

Mobility and Equity for New York's Transit-Starved Neighborhoods:

The Case for Full-Featured
Bus Rapid Transit

A Report Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and
Written by the Pratt Center for Community Development

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Executive Summary

In a year that marks the Rockefeller Foundation's centennial and the Pratt Center for Community Development's 50th anniversary, we turn our focus toward the future of New York City.

New York City's public transportation system moves millions of people every day. But an increasing number who live in outer borough neighborhoods are stuck with unreliable transit options and long travel times tracked in hours, not minutes.

It does not have to be this way.

Developed by the Pratt Center for Community Development and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, this report highlights the limitations of New York City's current public transit system, the adverse effects those limitations have on our economy and quality of life, and the role Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) can play in remedying these transit inequities.

BRT has transformed cities across the world from Mexico City to Barcelona to Cleveland. At a fraction of the cost to build just a mile of subway rail, BRT gives riders a reliable way to get where they need to go.

BRT is effective. It is innovative. And it could be the solution for New York's transit-starved neighborhoods.

Sincerely,

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Pratt Center works for a more sustainable and equitable New York City by integrating research, advocacy, and technical assistance to community-based organizations. For more information, [visit www.prattcenter.net](http://www.prattcenter.net)

Additional Support

The Rockefeller Foundation is working with public affairs firm Global Strategy Group to support and promote bus rapid transit in New York City.

Executive Summary

New York City's transit system is the largest and most heavily used in the United States, serving more riders each day than the twenty next largest systems combined. New York's density and economic vitality would be impossible without its bus and subway system.

But the system doesn't serve all New Yorkers equally. Over 758,000 New York City residents commute more than an hour each way. Two-thirds of those workers are traveling to jobs that earn their families less than \$35,000 per year. And commutes are lengthening for more and more people. Skyrocketing housing costs push low- and moderate-income families farther from Manhattan and the well-connected communities that surround it, to the "two-fare zones" where the nearest subway station is a long, slow bus ride away. While free transfers now keep the cost of those trips to a single swipe, commuters on Staten Island and in outlying neighborhoods of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, pay an ongoing penalty in time spent away from their families.

Employers outside the Manhattan Central Business District pay a price for poor transit as well. The number of jobs in Manhattan below 60th Street declined by over 100,000 from 2000 to 2009 – during the same period, every other borough gained jobs. And while the recovery of the financial sector has brought some jobs back to Manhattan, growth in other industries – retail, education, health care, manufacturing, transportation, logistics, and more – has continued to add jobs in outer borough clusters that are poorly served by transit. Most New Yorkers work in the same borough where they live – but the subway system's radial design makes cross-borough commutes difficult. A trip that would take twenty minutes by car can take forty-five minutes by bus. Bus trips are not only slow but also unpredictable, forcing some employers to send vans or livery cars to pick up workers from subway stops that may be several miles away. Employers have trouble finding and keeping workers, and workers find their access to jobs severely limited – especially to the mid-skilled work that offers a ladder out of poverty.

Difficult trips to destinations other than work also undermine the health and quality of life for those living in underserved neighborhoods. Hospitals and the clusters of health services that surround them are often difficult to reach, especially for seniors and people with disabilities. Students face long trips to the high schools and colleges that offer access to the skills needed to succeed. Local retail strips struggling to compete with big box chains suffer from lack of transit access, and from car-oriented street designs that discourage foot traffic.

There is no realistic prospect of expanding the subway system to serve outlying neighborhoods. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority's capital budget is severely challenged to finish the expansion projects already underway, to maintain the system in good condition, and to repair the damage done by Hurricane Sandy. Cost aside, subway construction below New York City's streets and buried infrastructure is difficult and disruptive, subject to unpredictable delays and cost escalation.

Bus Rapid Transit for New York City

Bus Rapid Transit offers a cost-effective and achievable solution to the mobility needs of New York's transit-starved neighborhoods. The MTA and New York City's Department of Transportation have taken important steps toward improving the speed and reliability of bus travel with Select Bus Service, now implemented or planned for a total of seven routes since its 2008 launch on the Bx12 in the Bronx. Even without some of the key features that characterize true BRT, SBS has delivered significant reductions in trip time, and won high ratings for customer satisfaction.

New York's underserved communities need something more. They need Bus Rapid Transit – a full-featured system that performs as well or better than light rail, but can be implemented at a fraction of the time and cost.

The Institute for Transportation and Development Policy's (ITDP) BRT Standard 2013 identifies five features as essential for a system to qualify as Bus Rapid Transit. These features are referred to by ITDP as the 'BRT Basics' and are the elements that define the concept of 'full-featured' BRT. To achieve the speed, flexibility, reliability, and comfort that the world's most successful BRT systems have demonstrated, we need:

- Bus lanes located along center medians rather than next to the curb, where they can be physically protected and where conflict with traffic, parking, and loading is minimized;
- Traffic signal priority and turn restrictions to maximize both speed and safety;
- Visible and comfortable stations where
 - Riders pay fares before the bus arrives, eliminating delays in boarding;
 - Platforms allow level boarding through multiple bus doors, providing universal access and further minimizing delay;
 - Maps and real-time bus information are available and clear.

Fortunately, in many neighborhoods where the need for better transit is greatest, rapid implementation of full-featured BRT is physically feasible. Major streets in these areas are wide, often with six or more traffic lanes, and with center medians that could accommodate BRT stations. Long blockfronts minimize the number of intersections, and the long distances along these routes make the gains in speed from BRT truly significant in reducing travel time.

Full-featured BRT can offer riders in what are now transit-starved areas the speed, reliability, and comfort we normally associate with rail. It also provides a fully accessible ride for seniors, people with disabilities, and people traveling with children. And when BRT is implemented as a network, with well-planned connections between BRT corridors and existing subway and bus routes, it has the potential to greatly increase the mobility of a very large number of people who today are isolated from transit.

BRT improves travel time and safety for non-riders as well. On the M15 SBS corridor in Manhattan, taxi GPS data shows that overall congestion has decreased with the creation of separated bus and bike lanes. The changes have also led to fewer crashes and injuries. Local retail corridors benefit from increased foot traffic when BRT infrastructure is coordinated with pedestrian and bicycling improvements. Improved transit access may decrease demand for parking, and make it possible to redesign street fronts that are now made uninviting and chaotic by wide curb cuts and setbacks for parking.



Priority Corridors for BRT

This report includes a recommendation for eight new, full-featured BRT corridors to be prioritized for further evaluation, planning, and implementation. The corridors were selected based on their potential benefits, and on their physical feasibility for BRT. Using data from the US Census, the Department of Labor, and the New York City Department of City Planning, we identified:

- **Areas where many people live more than ½ mile from any subway station**
- **Corridors connecting major job centers, especially those lacking good subway access**
- **Corridors connecting major health care and educational hubs**

We then prioritized corridors where BRT is physically feasible, selecting those where for most of their length, streets include:

- **Six or more traffic lanes**
- **Center medians**
- **Long distances between intersections**

A full-featured BRT network that would speed commutes and open up opportunity for millions of New Yorkers is achievable and affordable. It would build upon the framework of collaboration our agencies have established by implementing Select Bus Service; it would require the agencies to engage all stakeholders in identifying and overcoming obstacles to the more substantial interventions that BRT would entail. It would demand a modest commitment of capital dollars – backed by a real commitment of political capital by leaders at the City and State level.

