

# MODERNIZING PUBLIC TRANSIT

Danny Plaughter // Virginia Transit Association // danny@vatransit.com  
Faith Walker // RVA Rapid Transit // faith@rvarapidtransit.org

## WHY IT MATTERS

Public transportation opens doors to opportunities and provides mobility for those who need it most. Transit provides access to resources such as employment, housing, and healthcare, to ensure economic, environmental, and social sustainability. Studies have proven that transportation is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Virginia,<sup>1</sup> equaling 42.1% of all emissions.

Promoting the use of alternative modes of transportation including buses, trains, and ferries contributes to lowering the vehicle miles traveled in the state: The more people who ride transit, the fewer cars are on the road.

Transit also provides financial benefits for the community, as a recent study from AAA found that the total cost of owning and operating a personal vehicle is over \$12,000<sup>2</sup> annually. Over half of all transit users in the US earn less than \$55,000 a year, and installing infrastructure is a vital asset for personal economic growth and social mobility. Not to mention the simple fact that over 1.1 million Virginians over the age of 16 don't have a driver's license including 26% of our population between the ages of 16 and 34.

Lastly, public transportation is an economic value to the Commonwealth generating over \$8.9B in economic benefits in FY 2022 while creating and sustaining over 16,000 jobs.<sup>3</sup>

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The pandemic battered our transportation network, but especially our public transit systems including impacting ridership, staff recruitment and retention, and operational and capital costs. While many industries were battering down the hatches, Virginia's transit agencies were pushing the envelope by expanding micro-transit, implementing reduced or zero-fare programs, redesigning service and networks, investing in zero-emission technology, and improving our "last foot" infrastructure including investing in more shelters and benches. Instead of relying on the transit plan of yesteryear, our systems are looking to build the transit network of tomorrow.

Those investments are now starting to pay dividends. Since FY 2021, even with the rapid advancement in work-focused technology and schedules (virtual meetings, work-from-home or hybrid capability, and improved cloud services) Virginia's transit systems have seen robust ridership growth coming out of their pandemic-era lows with large systems like Metro on-pace to grow 232% from FY 2021-23 to small

systems like Mountain Empire which serves Wise, Lee, and Scott counties in Southwest Virginia growing 183% that same period. Overall, transit ridership across the entire Commonwealth has grown 140% since FY 2021.<sup>4</sup>

The environmental impact of this growing ridership cannot be understated. In FY 2024, public transit is on-pace to carry 663 million passenger miles which is the equivalent of removing an additional 36,000 cars from our roads compared to FY 2021. This reduction in potential automobile trips also eliminates the potential release of over 67,000 metric tons of carbon emissions.<sup>5</sup>

## OPPORTUNITIES

With the significant increase in ridership for transit agencies across Virginia, progress is being made in enhancing technology and service improvement projects. The successful launch of microtransit systems across the state—for example, Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC)'s LINK in Ashland and MetGo! in Wise-Norton County—has demonstrated a need for mobility in areas underserved by local bus routes, allowing residents in decentralized geographic areas accessibility to places like hospitals, grocery stores, and work. Zero emission technology implementation in Blacksburg and Alexandria is leading the way to meet sustainable environmental, mobility, and energy goals. Additionally, many systems are advancing network redesigns to more efficiently and effectively serve their communities.

Like nearly every facet of post-pandemic life, the cost to operate and maintain our public transit network has far outpaced funding levels. A snapshot of staffing costs across the Commonwealth's largest transit agencies shows an annual cost increase of 6.5% from 2019 to 2023. In addition to higher staffing costs, fuel, primarily diesel fuel, doubled in cost from mid-2019 to mid-2022 with fuel costs still over 25% above 2019 averages today. Lastly, the capital costs for our transit systems have also gone through the roof with the average costs of a transit bus going up anywhere from 15% for diesel buses to 30% for electric buses with delivery times extending from months to potentially years.

With transit ridership continuing to grow, operating costs becoming larger shares of transit agency budgets, and pandemic-era funding beginning to go away – now is the time to begin looking at expanded regional and statewide dedicated funding for public transportation to create and maintain the 21st-century modern transit network that Virginians deserve.

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Promoting public transit lowers the vehicle miles traveled in the state  
Photo by Andrew Kreydatus

## TOP TAKEAWAYS

Transit ridership has grown 140% since 2021 and is on pace to exceed 121 million trips in 2024.

Virginia's transit agencies are continuing to innovate by expanding micro-transit, implementing reduced or zero-fare programs, redesigning service and networks, investing in zero-emission technology, and improving our "last foot" infrastructure including investing in more shelters and benches.

Operating costs have far outpaced state and federal transit funding.

## ENDNOTES

1. "Greenhouse Gases," Virginia DEQ, <https://www.deq.virginia.gov/our-programs/air/greenhouse-gases>.
2. Moye, Brittany, "Annual New Car Ownership Costs Boil over \$12K," AAA Newsroom, (August 30, 2023). <https://newsroom.aaa.com/2023/08/annual-new-car-ownership-costs-boil-over-12k>.
3. Plaucher, Daniel, "Review of 2024 Virginia Transit Overview," Virginia Transit Association, (January 1, 2024), [https://vatransit.starchapter.com/images/2024\\_VA\\_Transit\\_Overview.pdf](https://vatransit.starchapter.com/images/2024_VA_Transit_Overview.pdf).
4. "Open Data Portal – DRPT." Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transit (2022), <https://drpt.virginia.gov/data/>.
5. Data generated by the Virginia Transit Association via several sources including the Federal Highway Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, VA Dept. of Rail and Public Transportation, and Federal Transit Administration.