, per bus in service, and over the equipment life cycle.[48] BPIs include dedicated bus lanes and traffic signal priority. They can also be applied across a wider range of routes to improve service and implemented in places that currently do not have sufficient ridership to justify BRT. Cities can combine these strategies as needed depending on context to maximize service improvements. ◂

[47] Paul Redelmeier, Rodrigo Victoriano-Habit, Miles Crumley, Ahmed El-Geneidy, "Bit by Bit: A Method for Using Bus Data to Develop Plan Bus Priority Interventions in Portland, Oregon, USA," *Journal of Public Transportation* 27 (2025): 100135, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1077291X25000207.

[48] Transportation Research Board, *Transit Capacity and Quality of Service Manual, 3rd ed. (TCRP Report 165)* (Washington, DC: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2013), https://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp_rpt_165fm.pdf.

Examples of bus priority interventions (BPIs)

Traffic signal priority, which allows buses to trigger green lights along their routes, on its own can decrease travel times by 8 to 12 percent.[49] A pilot project in Alpharetta, Georgia found that installing priority signals for school buses increased speeds by 18 percent, reduced traffic signal stops by 40 percent, and reduced fuel consumption and emissions by 10 percent.[50] The cost for installing signal priority hardware is $10,000 to $20,000 per signal, or approximately $100,000 per mile. Depending on the strategy, this can be completed in a matter of weeks.[51] In cases where a signal is already equipped with the correct hardware, an automated system that recognizes an approaching bus can substantially reduce retrofitting costs.[52]

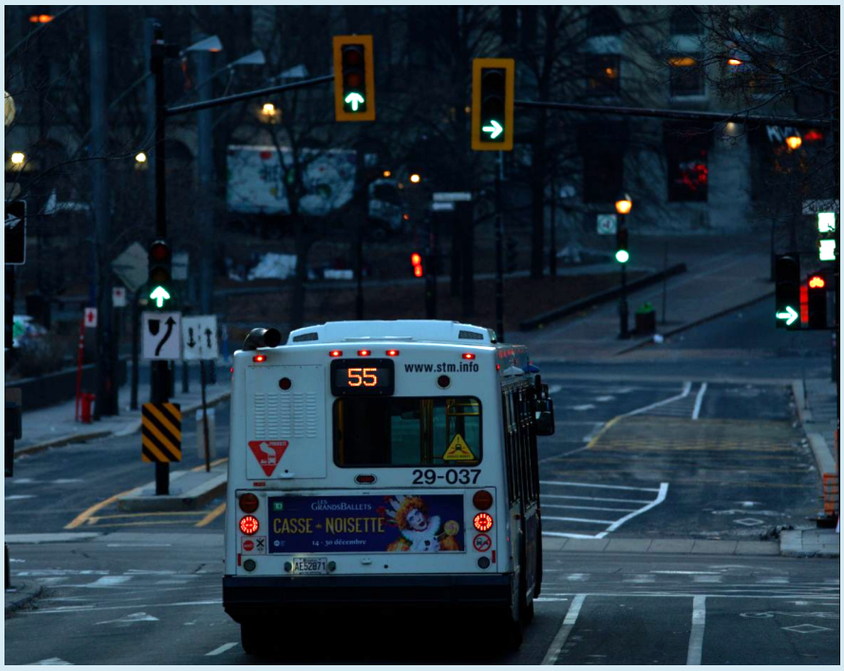


Photo by Ernest Westphal via Pexels

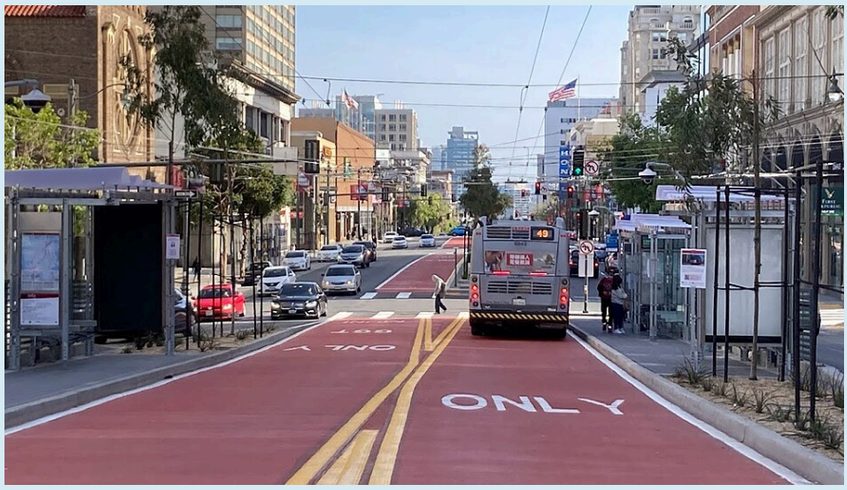
[49] "Transit Priority Toolkit: Key Messages and Evaluation Methods," Nelson\ Nygaard, Presentation to American Cities Climate Challenge Transit Priority Working Group, May 2021, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.nelsonnygaard.com/ideas/nrdc-transit-priority-toolkit.

[50] Michael Ruelle, "America's Untapped Transportation Potential: School Bus Traffic Signal Prioritization" Kimley-Horn, April 11, 2024, https://www.kimley-horn.com/news-insights/perspectives/school-bus-traffic-signal-prioritization/.

[51] US Department of Transportation, Intelligent Transportation Systems Joint Program Office, "In Los Angeles, California, Transit Signal Priority for BRT Cost Approximately $20,000 per Intersection, or $100,000 per Mile," *ITS Deployment Evaluation*, September 9, 2008, accessed May 14, 2026, https://www.itskrs.its.dot.gov/2008-sc00156; US Department of Transportation, Intelligent Transportation Systems Joint Program Office, "The Average Installation Cost per Intersection of an Adaptive Traffic Control System (ATCS) is $65,000," *ITS Deployment Evaluation*, January 12, 2012, accessed May 14, 2026, https://www.itskrs.its.dot.gov/2012-sc00249; Baruch Feigenbaum, "Bus Rapid Transit Systems Need to Use Transit Signal Priority," Reason Foundation, May 20, 2022, https://reason.org/commentary/bus-rapid-transit-systems-need-to-use-transit-signal-priority/; National Association of City Transportation Officials, "Move! That! Bus!," 32.

[52] Ruelle, "America's Untapped Transportation Potential."

Dedicated bus lanes, which give buses their own travel space apart from cars, can decrease travel times by 25 to 45 percent.[53] The basic cost for converting a traffic lane to a painted dedicated bus lane is about $100,000 to $200,000 per mile and can be completed in less than a year.[54] In comparison, the Federal Highway Administration estimates the cost to simply resurface and widen an existing car lane ranges from $2 million to $8 million per mile.[55] Road widening, however, only alleviates congestion for a brief time because drivers respond by driving more, which quickly increases congestion and further degrades bus system performance.[56] Of the 219,000 miles of streets that host bus routes in the United States, only about 1,255 provide buses with an exclusive right-of-way.[57] This points to an enormous opportunity to improve transit service.



The Van Ness Bus Rapid Transit corridor in San Francisco, California. Photo by Mattsjc via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

[53] "Transit Priority Toolkit," Nelson\Nygaard; Transportation Research Board, *Transit Capacity and Quality of Service Manual, 3rd ed. (TCRP Report 165)*, 6-39; "Prioritizing Bus Priority: Finding the Right Place to Put Buses First," Swiftly, January 13, 2020, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.goswift.ly/blog/prioritizing-bus-priority-finding-the-right-place-to-put-buses-first.

[54] John Gahbauer and Juan Matute, "Best Practices in Implementing Tactical Transit Lanes," UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies, February 2019, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1tj0974b;

"Dedicated Bus Lane Projects," Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization, April 25, 2019, https://www.ctps.org/data/calendar/pdfs/2019/RTAC_0508_Dedicated_Bus_Lane_Program.pdf; Jonathan Maus, "Portland's Cheap and Easy Bus Lane Projects are Working Well," *BikePortland*, November 26, 2019, https://bikeportland.org/2019/11/26/portlands-cheap-and-easy-bus-lane-projects-are-working-quite-well-308032; National Association of City Transportation Officials, "Move! That! Bus!," 28.

[55] Federal Highway Administration, *Status of the Nation's Highways, Bridges, and Transit: 23rd Edition (Conditions and Performance Report), Appendix A: Highway Investment Analysis Methodology,* US Department of Transportation, November 22, 2019, accessed May 15, 2026, https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/23cpr/appendixa.cfm.

[56] Douglass B. Lee, Lisa A. Klein, and Gregorio Camus, "Induced Traffic and Induced Demand," *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board* 1659, no. 1 (1999): 68–75, https://doi.org/10.3141/1659-09.

[57] American Public Transportation Association, *2023 Public Transportation Fact Book, 74th Edition* (Washington, DC: American Public Transportation Association, 2024), https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-2023-Public-Transportation-Fact-Book.pdf.

Bus rapid transit, which typically combines dedicated bus lanes, signal priority, and features to speed the boarding process, can reduce travel times by as much as 55 percent.[58] BRT corridors in Cleveland; San Francisco; and Eugene, Oregon have sped up travel by 34 percent, 36 percent, and 28 percent, respectively.[59] Our review of cost data from 10 US projects found that BRT projects can cost $1 million to $29 million per route mile, with an average around $11 million, and take one to four years to build, as well as additional time to plan.[60]

A bus stopping on the Mason Corridor Transitway of the MAX bus rapid transit line in Fort Collins, Colorado. Photo by Jeffrey Beall via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT	COST PER MILE	TIME TO IMPLEMENT	TRAVEL TIME REDUCTION
Traffic priority signal	$100,000	Weeks to months	8%–12%
Dedicated bus lane	$100,000–$200,000	Less than 1 year	25%–45%
Bus rapid transit (BRT)	$1 million–$29 million	1–4 years	25%–55%
Resurface and widen an existing car lane	$2 million–$8 million	Weeks to months	None

[58] Time savings range from 25 percent (Boston) and 37 percent (Las Vegas) to 49 percent (Honolulu) and 55 percent (Pittsburgh). See: Federal Transit Administration, "Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Brochure," accessed February 4, 2026, https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/BRTBrochure.pdf; International Association of Public Transport, "50 Years of BRT: 5 Advantages of BRT Buses," UITP, November 5, 2024, https://www.uitp.org/news/5-advantages-of-brt-buses/.

[59] Dr. Walter Hook and Annie Weinstock, "How Much Faster Are We Moving?" People Oriented Cities, 2025, accessed March 22, 2026, https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/87d8897e-0526-4b64-8769-54eb32823548/How-Much-Faster-Are-We-Moving%20-%20Final.pdf, 21.

[60] See Appendix for details.

FREE TRANSIT ▶

Among the more counter-intuitive benefits of **fare-free transit** is its relatively low cost of implementation. The revenue foregone when switching to fare-free is often minimal and can be covered by other sources, including city and agency budgets, local taxes, or grants. Fares typically cover a small proportion of public transit operating expenses. In transit jargon, this is referred to as a low "farebox recovery ratio." The average farebox recovery ratio across all US transit agencies in 2024 was just 13 percent, while the median was just 6 percent, reflecting how little most transit agencies depended on fares, particularly during the pandemic.[61]

For example, in Durham, North Carolina, the 2019 farebox recovery ratio of GoDurham was 15 percent, and the total revenue collected from fares was $2.4 million. Adjusted for inflation, this represents less than 1 percent of the city's general fund budget for FY2026, and less than 0.5 percent of the total budget.[62] Durham has operated fare-free since 2020. Smaller systems are even less dependent on fares. Before going fare-free in 2022, the college town of Blacksburg, Virginia collected just $50,000 in fares, or 1 percent of its operating expenses.[63] In these contexts, the generalized value of reduced congestion and increased mobility easily justifies the cost of covering operations for local governments and institutions, leaving very little added gain by continuing to collect fares.

Fare collection and enforcement are also themselves expensive. A 2023 report estimated that Los Angeles Metro spent roughly 75 cents on fare collection for every dollar it received in fares.[64] Prior to the pandemic, Kansas City had a farebox recovery ratio of just 9.4 percent. After eliminating fares, it projected an annual cost savings on enforcement of $1 million, over 20 percent of the $4.4 million in fares collected in 2019.[65] In 2020, Intercity Transit in Olympia, WA found that the $1 million cost of upgrading fare collection systems

[61] Tyndall, "Fare-Free Transit in the United States," 1. Kea Wilson, "Study: Subsidizing Transit Actually Makes It More Efficient," *Streetsblog USA*, February 5, 2024, https://usa.streetsblog.org/2024/02/05/study-subsidizing-transit-actually-makes-it-more-efficient.

[62] Justin Laidlaw, "With Growing Expenses, Durham Officials Are Looking for Ways to Keep Buses Free," *INDY Week*, March 6, 2025, https://indyweek.com/news/with-growing-expenses-durham-officials-are-looking-for-ways-to-keep-buses-free/; City of Durham, North Carolina, *Fiscal Year 2025-26 Adopted Budget*, 2025, accessed May 15, 2026, https://www.durhamnc.gov/DocumentCenter/View/61856/FY26-COD-Adopted-Budget-Book.

[63] Wyatt Gordon, "One In Four Virginia Transit Agencies Operate Fare-Free; Should Others Follow Their Lead?" *Streetsblog USA*, January 18, 2024, https://usa.streetsblog.org/2024/01/18/one-in-four-virginia-transit-agencies-operate-fare-free-should-others-follow-their-lead.

[64] Chelsea Kirk et al., "The Road to Transit Equity: The Case for Universal Fareless Transit in Los Angeles," Strategic Actions for a Just Economy and Alliance for Community Transit Los Angeles, May 2023, https://www.saje.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SAJE-The-Road-to-Transit-Equity.pdf.

[65] Mid-America Regional Council, "Transit Zero-Fare Impact Analysis," April 2022, https://www.marc.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Transit-Zero-Fare-Impact-Analysis.pdf, 15; Mader et al., "Zero Fare Transit State of the Industry," Shared-Use Mobility Center, December 16, 2024, https://learn.sharedusemobilitycenter.org/casestudy/zero-fare-transit-state-of-the-industry/.

would outweigh the 2 percent of operating budgets covered by fares, and went fare-free instead.[66] Service costs are covered in part by a sales tax increase passed in 2018, meaning that, according to the agency, "Passengers now essentially pre-pay their bus fare while shopping."[67]

Private cars have long been heavily subsidized in the United States through road construction, fuel subsidies, and allocation of public space, and transit has typically received far fewer taxpayer dollars than highways.[68] In the words of Justin Wilson, the former mayor of Alexandria, Virginia, whose agency went fare-free and saw ridership exceed pre-pandemic levels, "Every mode of transportation is subsidized . . . The question is how much."[69] Furthermore, buses are cheaper to operate per passenger trip than all modes of transit except subways. Unlike subways, however, buses reach into even the smallest communities: of the 2,200 public transit agencies in the United States, less than 5 percent operate rail systems, while more than half serve rural areas, not cities.[70]

Even as other popular pandemic-era social programs were allowed to expire in 2022, many agencies that eliminated fares during or after the COVID-19 pandemic have kept their systems fare-free due to their broad social, environmental, and economic benefits. The City Council in Iowa City, for example, voted in 2025 to extend a two-year pilot and pay for it with a 1 percent increase in utility taxes and an increase in public parking fees. State governments have recognized the value of FFPT as well, stepping in to fund operations once federal pandemic relief funds expired. Virginia offers grants to support FFPT through the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP), which had disbursed a total of $24.1 million as of FY2024 to cities and towns to offer reduced-fare or fare-free service.[71] In 2022,

[66] Abby Spegman, "IT Board Approves Fare-Free Bus Rides Starting Jan. 1," *The Olympian*, December 6, 2019, https://www.theolympian.com/news/local/article238068489.html.

[67] Tom Banse, "'Get On and Go!' No Bus Fare Needed Anymore in this Northwest Capital City," *KUOW Seattle*, January 2, 2020, https://www.kuow.org/stories/just-get-on-and-go-no-bus-fare-needed-anymore-on-this-northwest-transit-system.

[68] Gregory H. Shill, "Should Law Subsidize Driving?" *New York University Law Review* 95, no. 2 (2020): 498-579, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3345366; Jenna Fortunati, "It's Time to Fund Public Transportation and Highways Equally," Transportation for America, November 12, 2020, https://t4america.org/2020/11/12/its-time-to-fund-public-transportation-and-highways-equally/.

[69] Gordon, "One In Four Virginia Transit Agencies Operate Fare-Free."

[70] American Public Transportation Association, *2025 Public Transportation Fact Book*, 7, 26. A significant proportion of rural transit systems are demand-response services, reflecting low population densities.

[71] Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, *Transit Ridership Incentive Program FY2024 Report* (Richmond, VA: Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, October 2024), https://drpt.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/DRPT-2024-TRIP-Report-Oct-24-Edits.pdf.

the Colorado Energy Office created the Ozone Season Free Transit Grant Program to support fare eliminations in summer, when urban air quality is particularly poor due to high temperatures. This program provided $13.9 million for Denver's Zero Fare for Better Air pilot from June to August 2023.[72] These programs suggest the potential to scale up local FFPT experiments through state funding. ◂

Fast and free buses in practice across the United States

FAST TRANSIT ▸

Pittsburgh pioneered dedicated bus corridors in the United States with its successful busways in the 1970s and 1980s. In the decades since, cities of various sizes have been building bus priority features to provide better transit.[73] Eugene, Oregon, another relatively early adopter, opened its first BRT line in 2007. The improvements on Eugene's Emerald Express line boosted speeds by 36 percent[74] and increased ridership by 122 percent over the first four years.[75] These early successes helped prove that BRT can work in the United States, leading to several dozen other routes from Texas to Florida to Michigan. Cities with BRT now include Albuquerque, Cleveland, El Paso, Grand Rapids (MI), Oakland (CA), Minneapolis, Omaha, Birmingham, and Miami.

Transit agencies that introduced priority bus infrastructure during or after the COVID-19 pandemic have seen ridership increase more quickly on those routes than in the rest of the system. Some have also documented economic benefits along priority corridors. The Omaha Rapid Bus Transit (ORBT) line, for example, opened in 2020 and quickly became one of the city's most popular routes while also supporting economic development. According to Omaha Metro Transit's CEO, "In 2020 and 2021 there were over $500 million in permits for new development and redevelopment that was issued

[72] Denver Regional Transportation District, "Zero Fare for Better Air 2023 Evaluation Report."

[73] Angie Schmitt, "America's Early Bus Rapid Transit Systems Are Working Well," *Streetsblog USA*, November 5, 2018, https://usa.streetsblog.org/2018/11/05/checking-in-on-americas-pioneering-bus-rapid-transit-systems.

[74] Schmitt, "America's Early Bus Rapid Transit Systems Are Working Well."

[75] John Perry, "Measuring the Accuracy of Bus Rapid Transit Forecasts," *Journal of Public Transportation* 20, no. 1 (2017): 119–138, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1077291X22000765.

just along the Dodge corridor [of ORBT]."[76] Meanwhile, Birmingham's 10-mile rapid transit project opened in 2022. Within two years, ridership had increased by 194 percent above the system's baseline post-pandemic recovery.[77] The county is taking advantage of the new public resource by developing affordable housing and mixed-use spaces on property owned by the transit agency along the BRT line.[78]

In recent years, several new local funding initiatives have passed with commitments to building out more priority bus routes. In 2023, for example, the Minnesota Legislature enacted a new sales tax, which specifically directs a portion of the funds to building out more fast bus routes for the Twin Cities region, which launched its first BRT route in 2013 and has continued to expand fast reliable service to other bus lines. In Nashville, voters approved a 2024 transit sales tax with a $3.1 billion funding plan that includes a BRT network.[79] Cities, counties, and states are recognizing the opportunity for fast bus corridors to benefit their residents and are putting plans into practice through funding measures and other public policy.

Many cities have also improved service by adding individual BPIs, like dedicated bus lanes or traffic signal priority, without investing in a full BRT corridor. For example, Cincinnati installed a half-mile dedicated bus lane on a downtown street and found that travel time on that stretch dropped by 20 percent. A route in Oakland, California that gave signal priority to buses in 2003 for 96 signals over 12 miles reduced travel time by 20 percent and increased ridership on the route by 200 percent.[80] Miami also included a half mile of dedicated bus lane in a downtown Complete Streets project. A study by the Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) estimated that an expansion to six Business Access and Transit (BAT) lanes

[76] Marlo Lundak, "Metro's ORBT Hits Millionth Ride, Officials Say Ridership Steadily Increasing," *WOWT*, March 23, 2023, https://www.wowt.com/2023/03/24/metros-orbt-hits-millionth-ride-officials-say-ridership-steadily-increasing/.

[77] Gauthier, "Growth, Speed, Convenience." Ridership on the route increased 207 percent from 2022 to 2024. To account for post-COVID-19 ridership recovery that transit systems have experienced, we can compare the 207 percent increase to the Birmingham transit system's overall ridership increase of 13 percent over the same period (as calculated by the authors using the FTA transit agency profile 2022–2024 to arrive at a 194 percent increase over the baseline).

[78] Gauthier, "Growth, Speed, Convenience."

[79] "Regional Transportation Sales and Use Tax," Metropolitan Council, accessed March 22, 2026, https://metrocouncil.org/Transportation/Planning-2/Transportation-Funding/Regional-Transportation-Sales-and-Use-Tax.aspx; Cynthia Abrams, "Nashville Transit Funding Changed Fundamentally in 2025. Here's What is in Motion," *WPLN News*, December 28, 2025, https://wpln.org/post/nashville-transit-funding-changed-fundamentally-in-2025-heres-what-is-in-motion/.

[80] "San Pablo Avenue Rapid Corridors Project," AC Transit, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.actransit.org/rapid-corridors/san-pablo-avenue; Cheryl Thole and Alasdair Cain, *The San Pablo Rapid BRT Project Evaluation, Final Report*.

spanning a total 4.5 miles would result in annual bus travel time savings of 235,624 minutes, or 3,928 hours, which would translate to many more hours collectively saved by all riders on board these buses.[81]

FREE TRANSIT

Meanwhile, even before the current wave of FFPT, a wide range of cities were already eliminating bus fares and seeing the tangible benefits. For example, small-scale fare-free bus routes and systems have long been popular in downtown business districts to reduce congestion, encourage visitation of local businesses, and promote tourism. Western ski resort towns like Crested Butte, Colorado; Park City, Utah; and Ketchum, Idaho, as well as the New Jersey beach community of Cape May, have long offered free buses.[82] Cities like Greensboro and Raleigh in North Carolina and Seattle, Washington offer free downtown circulator buses that serve key destinations. In 1997, Orlando launched Lymmo, a free downtown BRT that has expanded to three lines. Fare-free buses are also common in college towns like Clemson, South Carolina; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; and Corvallis, Oregon. In these places, which generally have a relatively small and dense service area and population, fare-free buses have long been considered feasible as an amenity that improves quality of life and reduces congestion.

Transit agencies' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic showed that FFPT can also be rapidly implemented. Some agencies like the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority had already been planning a fare-free transition prior to the pandemic, but most systems who went fare-free did so reactively and simply ceased collecting fares in March 2020. Unlike other performance investments, these changes carry no up-front fixed costs and can be implemented quickly to deliver immediate benefits to riders while longer-term service improvements are planned. Furthermore, for many small agencies, upgrading fare collection systems to more current standards (fare integration, daily maximum charges, etc.) can cost more and take longer than eliminating fares altogether.[83]

[81] Parsons Brinckerhoff, "Bus Lanes in Downtown Miami Final Report," Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization, December 2015, https://miamidadetpo.org/library/studies/downtown-miami-bus-lanes-final-report-2015-12.pdf.

[82] Volinski et al., *Implementation and Outcomes of Fare-Free Transit Systems*.

[83] Mader et al., "Zero Fare Transit State of the Industry."

One of the most direct impacts of fare elimination is that it increases ridership generally from 20 to 60 percent, with one study finding an average increase of 56 percent.[84] An estimated 5 to 30 percent of these ridership increases are due to riders switching from driving.[85] After eliminating fares in 2022 on a trial basis (now made permanent), Albuquerque's bus system saw a 20 percent increase in ridership.[86] Iowa City similarly saw a 68 percent increase after a two-year pilot (now made permanent) that rebounded its ridership to 118 percent of pre-pandemic levels while the national average lagged at 85 percent.[87] Alexandria, Virginia saw a 50 percent increase in ridership after it eliminated fares in 2021; in a survey, 32 percent of riders increased their transit usage as a result of the eliminated fares.[88] Among riders surveyed in 2023 in Richmond, Virginia, where the bus system was made fare-free in 2020, as many as 41 percent were new riders, and roughly half of these new riders cited fare elimination as what compelled them to use the bus.[89] These ridership increases produce cost benefits for agencies as well. Federal public transit funding is partially based on demand, which means higher ridership can increase how much a given agency receives in funding.[90] ◂

[84] Cinzia Cirillo, Asal Mehdi Tabrizi, Hesham Rakha, and Jianhe Du, *Fare-Free Public Transportation: A Full-Scale, Real-World Experiment in Alexandria (VA)* (College Park, MD: Urban Mobility & Equity Center and University of Maryland, 2023), https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/68861; Tyndall, "Fare-Free Transit in the United States," 24.

[85] Volinski et al., *Implementation and Outcomes of Fare-Free Transit Systems*, 3.

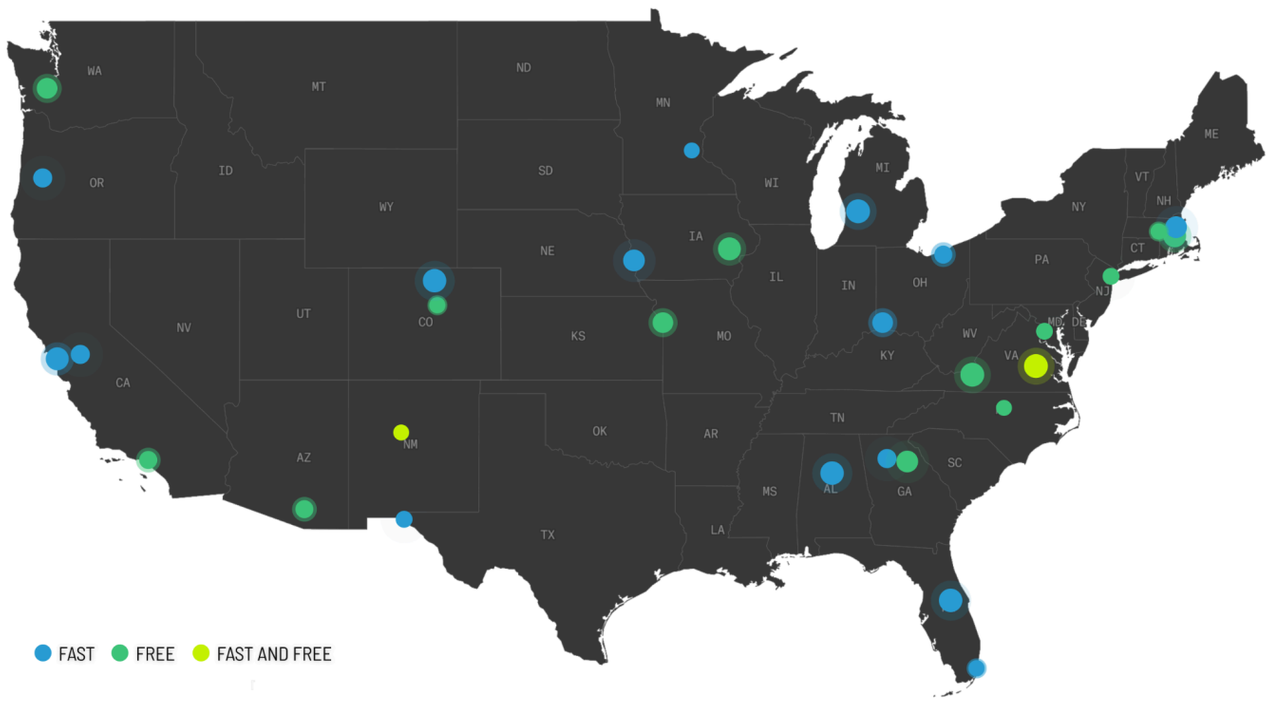
[86] Erin Rode, "What Free Transit Looks Like in Albuquerque, Nearly Two Years After the City Eliminated Fares," *Next City*, July 21, 2025, https://nextcity.org/urbanist-news/what-free-transit-looks-like-in-albuquerque-nearly-two-years-after-the-city.

[87] City of Iowa City, "City Council extends Fare Free Transit Program," press release, *GovDelivery*, July 7, 2025, https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/IAIOWA/bulletins/3e47022.

[88] Cirillo et al., *Fare-Free Public Transportation*.

[89] Faith Walker, "Free to Move: The Role of Zero-Fare Transit in Advancing Health and Justice in Richmond," RVA Rapid Transit, March 2025, https://vcnva.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/RVA-Rapid-Transit-Report-Free-to-Move-The-Role-of-Zero-Fare-Transit-in-Advancing-Health-and-Justice-in-Richmond.pdf.

[90] Congressional Budget Office. "Federal Financial Support for Public Transportation," March 22, 2022, https://www.cbo.gov/publication/57940.



The interactive version of this map is available at https://stopgreedbuildgreen.climateandcommunity.org/posts/fast-and-free#map-bus-interventions.

Highlighted interventions to make buses fast

KEY	
BRT	Includes a combination of dedicated lanes and mixed traffic, signal priority, level/raised boarding platforms, all-door boarding, off-board fare payment.
Partial BRT	Some BRT features (such as signal priority, pre-paid fares, and level boarding) but primarily runs in mixed traffic rather than dedicated lanes. El Paso is the clearest example.
Signal priority	Wireless or hardware-based traffic signal triggering with no dedicated lanes or infrastructure.
Dedicated lane	A lane reserved for buses, with no signal priority or platform upgrades.
Complete streets	Bus lanes installed as part of a broader redesign also including bike lanes and pedestrian improvements.

PLACE	INTERVENTION TYPE	KEY RESULTS	ROUTE MILES	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
Albuquerque, NM POPULATION 560k	BRT	2M+ riders/year ▸53% of all bus trips are BRT	8.8	Launched in 2019. According to the city, since its launch "ART has become one of the busiest transit services in the region."
Alpharetta, GA POPULATION 67k	Signal priority	↑18% bus speed ↓40% signal stops,	N/A	Launched in 2022. A pilot project installed wireless hardware on two

PLACE	INTERVENTION TYPE	KEY RESULTS	ROUTE MILES	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
		↓10% fuel consumption and emissions		school buses and on 62 signals along the bus routes.
Birmingham, AL POPULATION 196k	BRT	**↑207% ridership** ▸26% of all bus trips are BRT	10	Launched in 2022. The Birmingham Xpress includes 32 stations, dedicated bus lanes, and signal priority. As of March 2026, the city offers "complimentary" rides on the route although the system overall is not fare-free.
Cincinnati, OH POPULATION 315k	Dedicated lane	**↓20% travel time**	0.5	Launched in 2018. The city converted a parking lane to a dedicated bus lane during rush hour.
Cleveland, OH POPULATION 365k	BRT	**↑60% ridership** ↓26% travel time, $9.5B economic development along the corridor, ▸11% of all bus trips are BRT	6.8	Launched in 2008. The HealthLine BRT route connects two employment centers, using dedicated lanes, all-door boarding, and limited signal priority—although removal of some features has led to transit advocate critique.
El Paso, TX POPULATION 681k	Partial BRT	**85k+ residents within half mile of stop** ▸40% of all bus trips are BRT	49	The city opened its first BRIO BRT route in 2014, followed by new routes in 2019 and 2022. The buses use pre-paid fare purchase and signal prioritization, but primarily operate in mixed traffic.
Eugene, OR POPULATION 178k	Dedicated lane	**↑122% in ridership** ▸79% of all bus trips are BRT	14	Launched in 2007. The Emerald Express (EmX) uses dedicated lanes and off-board fare collection. A 2024 systemwide report described the route as the backbone of the transit system: "especially robust with high levels of boarding and productivity over most time periods."
Everett, MA POPULATION 51k	Dedicated lane	**↓ 20-30% trip times** Successful pilot led to permanent bus lane	1	Launched in 2016. According to the regional planning agency, the bus lane cut trip times, "prompting the city to start working on the next steps of bus stop consolidation, transit signal priority, and planning for more bus/bike lanes."
Fort Collins, CO POPULATION 170k	BRT	**x2 ridership** ▸28% of all bus trips are BRT	5	Launched 2014. The MAX BRT line uses signal priority, as well as dedicated bus lanes for the majority of the route. Additional routes are in planning phases.
Grand Rapids, MI POPULATION 200k	BRT	**↑34 to 40% ridership** ↓18 min travel time ▸7% of all bus trips are BRT	22	Launched 2014. The Rapid offers two BRT routes. Its Silver Line uses dedicated bus lanes and raised platforms for boarding.

PLACE	INTERVENTION TYPE	KEY RESULTS	ROUTE MILES	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
Miami, FL POPULATION 442k	Complete streets	↓3,928 hours *Projected bus time savings system-wide*	0.5	Launched in 2017.
	BRT	130k riders/month *Average of first two months*	20	Launched in 2025. The first line completed (of six planned priority corridors) is an all-electric BRT line that uses dedicated lanes, signal priority, level boarding, and all-door boarding.
Minneapolis , MN POPULATION 428k	BRT	↑115% BRT ridership 8 of 12 routes in service	105	Launched in 2013. The city has eight routes in service and four in development, using a mix of dedicated lanes, signal priority, and all door boarding. It plans to complete its 165 mile BRT network by 2030.
Oakland, CA POPULATION 441k	Signal priority	↑204% in ridership ↓21% travel time ↓~1,100 auto trips/day, 19% of riders previously used a car for their trips ▸14% of all bus trips are BRT	N/A	Launched in 2013. Signal priority on 96 signals over 12 miles of San Pablo Avenue. The route carried 13,000 riders daily pre-COVID-19.
Omaha, NE POPULATION 489k	BRT	10,727 rides/week "...the highest recorded on Dodge Street in nearly two decades."	8.2	Launched in 2020. Omaha Rapid Bus Transit (ORBT) includes dedicated lanes, signal priority, raised platforms, and three-door boarding.
Orlando, FL POPULATION 334k	Partial BRT	↓Operational costs than system average ▸3% of all bus trips are BRT ↑Customer satisfaction	2.5	Launched in 1997. Orlando's LYMMO system is a fare-free downtown circulator that has operated for decades with signal priority and dedicated lanes. However, the city recently decided to convert some of the dedicated lanes to mixed traffic, which will reduce speed benefits. A fifteen year retrospective found that a majority of downtown employers said LYMMO "contributed to the economic development of downtown, made downtown a more attractive place to live and work, and improved mobility in downtown."
Richmond, VA POPULATION 227k	BRT	↑ Passengers/hour and mile than any other agency route. ▸Its success has led to plans for a second BRT route.	7.6	Launched in 2018. GRTC Pulse BRT includes bus lanes separated from car traffic, level boarding stations, all-door boarding, and is now fare-free.

PLACE	INTERVENTION TYPE	KEY RESULTS	ROUTE MILES	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
		▸ 20% of all bus trips are BRT		
San Francisco, CA POPULATION 827k	BRT	↑36% travel time ↓54% in injuries ↑72% rider satisfaction, 2024 ↑Ridership reached 140% of pre-pandemic levels	75	Launched in 2022. The city has built many miles of dedicated bus lanes, including for the Van Ness BRT project which also includes signal priority, all-door boarding, and pedestrian safety improvements.

Note: The above table summarizes findings. To view the full table, including sources, see this link.

Highlighted interventions to make buses free

KEY	
Ongoing	Free fares established as an ongoing policy commitment, which in some cases will need renewal by a certain date.
Time-limited	Free fares intended as a time-bound trial, or set to expire after a defined period.
System-wide	Free fares applied across all routes in the transit network.
Limited-routes	Free fares applied only to select routes, not the full network.

PLACE	INTERVENTION TYPE	PREVIOUS FAREBOX RECOVERY	KEY RESULTS	ADDITIONAL CONTEXT
Albuquerque, NM POPULATION 560k	Ongoing System-wide	12-16%	↑20% ridership in the first three years	After an initial pilot, in 2023 Albuquerque became the largest city in the US to go fare-free permanently systemwide. The agency budget is funded by a transportation tax as well as the county and city general funds.
Alexandria, VA POPULATION 159k	Ongoing System-wide	17%	↑50% ridership 32% of riders increased their transit usage	DASH eliminated fare in 2021, and has since received $7.2 million to offset three years of fares through Virginia's TRIP grant program that supports zero fare systems across the state. The operating costs of collecting fares was $256,000 annually, in addition to capital costs of collection systems.
Athens, GA POPULATION 129k	Ongoing System-wide	<40%	↑ Ridership 130% in 2025 From 2005 to 2020, the system averaged 1.62 million rides a year	New fareboxes would have cost $1.6 million. or roughly $160,000 a year over their 10-year lifespan. Maintenance and labor raise the total costs of fare collection to $290,000 per year.

PLACE	INTERVENTION TYPE	PREVIOUS FAREBOX RECOVERY	KEY RESULTS	ADDITIONAL CONTEXT
Blacksburg, VA POPULATION 45k	Ongoing System-wide	1%	**↑45% ridership / first three years**	This college town collected only $50,000 in fares before going fare-free. A local city council member, Michael Sutphin, focused a winning reelection campaign on the issue.
Boston, MA POPULATION 673k	Time-limited Limited-routes	27%	**19% new riders** 15% said they made trips they would have skipped otherwise.	As a four-year pilot program, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) eliminated fares on three bus lines serving the low-income neighborhoods of Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury.
Denver, CO POPULATION 729k	Time-limited System-wide	10%	**↑16% ridership when free fares and 20% of bus drivers listed faster boarding** "Reduction in disputes over fares" listed as the top benefit by drivers.	In July and August 2023, RTD provided free rides systemwide as part of a Zero Fare for Better Air initiative.
Durham, NC POPULATION 283k	Ongoing System-wide	15%	**Riders saved up to $728/year** 87% of riders have a household income <$35,000 a year.	Agencies suspended fare payment during the COVID-19 pandemic to help with social distancing and support essential workers, and have continued to operate fare-free through at least 2026. The city has kept buses free, while also investing $17 million in expanding bus service.
Iowa City, IA POPULATION 76k	Ongoing System-wide	<30%	**↑68% ridership during pilot and 118% of pre-pandemic levels.** 1.8M fewer vehicle miles traveled, nearly 800 tons of carbon dioxide eliminated.	The City Council voted to extend a two-year pilot with a 1 percent increase in utility taxes and by increasing public parking rates.
Kansas City, MO POPULATION 508k	Time-limited System-wide	9%	**$4.2M–$13.6M economic stimulus estimated**	Eliminated fares on its bus system from 2020-2026, demonstrating the potential of free service beyond small cities and college towns. Kansas City projected an annual cost savings on enforcement of $1 million, over 20 percent of the $4.4 million in fares collected in 2019.
Los Angeles, CA POPULATION 3.8M	Time-limited System-wide	6%	**↓10% boarding time** The fare-free program ensured that all low-income riders received economic relief, 50%+ of riders earn <$18,000/year.	From April 2020 to December 2021, LA Metro buses provided about 281 million fare-free boardings as a system-wide response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

PLACE	INTERVENTION TYPE	PREVIOUS FAREBOX RECOVERY	KEY RESULTS	ADDITIONAL CONTEXT
New York City, NY POPULATION 8.4M	Time-limited Limited-routes	21%	**↑30% ridership / weekdays, 11% of riders would have used a car or taxi** Fare elimination could increase route speeds by 12%.	The New York State legislature initiated a pilot program, with one bus route in each of New York City's boroughs operating fare-free from September 2023 to September 2024. Lawmakers are pushing to renew the program for 2027.
Richmond, VA POPULATION 227k	Ongoing System-wide	14-16%	**~50% of new riders switched due to fare elimination** Surveyed riders used to spend at least $50/month on fares.	Virginia offers grants to support free transit across the state through the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP).
Thurston County (Olympia), WA POPULATION 302k	Ongoing System-wide	6%	**↑Ridership, especially among low-income riders** The estimated savings (from avoiding collection system upgrades) were greater than estimated costs.	Intercity Transit, which operates primarily around Olympia and surrounding communities, started a five-year fare-free pilot January 2020 (which continues as of 2026.) The ruralTRANSIT service provides free rural bus service between smaller communities south of Olympia. Expensive collection system upgrades factored into the decision to go fare-free.
Tuscon, AZ POPULATION 554k	Ongoing System-wide	16%	**29% of riders would have driven or used a taxi/rideshare, 18% would have skipped the trip entirely** 60% of riders earn under $25,000/year.	The City Council voted in 2025 to extend the fare-free program that started during the pandemic.
Worcester, MA POPULATION 211k	Ongoing System-wide	14%	**140% of pre-pandemic ridership by end of 2022**	Worcester Regional Transit Authority board approved renewal of zero-fare service in 2025.

Note: The above table summarizes findings. To view the full table, including sources, see this link.

Fast and free buses deliver tangible benefits

In the United States during recent decades, buses have been overlooked as an integral part of the mobility system. Not only does this limit the mobility of people who rely on them, but it also limits the potential for buses to address key issues of affordability, accessibility, quality of life, greenhouse gas emissions, and air pollution. The growing number of cities that have identified buses as a key opportunity are demonstrating that fast and free buses can deliver important benefits, including:

- Getting more people where they need to go more quickly and comfortably;
- Saving people money;
- Improving safety and comfort on city streets and public vehicles; and
- Getting more people out of cars, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and improving air quality.

Fast and free buses get people where they need to go more quickly and comfortably

Fast and free buses enable people to better access the necessities in their lives while also more fully enjoying social relationships and leisure activities. In short, speedier and fare-free buses can expand freedom of movement.

FAST TRANSIT ▶

Transportation reliability is a critical determinant of access to essential services including medical care, housing, and preschool programs.[91] Speedier, more reliable buses can help people meet these needs. In San Francisco, a streamlined bus corridor has made

[91] Semborski et al., "Transportation Insecurity as a Critical Social Determinant of Health."

bus travel 36 percent faster and 45 percent more reliable.[92] Minneapolis's BRT buses move 25 percent faster than the city's regular buses.[93] Dedicated bus lanes on their own—without a full BRT treatment that would include signal priority and efficient boarding—can cut travel time by 25 percent.[94] In addition to increasing speed, bus priority also increases reliability by reducing the peak rush hour delays so riders can more predictably plan their activities.[95] A bus that travels faster and consistently stays on schedule can keep people better connected to housing, health care, school, work, groceries, recreation, and loved ones.

Private cars cause the congestion that slows buses down and the impact of congestion falls most acutely on bus riders, who already spend more time commuting than drivers and do not have the option of changing routes in response to real-time traffic conditions. If most people traveled by bus, traffic would be simplified and gridlock would be eliminated on all but the densest routes. A thoughtfully designed, well-utilized bus system has the potential to move many more people quickly and comfortably than cars can alone. According to the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO), a dedicated bus lane can move as many as 8,000 passengers per hour while a single lane of private cars can only move 600 to 1,600 people.[96] However, because most streets require buses and cars to share the same space, buses move at an average speed of only 12 miles per hour, sometimes creeping behind slow-moving car traffic.[97] The typical bus also stops to pick up and drop off passengers, collect fares, and pause for traffic lights.

Acknowledging these limitations, more and more cities are making low-cost interventions to separate buses from mixed traffic in order to streamline and speed up their bus operations. These faster, more reliable buses translate into time savings and convenience for bus

[92] City and County of San Francisco, "San Francisco's First Bus Rapid Transit Project Receives Internationally Recognized Designation," *SF.gov*, press release, September 3, 2024, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.sf.gov/news—san-franciscos-first-bus-rapid-transit-project-receives-internationally-recognized-designation."

[93] "Bus Rapid Transit," Metro Transit, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.metrotransit.org/brt.

[94] "Prioritizing Bus Priority: Finding the Right Place to Put Buses First"; Transportation Research Board, *Transit Capacity and Quality of Service Manual*, 6-39.

[95] "Transit Priority Toolkit."

[96] Angie Schmitt, "How Can Cities Move More People Without Wider Streets? Hint: Not With Cars," *Streetsblog USA*, May 10, 2016, accessed March 22, 2026, https://usa.streetsblog.org/2016/05/10/how-can-cities-move-more-people-without-wider-streets-hint-not-with-cars.

[97] American Public Transportation Association, *2023 Public Transportation Fact Book*.

riders while also giving car drivers an attractive and viable alternative. ◂

FREE TRANSIT ▸

Eliminating fare collection itself can make bus service more efficient by reducing "dwell time"—the time a bus spends at a given stop.[98] A study estimated that fare elimination could increase overall route speeds by 12 percent in New York City.[99] In Boston, the lines covered by a fare elimination pilot saw dwell times decline by 20 percent.[100] In Denver, 20 percent of bus drivers listed faster boarding as a benefit of the zero-fare pilot.[101] While ridership increases can slightly increase dwell times, eliminating fares substantially reduces the time spent accepting payment and allows riders to board at all doors, loading the bus faster. Thus, fare elimination and other speed improvements can be implemented in tandem to move passengers even more quickly to their destinations.

In addition to increasing speeds, boarding without payment can improve the travel experience for many bus users, including people with disabilities. People with vision impairment sometimes experience difficulty handling fare payment systems while boarding the bus, especially on an unfamiliar bus or route, which can put them in the uncomfortable position of holding up a line of other passengers waiting to board—leading to frustration and even worry for personal safety if passengers become angry. Fare-free buses eliminate this problem. Similarly, other features that speed boarding, like level boarding and all-door boarding, can democratize the experience of riding the bus for people using a wheelchair or walker so they do not need to wait for the driver to lower a lift.[102]

Fare elimination encourages those who already ride buses to use them more for their daily needs, while also attracting new riders. In Boston, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) eliminated fares on three bus lines serving the low-income neighborhoods of Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury. Ridership on these lines recovered more quickly than the city average from the

[98] Tyndall, "Fare-Free Transit," 1.

[99] Colon, "Free Buses Would Mean 12% Faster Rides And 20% More Riders."

[100] City of Boston, *Fare Free Program: Mid Program Report* (Boston, 2023), https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2023/03/Fare%20Free%20Mid%20Program%20Report.pdf, 24.

[101] Denver Regional Transportation District, "Zero Fare for Better Air 2023 Evaluation Report," 19.

[102] Personal communication with Abby Giffith, Bus Riders Unite, March 6, 2026.

pandemic decline, with new riders making up 19 percent of those surveyed and 15 percent of riders saying they made trips they would not have otherwise made at all. One focus group participant noted, "I go to visit my sister more and my daughter more."[103]

A nine-month pilot study in Washington, DC that gave some transit riders free passes found that riders who did not pay fares took four times as many trips, experienced lower transportation insecurity, and scored higher on an overall well-being index.[104] Notably, faster, more reliable service can especially help working class women, who disproportionately handle care work and more often have to chain multiple trips together in a day.[105] In a trip with multiple bus transfers, each speed improvement and on-schedule arrival can compound to dramatically shorten the overall travel time. Fare-free transit improves the quality of life for existing riders, expanding access both to necessary and discretionary trips (which make up roughly half of all travel) and enabling people to more fully enjoy nearby opportunities, social ties, and leisure. ◂

Fast and free buses save people money

Fast and free buses can reduce expenses for both current and new bus riders by saving current riders time and money while also giving car drivers a viable alternative to spending hundreds of dollars per month on vehicle ownership, operation, and maintenance costs.

FAST TRANSIT ▸

The average car owner in the United States pays almost $1,000 per month for fuel, lease payments, insurance, maintenance, and unpredictable repairs.[106] Nearly two in five adults in the United States say they sometimes, often, or always have to make significant adjustments to their spending to satisfy their basic

[103] City of Boston, *Fare Free Program: Mid Program Report*, 20.

[104] Alyssa Huberts, Roxanne Oroxom, Kayleigh B. Campbell, Katherine N. Gan, Danielle Moore, and Sam Quinney, "Do Free and Discounted Fares Increase Transit Use, Well-being, and Employment for Low-Income Residents? Evidence from a Pilot Program in Washington, DC," The Lab @ DC, August 26, 2025, accessed March 22, 2026, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d2361aa11fed60001f7ab3a/t/68fb86d6e8a6182240e818b7/1761314682571/LIFT-Report-August-2025.pdf.

[105] Sophie Frank, Designing Streetscapes for Gender Inclusivity," Capstone project report, UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies, June 2023, https://escholarship.org/content/qt3j95x9xc/qt3j95x9xc.pdf#page=13, 11.

[106] American Automobile Association, "AAA Releases Annual Report on Vehicle Costs."

transportation needs.[107] The lowest-income households in the United States with a car spend a staggering 38 percent of their income toward transportation, while the lowest-income households without a car spend just 7 percent of their income on transportation.[108] This equates to an average difference of $478 per month, which means that switching from driving to transit can dramatically reduce household costs, with particular benefits for low-income households.[109] However, to make this switch feasible, transit needs to operate at reasonable speeds.

Even for riders who do keep a car, but reduce car trips by riding the bus, faster buses can make a difference to household budgets. One Grand Rapids resident told a local TV station that she had been parking at the bus station and riding the Silver Line BRT bus to work for a year: "And I drive a Ford F150 [truck]. So, it's forty dollars for me to do unlimited rides for the month, and it was costing forty a week in gas. So it's a no-brainer for me, really."[110]

For current bus riders earning hourly wages and/or balancing child care and other duties, the time savings offered by faster buses also have direct economic benefits. On a route in Oakland, California that gave signal priority to buses in 2003 for 96 signals over 12 miles, 40 percent of riders reported saving more than 15 minutes per trip.[111] For a daily commuter, 15 minutes per trip would translate into more than 10 hours a month that could be used for other activities, such as earning wages at work, spending time with family instead of paying for child care, running errands, or enjoying leisure time. ◂

FREE TRANSIT ▸

Fare elimination extends household economic benefits even further, nearly erasing transit costs for current and new bus riders. The recent trend toward fare-free systems was initially prompted by health concerns: eliminating cash payment and enabling rear-door boarding were both designed to reduce bus drivers' exposure to

[107] August 15–18, 2025 survey of 1,419 US adults, conducted by Data for Progress and Climate and Community Institute.

[108] Transportation expenditure as percent of (after-tax) income for the lowest-income quintile of US households in 2023 that own or lease a vehicle versus households that do not own or lease a vehicle. Source: US Department of Transportation Bureau of Transportation Statistics, "Transportation Cost Burden: Transportation Spending by Income Quintile and Vehicle Ownership."

[109] Transportation expenditure for the lowest-income quintile of US households in 2023 that own or lease a vehicle was $6,629, versus $889 for households that do not own or lease a vehicle. Source: US Department of Transportation Bureau of Transportation Statistics, "Transportation Cost Burden: Transportation Spending by Income Quintile and Vehicle Ownership."

[110] WOOD TV8, "Silver Line One Year Later: Success?" YouTube video, August 25, 2015, accessed March 21, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FibP4sM_aAY.

[111] "San Pablo Avenue Rapid Corridors Project"; Cheryl Thole and Alasdair Cain, *The San Pablo Rapid BRT Project Evaluation, Final Report*, 21.

COVID-19, while providing economic support for frontline workers who continued to depend on buses.[112] In the years since, fare elimination led to major cost savings for all riders but particularly those with low incomes, without the need for complicated, costly, and punitive means-testing. And it has become politically popular, leading many agencies to continue it despite the expiration of federal pandemic support funds.

Fare-free buses attract and benefit new riders by offering a more affordable alternative to driving. A 2012 study estimated that 5 to 30 percent of ridership increases on free routes were due to riders switching from driving.[113] Even new riders who do not have access to their own car can reduce vehicle miles traveled (and save money) by foregoing a rideshare. In Richmond, for example, as many as 37 percent of bus riders surveyed would have taken a much more expensive rideshare option in the absence of bus service.[114]

Fare-free public transport is especially beneficial for low-income people and people of color, who disproportionately depend on transit for daily needs. Low-income households with public transit access are squeezed by high costs in all areas of life. Fare-free transit is therefore a key way to reduce the cost of living, allowing people to better cope with the costs of housing, food, and other types of insecurity.[115] FFPT programs often have these explicit goals.

In Richmond, a survey of riders revealed that more than 80 percent of riders spent up to $75 per month on fares prior to FFPT, and more than half spent at least $50. Once fares were eliminated, food and rent topped the list of expenditures for which these savings were used instead.[116] In Boston, even though the rest of the system did not eliminate fares, some bus riders were able to forgo a $55 monthly pass and use the freed-up income for food and other necessities. One respondent reported saving as much as $700 over the 15-month study period.[117] For the over 8 percent of households with annual

[112] Kębłowski, "No Fare, No Fear?" 5–6.

[113] Volinski et al., *Implementation and Outcomes of Fare-Free Transit Systems*, 3.

[114] Faith Walker, "Free to Move," 13. This question was not asked in terms of what mode would be used if the bus were not fare-free, but presumably a fare-free bus reduces the competitiveness of ridesharing to some degree.

[115] Carrie Makarewicz, Prentiss Dantzler, and Arlie Adkins, "Another Look at Location Affordability: Understanding the Detailed Effects of Income and Urban Form on Housing and Transportation Expenditures," *Housing Policy Debate* 30, no. 6 (2020): 1033–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2020.1792528.

[116] Walker, "Free to Move," 16.

[117] City of Boston, *Fare Free Program*, 17.

incomes below $15,000, this translates to savings of between 4 and 6 percent.[118]

Although many transit agencies have implemented a daily maximum fare for transit card users—also known as fare capping—unbanked riders (riders without a checking or savings account) paying in cash may easily exceed this cap. Fare capping is a policy that some agencies enact to prevent riders who make many trips from paying excessive amounts.[119] A capping system tracks payments by individual bank cards or digital payment devices and allows the rider to board the vehicle at no cost once they have paid a certain amount for the day (or week or month, depending on the policy). Although agencies can implement systems to allow for cash purchase of a digital card, this is an extra step that many unbanked riders may not complete. While nationally only an estimated 6 percent of adults were unbanked in 2024, a 2021 study of transit users in Ohio found more than 15 percent were unbanked.[120] This means that fare elimination can prevent overpayment by those without bank accounts.

These individual household savings are relevant in aggregate as well and can have multiplier effects in low-income communities where savings are likely to be spent on other essential services at local businesses. In a study of Kansas City's zero-fare implementation, the Mid-America Regional Council estimated that the resulting disposable income increases aggregate personal income of up to $4.6 million across all the region's residents, in turn stimulating up to $13.6 million in additional local economic output.[121]

Eliminating fares provides an economic lifeline for people who depend on public transit, supporting food and housing security. And, as a universal program, fare-free service does not incur the administrative costs associated with more targeted poverty alleviation programs, while still benefiting those with the deepest need. ◂

[118] US Census Bureau, "Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2024 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars)," *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1901*, accessed on March 4, 2026, https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2024.S1901; Samuel Owusu-Agyemang, Robert A. Simons, Mark Henning, and Katherine Conrad, "Travel Behavior of Unbanked, Underbanked, and Ultra-Low-Income Transit Riders in Ohio under Covid-19," *Journal of Public Transportation* 25 (January 2023): 100059, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubtr.2023.100059.

[119] Andreea Andriescu, "Understanding Fare Capping: A Comprehensive Guide," Littlepay, August 13, 2024, accessed April 15, 2026, https://littlepay.com/resource-hub/blog/articles/understanding-fare-capping-a-comprehensive-guide/.

[120] Owusu-Agyemang et al., "Travel Behavior of Unbanked."

[121] Mid-America Regional Council, "Transit Zero-Fare Impact Analysis."

Fast and free buses improve safety and comfort on city streets and public vehicles

Fast and free buses improve service efficiency and their effects reverberate beyond the ridership and wind up benefitting everyone. Especially when combined with other, longer-term improvements to the public realm, like streetscaping and expansion of public spaces, fast and free buses can contribute to safer and more pleasant places. In addition, fast bus infrastructure and fare-free buses lead to some specific safety benefits for people within and outside of the bus.

FAST TRANSIT ▶

Many bus priority interventions can also improve conditions for people driving, walking, or bicycling.[122] The reduction of vehicle traffic due to switching from cars to buses reduces congestion and noise, while improving safety.[123] Simply by raising the awareness and attention of passing drivers through painted bus lanes and distinct boarding areas, BRT infrastructure has been shown to lower car speeds to safer levels—by more than 10 percent—resulting in safer streets for everyone, which has the potential to reduce congestion at the same time by encouraging drivers to use other modes.[124] Bus stop performance improvements tend to shorten crossing distances, either by extending the curb or expanding the median. This improves conditions for pedestrians while also making bus stops themselves better public places by reducing interactions with cars and adding streetscaping elements. San Francisco included safety features like pedestrian bulb-outs, pedestrian countdown signals, and left-turn restrictions in its new rapid bus route and saw a 54 percent reduction in traffic injuries along the corridor.[125] Bus priority lanes often also serve as a buffer to separate car traffic from

[122] Chris McCahill, "Dedicated Bus Lanes Improve Safety," State Smart Transportation Initiative, August 5, 2024, accessed March 22, 2026, https://ssti.us/2024/08/05/dedicated-bus-lanes-improve-safety/.

[123] Joan G. Hudson, Jueyu (Olivia) Wang, Kelly Blume, et al., *Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety in Bus Rapid Transit and High-Priority Bus Corridors* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2023), https://doi.org/10.17226/27007; David Nutt, "Congestion Pricing Improved Air Quality in NYC and Suburbs," *Cornell Chronicle*, December 8, 2025, https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2025/12/congestion-pricing-improved-air-quality-nyc-and-suburbs.

[124] Ashish Ravi Joshi, Nicholas N. Ferenchak, and Lisa L. Losada-Rojas, "Bus Rapid Transit as Arterial Corridor Traffic Calming: The Relationship between Transit Infrastructure and Motor Vehicle Operating Speeds," *Traffic Injury Prevention* 25, no. 8 (2024): 1098–1106, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15389588.2024.2373662; Douglass B. Lee et al., "Induced Traffic and Induced Demand."

[125] City and County of San Francisco, "San Francisco's First Bus Rapid Transit Project Receives Internationally Recognized Designation."

bicyclists and pedestrians. Additionally, bus cameras can provide passive lane enforcement without the added risks from police presence.[126] ◂

FREE TRANSIT ▸

Fare collection during boarding is a primary source of conflict between bus drivers and passengers and, in turn, a major cause of long dwell times at stops. Violence against bus drivers has been a rising concern among transit operators, and fare disputes are among the leading causes for this threat.[127] Therefore, fare elimination improves drivers' working conditions and safety as well as the user experience.[128] In fact, "reduction in disputes over fares" was listed by Denver's Regional Transportation District drivers as the top benefit of the zero-fare pilot.[129] Improving working conditions for bus drivers can make it easier for agencies to hire, reducing the driver shortage that limits service expansions. ◂

Fast and free buses reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve air quality by getting people out of cars

Making buses fast and free can play a key role in increasing public transit usage in the United States, which is critical to meeting decarbonization goals and combating climate change. Faster, more affordable transit means fewer cars on city streets, which also improves local air quality and reduces the risk of asthma, lung cancer, and other respiratory illnesses. Importantly, these environmental benefits come from expanding a shared public service, rather than depending on private, voluntary behavior change. As part of a multi-pronged strategy to reduce car dependency, improvements to bus service can complement other

[126] National Association of City Transportation Officials, *Curb Appeal: Curbside Management Strategies for Improving Transit Reliability* (New York: Nacto, 2017), https://nacto.org/wp-content/uploads/NACTO-Curb-Appeal-Curbside-Management.pdf.

[127] Kea Wilson, "US DOT Takes Critical Step to Stop Assaults on Transit Workers," *Streetsblog USA*, September 26, 2024, https://usa.streetsblog.org/2024/09/26/us-dot-takes-critical-step-to-stop-assaults-on-transit-workers.

[128] Wyatt Gordon and Faith Walker, "The Bus Should Be Free," *Richmond Racial Equity Essays*, 2021, https://doi.org/10.21974/0N10-2C31, 115–17; City of Boston, *Fare Free Program*, 28.

[129] Denver Regional Transportation District, "Zero Fare for Better Air 2023 Evaluation Report," 19.

important land use and development policies. Fast and free buses can in fact be cornerstones of a transit-oriented development (TOD) strategy centered on low-carbon social housing co-located with public services, which would drive ridership increases and further remove cars from streets as part of a more holistic model of urban decarbonization that centers walkable, bikeable, and wheelchair-accessible neighborhoods.

FAST TRANSIT ▶

Buses are among the most efficient ways to move people on surface streets, making them a crucial element of strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and environmental pollution.[130] Buses can carry anywhere from five to 20 times as many people as cars. Even at only 20 percent capacity, buses produce lower emissions per passenger-mile than cars.[131] But slow or idling buses trapped in car traffic with low ridership do little to advance these goals. Faster buses can move more people *and* pay off more broadly with lower carbon emissions, cleaner air, and reduced noise for all city residents—especially if these buses are electric.

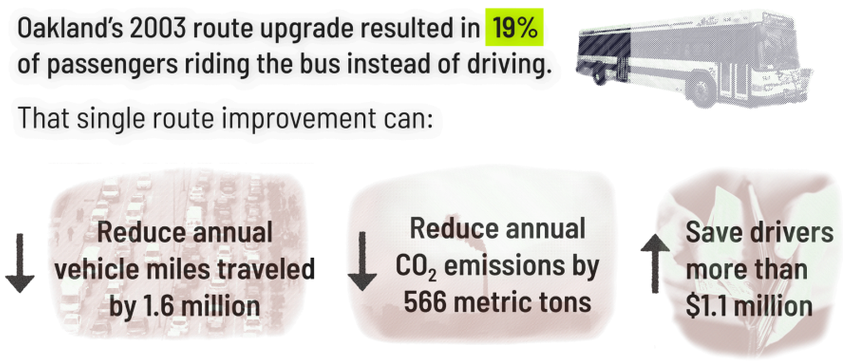
Making buses fast can shift drivers out of cars and onto transit, avoiding emissions from car journeys. Consider the 2003 route upgrade in Oakland, California, for example, that gave buses priority on 96 traffic signals over 12 miles. The change reduced travel time by about 20 percent and attracted new riders. A rider survey found that 19 percent of the people on the bus used to drive, which eliminated about 1,100 car trips per day from San Pablo Avenue.[132] Based on that finding, **a single route improvement alone could reduce annual vehicle miles traveled by 1.6 million, reducing annual carbon dioxide emissions by 566 metric tons and collectively saving drivers more than $1.1 million in annual expenses.**[133] ◀

[130] P. Jaramillo, S. Kahn Ribeiro, P. Newman, S. Dhar, O.E. Diemuodeke, T. Kajino, D.S. Lee, S.B. Nugroho, X. Ou, A. Hammer Strømman, and J. Whitehead, "Transport," in Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [P.R. Shukla, J. Skea, R. Slade, A. Al Khourdajie, R. van Diemen, D. McCollum, M. Pathak, S. Some, P. Vyas, R. Fradera, M. Belkacemi, A. Hasija, G. Lisboa, S. Luz, and J. Malley (eds.)] (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157926.012.

[131] Transformative Urban Mobility Initiative, "Passenger Capacity of Different Transport Modes," *Transformative Mobility*, January 1, 2019, accessed May 16, 2026, https://transformative-mobility.org/multimedia/passenger-capacity-of-different-transport-modes/; P. Jaramillo et al., "Transport," 1080.

[132] Thole and Cain, *The San Pablo Rapid BRT Project Evaluation, Final Report*.

[133] Authors' calculations. The 6,133 daily riders multiplied by 19 percent of riders who would have driven (Thole and Cain, *The San Pablo Rapid BRT Project Evaluation*, 35) = 1,165 daily riders replacing car trips. With an average trip length of 3.7 miles (American Public Transportation Association, *2023 Public Transportation Fact Book, 74th Edition*, 12), this equates to 4,311 miles of daily car trips replaced, or 1,573,697 miles per year. Using the US Bureau of Transportation Statistics national average fuel economy of 24.7 miles/gallon, this equates to 63,712 fewer gallons of gas consumed annually and 566 metric tons of CO_2 avoided (using the US Environmental Protection Agency's figure of 8,887 grams of CO_2 per gallon of gasoline). Applying the IRS standard mileage rate of 72.5 cents per mile, there are an estimated annual savings of $1,140,930 for all the drivers who reduced mileage by riding the bus route instead of driving.



Source: Climate and Community Institute, using data from Thole and Cain[134]

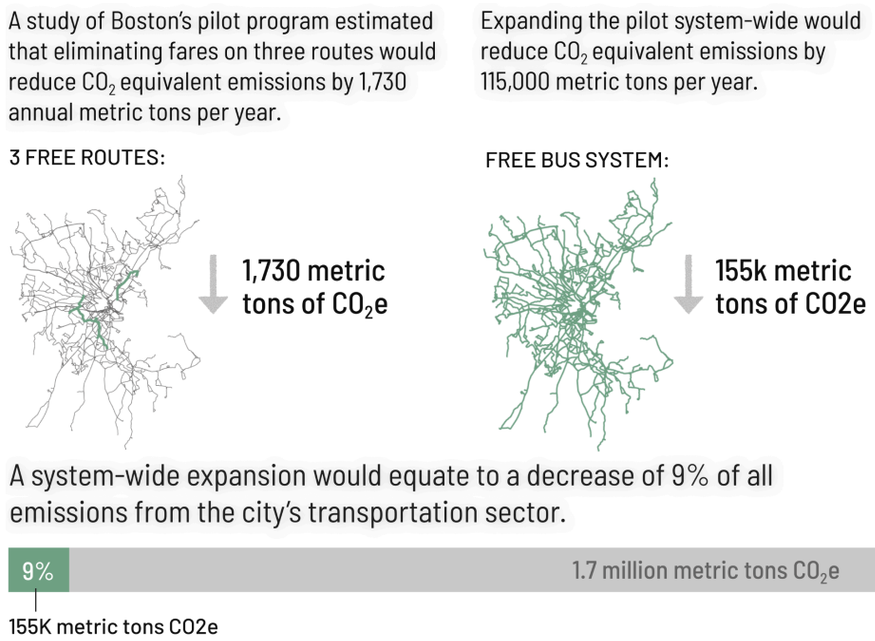
FREE TRANSIT ▸

Fare-free buses have also been shown to reduce car trips. Fare elimination makes the car-to-bus mode switch seamless for drivers unfamiliar with fare payment methods and makes transit even more affordable in direct comparison to driving. Some free transit systems report up to 30 percent of their new riders switching from driving.[135] However, even a smaller mode shift can lead to a significant drop in emissions. A 2019 study of Boston's fare-free pilot—where just 5 percent of riders surveyed would have otherwise used a vehicle—projected that extending fare-free service system-wide could reduce the city's total emissions by 2 percent, equivalent to 9 percent of its 2023 transportation sector emissions.[136]

[134] Thole and Cain, *The San Pablo Rapid BRT Project Evaluation, Final Report*.

[135] Volinski et al., *Implementation and Outcomes of Fare-Free Transit Systems*, 3.

[136] A.D. Boyle, T. Robbins, and M. Montgomery, *Evaluation of the Fare-Free Bus for Boston Pilot Proposal* [White Paper] (Boston, MA: Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University and Office of City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2021), https://cssh.northeastern.edu/policyschool/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/07/Evaluation-of-a-Fare-Free-Bus-for-Boston.pdf; "Boston's Carbon Emissions," City of Boston, accessed May 21, 2026, https://www.boston.gov/departments/environment/bostons-carbon-emissions. According to Boyle, Robbins, and Montgomery, eliminating fares on three routes would lead to an annual reduction of 1,730 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO_2e), cutting 0.03 percent of the city's carbon emissions. They claim that expanding free fares to the entire system would eliminate almost 2 percent of Boston's total carbon emissions, which, according to our calculations, would equate to a reduction of approximately 155,000 metric tons of CO_2e. According to the City of Boston, the city's total emissions in 2023 were 5.5 million metric tons of CO_2e, 1.7 million of which (31%) came from transportation. Based on our calculations, a reduction of 155,000 metric tons of CO2e would therefore equate to 9 percent of Boston's overall transportation sector emissions in 2023. Spatial data of Boston's MBTA bus route is provided by the Bureau of Geographic Information (MassGIS), Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Executive Office of Technology and Security Services, available at https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massgis-data-mbta-bus-routes-and-stops.



Source: Climate and Community Institute, using data from Boyle, Robbins, and Montgomery and the City of Boston[137]

Iowa City's ridership increases resulted in an estimated reduction of 1.8 million vehicle miles traveled in the city, eliminating nearly 800 tons of carbon dioxide.[138] ◂

Fast and free buses can also directly improve the local environment. At the most fundamental level, less time spent idling means fewer emissions from buses themselves and improved air quality. Various studies have demonstrated that idling vehicles, including buses, contribute to higher levels of harmful particulate matter in the air.[139] By implementing features like all-door boarding and fare-free or off-board fare collection, cities can reduce idle time and make streets healthier and more pleasant for all residents.

[137] Boyle, Robbins, and Montgomery, *Evaluation of the Fare-Free Bus for Boston Pilot Proposal* [White Paper]; City of Boston, "Boston's Carbon Emissions."

[138] Cara Buckley and Annick Sjobakken, "Iowa City Made Its Buses Free. Traffic Cleared, and So Did the Air.," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/18/climate/iowa-city-free-buses.html.

[139] Srinath Mahesh and Gitakrishnan Ramadurai, "Analysis of Driving Characteristics and Estimation of Pollutant Emissions from Intra-City Buses," *Transportation Research Procedia* 27 (January 2017): 1211–18, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trpro.2017.12.071. Differences in engine performance between India and the US would suggest lower figures, but likely still significant. Fredy Rosero,, Natalia Fonseca, Zamir Mera, and José-María López, "Assessing On-Road Emissions from Urban Buses in Different Traffic Congestion Scenarios by Integrating Real-World Driving, Traffic, and Emissions Data," *Science of The Total Environment* 863 (March 2023): 161002, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.161002. CO_2 and NO_x emissions increased by 31 percent and 43 percent, respectively, from diesel and 53 percent and 85 percent, respectively, from CNG buses. J. Richmond-Bryant, C. Saganich, L. Bukiewicz, and R. Kalin, "Associations of PM2.5 and Black Carbon Concentrations with Traffic, Idling, Background Pollution, and Meteorology During School Dismissals," *The Science of the Total Environment* 407, no. 10 (February 2009): 3357–3364, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19250655/. Paul Gabrielsen, "Vehicle Idling Can Compound Local Pollution on Bad Air Days," The University of Utah, July 20, 2023, accessed April 15, 2026, https://attheu.utah.edu/facultystaff/vehicle-idling-can-compound-local-pollution-on-bad-air-days/.

Fast and free: stronger together

Improving bus speeds and eliminating fares can work in concert to deliver greater benefits when implemented together. For example, fare-free service speeds up buses by allowing all-door boarding and avoiding boarding delays without the costs of providing ticketing at bus platforms or fare collection, inspection, and/or enforcement aboard buses. In this way, fare-free service could allow the reallocation of capital costs to other speed improvements like signal priority or dedicated lanes. Fare-free service maximizes the benefits of bus priority lanes by extending improved service to more people. By the same token, speed improvements maximize the benefits of fare-free service across a wider range of the city, enabling riders to travel farther and faster. Both fast and free services contribute to increases in ridership by simultaneously increasing value (by enhancing speed) and reducing price in ways that largely do not conflict operationally.

Together, fast and free buses contribute to a transit system that is accessible to more people, including: new riders who might otherwise feel intimidated by complex fare structures; people with disabilities who may feel more at ease boarding the bus from a level platform without fares; unbanked riders who cannot easily use a tap-based system; working people who need a faster ride to get to their jobs on time; and caregivers who need reliable transportation for multiple connecting trips. By making transit systems work better for more people, local governments can grow the ridership base needed to support and justify even greater improvements that compound in a positive feedback loop.

While the practical constraints of agency budgets and city politics can force transit planners into difficult decisions between fast and free, it is also true that these same planners, city staff, and policymakers can collaborate to find creative solutions. Capital costs (which fund physical improvements like bus lanes and upgraded traffic signals) and operating costs (which fund fare elimination) typically come from different pots of money, across federal, state, and local levels, so they can be pursued

simultaneously without direct trade-offs. That said, an enormous overall expansion of transit funding is still needed to fully fund transformative changes that would require increased operating funds to run more buses over more routes and longer time periods.[140] Such a commitment of funds, most likely from the federal government, would allow every city to offer fast, free, and frequent buses without compromise.

Strategies for unlocking fast and free service

Although transit advocates who support improved service and those who promote free transit sometimes find themselves pitted against each other, there is nothing intrinsically conflicting between fast and free buses. Policymakers and advocates facing difficult decisions about where to focus in the near-term can also keep a more ambitious horizon in mind, considering that existing budgets are not frozen in perpetuity. People can demand more from their governments, and a transit system that delivers excellent service at no direct cost to riders is a reasonable and feasible goal. From federal to state and local, there are examples of funding proposals that substantially boost resources for transit. That said, within current constraints, states and cities can strategically tap into existing resources to make bus systems both fast and free.

States can tactically direct certain existing funding streams toward fast buses and others toward free buses. Transit funding is often divided into two separate streams: capital funding and operations funding. Agencies can use *capital* grants from the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) Urbanized Area Formula Funding and State of Good Repair Formula Funding programs to pay for one-time infrastructure or equipment costs—such as buses, shelters, or bus lanes. At the same time, federal, state, and local *operations* funding covers the ongoing expenses of running service—such as bus driver wages, fuel, and vehicle maintenance.

One short-term strategic advantage of pursuing BPIs is that they can increase bus frequencies through the use of physical

[140] "World-Class American Transit," Transportation for America, January 14, 2026, accessed March 22, 2026, https://t4america.org/resource/world-class-transit/.

infrastructure (like painted bus lanes, programmed traffic lights, and raised platforms) without adding the extra operations expenses (like staff time, fuel, or vehicle maintenance) that would be required to increase the total operating hours of buses or run more total buses. With this in mind, transit agencies can access capital funding streams that would otherwise be closed to other types of interventions to improve service. In doing so, they can potentially tap into some of the vast funds available through the Federal-Aid Highway Program.

Federal funds for public transit are typically handled through the FTA, but states can elect to transfer (or "flex") funds out of highway programs into the FTA program as long as the funds are still used for purposes eligible under both the sending program and the FTA.[141] In doing so, states can increase the total dollars available to their transit agencies for capital spending. Many programs housed within the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), such as the Surface Transportation Block Grant and the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program, were created by Congress with the explicit intent for their eligible uses to include transit infrastructure.[142] As CCI has demonstrated with its flex funding comparison tool, no state flexed more than one fifth of its FHWA dollars to the FTA between FY2021 and FY2023.[143] Most states transferred less than 3 percent of FHWA dollars to the FTA. States have the opportunity to immediately begin planning and building fast bus infrastructure using these flexible capital dollars provided to them by the federal government. Some states have decided to more directly move funds previously earmarked for highways to transit by permanently shelving outdated and wasteful highway expansion plans. In 2022, for example, Los Angeles Metro canceled the 710 Freeway project and in doing so diverted $225 million to transit and bike and pedestrian projects.

Although current federal disbursements are governed by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, this bill expires in

[141] Federal Transit Administration, "Flexible Funding for Transit and Highway Improvements," accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/grants/grant-programs/flexible-funding-transit-and-highway-improvements; Federal Transit Administration, "Information: Fund Transfers to Other Agencies and Among Title 23 Programs," Memorandum, July 19, 2007, accessed March 22 2026, https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ipd/finance/resources/general/fund_transfers.aspx.

[142] Emmett Hopkins, "Trump's Transportation Proposal Will Worsen Affordability Across the Board," Climate and Community Institute, Substack, February 5, 2026, https://climatecommunityinstitute.substack.com/p/trumps-transportation-proposal-will.

[143] Kira McDonald, Emmett Hopkins, and Narayan Gopinathan, "How are Transportation Dollars Flowing in Your State?" Climate and Community Institute, December 2024, https://climateandcommunity.org/research/how-are-transportation-dollars-flowing-in-your-state/.

September 2026. Moreover, the current administration has demonstrated its hostility to public transportation, including an expressed desire to prohibit the use of FHWA funds for transit.[144] During the upcoming negotiations for a new surface transportation reauthorization bill, it will be important for Congress to protect *and expand* current funds for transit infrastructure and operations, which are critical to many states, red and blue alike.[145] This could include increased federal funding for transit operations as well as new dedicated capital grants for fast bus infrastructure. Meanwhile, rising dissatisfaction with the Trump administration's attacks on fuel efficiency standards and rising gas prices due to its highly unpopular elective war on Iran could build political will even among transit skeptics.

Another funding strategy is to build on the momentum demonstrated by states like Virginia and Colorado and press states to explicitly support fare-free operations. Across the country, hundreds of small transit agencies are operating bus service at a very low farebox recovery ratio. In some places, due to low ridership, agencies have fully replaced buses with rideshare services contracted with firms like Uber or Lyft, effectively privatizing a public service at a potentially higher cost.[146] State grants could both support fare-free operations and increase ridership, bolstering bus service as part of a suite of public functions provided to all residents. The funding required for fare-free operation may be onerous at the local level but negligible to the state budget. For example, the $5 million Virginia spends annually to make Richmond's buses fare-free is just 0.4 percent of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation's annual budget of $1.27 billion.[147] Expanding this state-level support will require coalition-building across communities, but fast and free service can be an important rallying point that brings together residents of small communities that are often left out of conversations about public transportation policy.

[144] "T4America Statement on USDOT Proposal to Eliminate Federal Transit Funding," Transportation for America, November 17, 2025, accessed March 22 2026, https://t4america.org/2025/11/17/t4america-statement-on-usdot-proposal-to-eliminate-federal-transit-funding/.

[145] Hopkins, "Trump's Transportation Proposal."

[146] See for example: City of Wilson, NC, "RIDE," accessed February 4, 2026, https://www.wilsonnc.org/residents/all-departments/public-works/wilson-transit-ride-wilson-industrial-air-center/ride.

[147] Gordon and Walker, "The Bus Should Be Free"; Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, "Annual Budget."

Some states mandate a minimum farebox recovery ratio for all transit agencies, effectively requiring transit agencies to impose fares. State legislatures can change this policy as a baseline for facilitating each municipality's choice in how and whether to collect fares. For example, Illinois used to require agencies to collect at least 50 percent of their operating revenue through the farebox, but this requirement was waived during COVID-19 and a recent transit reform bill that provided more funding to the system (in part from motor fuel tax) also reduced the mandated ratio to 25 percent from 2027 onwards.[148] California requires a minimum 10 percent ratio for non-urbanized areas and 20 percent for urbanized areas for agencies to qualify for certain funds.[149] Other states, like Maryland and Massachusetts, have repealed or allowed their requirements to expire.[150]

Localities can also support fast and free service with local bonds, property taxes, and other revenue streams. Before the current wave of FFPT, the standard-bearers for fare elimination were small, relatively wealthy tourist destinations and college towns who saw the mobility benefits of free buses—particularly congestion reduction—outweigh the costs. Expanding fare-free service to more places demonstrates a commitment to this as a universal principle, rather than a narrow privilege, and its implementation across the country during the height of the pandemic demonstrates that it is both feasible and desirable.

[148] Paula R. Worthington, "On the Right Track: Illinois' New Transit Agency and Path to Sustainability," The Civic Federation, December 10, 2025, accessed March 22 2026, https://civicfed.org/illinoisnewtransitagency.

[149] Riverside County Transportation Commission, "Transit Operator Funding Guide," May 2025, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.rctc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/0525-RCTC-Transit-Funding-Operator-Guide_FINAL.pdf.

[150] "Illinois Transit Farebox Recovery Ratio Requirement is Uniquely High and Harms Riders," Regional Transportation Authority, October 9, 2025, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.rtachicago.org/blog/2025/10/09/illinois-transit-farebox-recovery-ratio-requirement-is-uniquely-high-and-harms-riders.

Conclusion

Fast and free bus service has broad benefits. Even though many riders, even low-income ones, can afford bus fare, universal public services are more popular and ultimately more durable than micro-targeted, means-tested interventions that can be steadily whittled away.[151] It also has deep benefits, meaning that people who need fare-free transit the most receive it, and benefit from the faster speeds typically reserved for higher-income riders on express or restricted services. In this way, fast and free bus service can contribute to building a constituency for transit and breaking down political and social divisions between "premium" service aimed at luring high-income residents out of their cars and "regular" service for people who are assumed to have no other options. **Fast and free bus service also contributes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving urban air quality, not as a private amenity but as a public investment in a flourishing and shared future.** In other words, fast and free buses can promote solidarity among transit users and build the political will to push for more and better public transit.

Fast and free bus service is also cost-effective and achievable. The investments needed to speed up bus service and eliminate fares are relatively low-cost and can be quickly implemented, especially compared to the large, counter-productive road-widening projects typically offered as "solutions" to congestion. These changes can happen on a timescale that fits with electoral politics, making it possible for elected officials to deliver results and build momentum for further investments. Moreover, fast and free buses are not just for big cities that already have high ridership, like New York. Fast and free buses are actually ideal for smaller cities, where transit agency budgets rely less on fares, can see big ridership increases due to smaller public transit constituencies, and yield large social and environmental benefits from a small increase in expenditures. Smaller cities across the United States are showing the way, and supportive state governments are helping them forward.

[151] Katia Savchuk, "Why Universalism Trumps Targeting in Social Policy," *Polis* (blog), May 6, 2012, accessed March 22, 2026, https://www.thepolisblog.org/2012/05/why-universalism-trumps-targeting-in.html.

Finally, fast and free buses enhance freedom. Where our current transportation system is designed to move cars—and often does so poorly—bus priority interventions refocus mobility around **people,** and fare-free service extends this freedom of movement to everyone. As economist Justin Tyndall argues, libraries, public schools, and streets are universal infrastructures funded through taxation and free at the point of use; there is no meaningful reason why public transit cannot be the same.[152] **In this respect, fast and free buses can be a cornerstone of a larger Green Economic Populist agenda that prioritizes immediate economic benefits, emission reductions, and public sector capacity**—and which would include a more full transformation of the country's transit systems.[153] The success of Mamdani's mayoral campaign did not rest on fare-free transport alone, but it was a highly popular and clearly communicated dimension of his campaign's commitment to universal public services. Ultimately, fast and free bus service can foster the freedoms that our car-centric transportation system promises but cannot meaningfully deliver. These benefits are not only necessary—they are extremely feasible with the tools at our fingertips today.

[152] Tyndall, "Fare-Free Transit in the United States," 24.

[153] Bigger et al., "Stop Greed, Build Green: A Working Class Climate Strategy."

Appendix

Cost per mile of selected interventions to make buses faster

PLACE	NAME	MILES OF BRT	FIRST YEAR OF OPERATION	YEARS FROM CONSTRUCTION TO LAUNCH	COST OF INTERVENTION	COST PER MILE	SOURCES
Birmingham, AL	Birmingham Xpress (BX)	10	2022	2 (2020–2022)	**$64,000,000**	**$6,400,000**	"Ride the New Birmingham Xpress Bus Rapid Transit System," Skanska.
Cleveland, OH	HealthLine	6.8	2008	3 (2005–2008)	**$197,200,000**	**$29,000,000**	Nancy Derringer, "In Cleveland, They Built It, and Riders Came, Along With a Whole Lot More," *Bridge Michigan*, February 23, 2016.
El Paso, TX	Montana BRIO	16	2022	2 (2020–2022)	**$49,200,000**	**$3,075,000**	"Sun Metro's Montana BRIO Completed with $49.2 Grant," *KFOX14*, November 1, 2022.
Grand Rapids, MI	Silver Line	9.6	2014	1 (2013–2014)	**$40,000,000**	**$4,166,667**	"U.S. Department of Transportation Celebrates Opening of Silver Line Bus Rapid Transit System in Grand Rapids, Michigan," Federal Transit Administration, August 25, 2014.
Miami, FL	Metro Express	20	2025	4 (2021–2025)	**$300,000,000**	**$15,000,000**	Douglas Hanks, "Miami-Dade's $300 Million Bus Rapid Transit Launch Hits Red Lights," *Governing*, October 28, 2025.
Minneapolis, MN	D Line	18.5	2022	1 (2021–2022)	**$75,000,000**	**$4,054,054**	"Final BRT Case Studies Report," Oregon Metro, June 2024.
Oakland, CA	Tempo	9.5	2020	4 (2016–2020)	**$232,000,000**	**$24,421,053**	"Tempo Project Information," AC Transit.
Omaha, NE	Omaha Rapid Bus Transit (ORBT)	8.2	2020	2 (2018–2020)	**$30,500,000**	**$3,719,512**	"Omaha Wins Federal Grant for Mass Transit Improvements," City of Omaha, January 7, 2016.
Portland, OR	FX-2 Division	15	2022	2 (2020–2022)	**$175,000,000**	**$11,666,667**	Jim Redden, "TriMet Celebrates Success of Frequent Express Bus Line on Division Street," *Portland Tribune*, September 13, 2023.
Richmond, VA	Pulse	7.6	2018	4 (2014–2018)	**$65,000,000**	**$8,552,632**	"GRTC Pulse Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) System," Kimley-Horn.
AVERAGE						**$11,005,558**	