

GUARANTEEING TRANSIT EQUITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The past year and a half has shown that high-quality, reliable public transit service is essential for Virginians to access their jobs, schooling, healthcare, education, and shopping needs. Beyond transit's vital role in economic growth and social mobility, public transportation is critical to mitigating the climate crisis. Getting Virginians out of their cars and onto the bus, light rail, or Metro requires providing top-notch service and rethinking transit access and affordability. From benches and shelters to GPS live-tracking and zero-fare policies, public transportation can become Virginians' top way to get around with increased investments in our transit systems statewide.

CHALLENGE

Virginia's forty-plus transit providers are made up of incredibly resourceful and dedicated public servants, but decades of underfunding and fiscal uncertainty have produced transit systems far from befitting our prosperous state with its annual GDP of \$556 billion. Too often, bus riders are treated like second-class citizens, forced to wait up to an hour without benches or shelters to protect them — and that's if the buses come at all. In 2018, riders of Hampton Roads Transit (HRT) had to deal with 18,653 scheduled buses that never showed up.¹

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Virginia's transit providers are doing the best they can with limited funding for operational costs that in turn hinders service improvements and better wages; two of our state's biggest bus systems—HRT and the Greater Richmond Transit Company—were ranked two of the three worst-funded public transit systems in the

country per capita.² In the absence of adequate funding and infrastructure improvements, such as better sidewalks and bus lanes, transit providers cannot invest in modernizing their systems to provide the opportunities needed for more reliable, safe, and affordable service. These include high-quality bus-stops and bike shelters, user-friendly apps, more full-time salaried bus drivers, electric fleets, increased accessibility for differently abled riders, and expanded operation hours that support lower-income workers.

When it comes to the climate crisis, the single worst contributor in the Commonwealth that has the largest impact per ton of emissions are light-duty passenger vehicles.³ We simply cannot seriously meet our climate goals, without reducing the greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) from our transportation by 43% by 2030.⁴ Even if the U.S. is able to switch 70 million drivers to EVs, we still need to reduce per-capita vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by 20% in the next nine years via solutions that include increased transit ridership.⁵

SOLUTION

If equitable climate change mitigation is an executive and legislative priority, as evidenced in Virginia's electric vehicle and fare free transit program commitments, the executive administration and state legislators must elevate transit as a climate policy priority so all Virginians reap the benefits of changes in our public transportation system that are designed to meet the climate crisis.^{6,7}

Transit systems provide countless economic opportunities to small, large, rural, and urban municipalities alike. Transit agencies need coordinated state, regional, and local support to increase service access and affordability, rider and pedestrian safety, improve service amenities, and reduce local transportation pollution.

Government support allocated in this manner must ensure people-of-color and low-income riders, who often rely on local transit systems and pay a disproportionate amount of their household income on transportation, directly benefit from these types of improvements.

To provide high-quality, reliable public transit service that also increases ridership and helps the state meet its climate change and resiliency goals, Virginia must continue to increasingly shift transportation funding into transit systems

and transit-oriented development. This will develop a state budget that modernizes our transit systems and increasingly allocates funding to and builds service capacity in communities of color and low-income areas. These riders should directly benefit from these investments, having borne the burden of transportation emissions and relied on transit for generations to support their families, connect with their community, and meet daily and emergency food, health, and education needs.⁸

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase transit and rail capital and operating funding from the 2020 omnibus levels to at least 50% of the entire state transportation budget by 2030 (see also: *Transforming Transportation*, pg 67).

Remove the funding cap of 25% on Virginia's zero-fare program, and sustain its current funding levels, so transit systems can remain fare free over the next 3-5 years.

Advance recommendations from the Department of Rails & Public Transportation's Transit Equity & Modernization Study.

Through executive and legislative action, champion public transportation as a central strategy to meeting Virginia's climate change mitigation and resilience goals.

Require VDOT to support the conversion of arterial lanes to dedicated bus lanes to reduce VMT and GHG emissions through transit ridership.



Biker on Mount Vernon Trail
Image credit: Robin Kent