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Policy Hackathon: Can public transit recover from Covid-19?

Ridership plummeted and may never be the same. We asked 12 thought leaders to game out where city transit systems should go from here.

POLITICO Illustration; Zoom

By TANYA SNYDER | **05/27/2021**

Mass transit, almost by definition, is a pandemic-fighter's nightmare, with strangers crammed into enclosed spaces, breathing the same air. So it's no wonder that Covid-19 wreaked havoc with America's public transportation networks. Millions of workers stopped commuting and worked from home, kids stopped going to school, and stores and restaurants shuttered.

Empty buses and train cars were a good sign, at first, that people were heeding calls for social distancing. But it got more complicated from there.

Within weeks, we realized that grocery employees and hospital workers, renamed "essential workers" and lauded as heroes, were struggling to get to work as the transit systems they relied on cut schedules. People found it hard to make essential trips and access medical care. It turned out that even during a lockdown, public transportation is the artery through which the lifeblood of cities flows.

Now, emboldened by vaccines, people are returning to school and work and enjoying nights out again. Still, even when squeamishness about germs dissipates, the challenges facing public transit systems will persist. For many former daily commuters, work from home is widely expected to continue, untethering many employees from the office and allowing them to relocate outside metro areas for lower costs of living, better views or proximity to family.

What will all this mean for public transit systems?

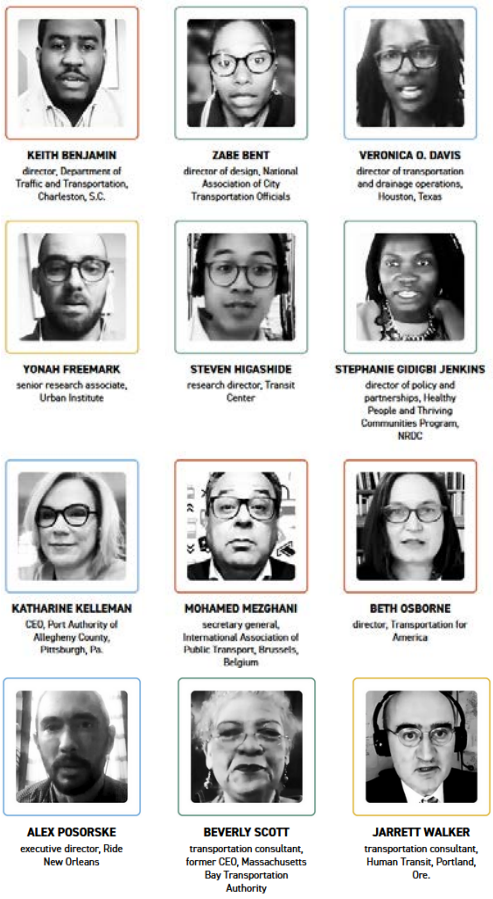
When the country shut down, transit ridership plummeted. Now, as things go back to normal, transit officials have an opportunity to reshape their systems to be more efficient and equitable.

To gauge the magnitude of the problem and brainstorm some policy responses, POLITICO gathered 12 of the savviest city transportation leaders, transit system designers, government officials and thought leaders from around the country, with one hailing from Europe. For nearly two hours over Zoom, they took stock of how the pandemic has changed how Americans get around, debated which of those changes will last beyond this moment, and thought up ideas for how cities and towns can best meet our post-pandemic transportation needs.

As the conversation demonstrated, that's not an easy puzzle. Even before the pandemic, less than 6 percent of Americans commuted to work on transit — a low rate policymakers have long decried but failed to remedy. Americans' habit of driving alone has clogged cities with traffic and made transportation responsible for more carbon emissions than any other sector. Many policymakers believe transit is essential for our cities to thrive for a future that's cleaner, healthier and more equitable.

Could Covid-19 provide an opportunity for public transit to hit the "reset" button and recalibrate its mission and practices? Here's what our policy hackers said.

The Participants



PART 1: HOW THE PANDEMIC WALLOPED TRANSIT SYSTEMS

When Americans were told to avoid crowded spaces, that meant buses and trains, subways and streetcars. Our policy hackers outlined what happened in the months that followed, and some of the lessons policymakers learned along the way.

Widespread service cuts

Nationally, transit ridership fell by 80 percent, so it's no wonder that many agencies dialed service way back. Some switched to a weekend schedule or stopped late-night service.

But hackathon participants said those cutbacks soon created new problems. Essential workers working low-paying service jobs whose value Americans finally recognized — but didn't remunerate — still had to go to work at

grocery stores, nursing homes, hospitals and, yes, transit agencies.

Those cuts made “essential workers’ jobs harder during the hardest year of many people's lifetimes,” said Steven Higashide of TransitCenter, a non-profit foundation focused on improving transit systems.

And it wasn’t just workers. Other essential trips were impacted as well, including access to medical care.

“Folks still needed to get to dialysis,” said Stephanie Gidigbi Jenkins of the Natural Resources Defense Council. “A lot of the implications for how we shut down the services last year were so real. Folks were literally coming outside and we did not have buses waiting for them.”

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— Stephanie Gidigbi Jenkins

Some agencies, understanding that their role was no longer to boost ridership but to keep the fragile fabric of society from coming completely apart, leaned in to the task of making sure essential workers could get where they needed to go.

“We saw across the country, really, this heroic effort to reallocate service to meet the needs and protect the health of essential workers,” said Higashide. “In Houston, for example, there were a lot of routes where the agency ran more service than before the pandemic to places like the Texas Medical Center and other places where there were a lot of essential trips happening.”

Veronica O. Davis, director of transportation for the city of Houston, noted that because of the work of “largely Black and brown men” who showed up to work throughout the pandemic, potholes got filled and repairs were made, and the city even moved forward with “advancing aggressively” its plans to improve transit.

That meant bus-only lanes and creating dedicated lanes for rail, sometimes even removing car traffic lanes, and improving access to bus stops.

Some agencies struggled to distribute limited resources while others showed nimbleness, using real-time data to reevaluate and tweak service day to day. Some agencies accelerated the adoption of technology that helps them better monitor system use during the pandemic, which will allow them to be more responsive to changing needs afterwards.

Equity suffered

Alex Posorske of Ride New Orleans, a rider advocacy group, said that the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA) initially eliminated service on a bus line that primarily served universities that had shut down for Covid. It was an effort to be strategic in how they made cuts, in order to keep frequent service on lines that were still being heavily used. But the change didn’t stick.

“Two phone calls to the local councilmember from a couple of angry constituents, and then a phone call in to the CEO of the RTA, and that bus was put back on tap,” Posorske said. He said he knew of health care workers whose buses were crammed so full that social distancing was impossible. “Meanwhile, this other bus that two people, apparently, really, really liked... was still running with two passengers an hour.”

People migrated

The pandemic caused a host of movements. Parents whose young children were suddenly at home with school and playgrounds shuttered and playdates off-limits moved in with grandparents. Workers who found themselves suddenly unemployed relocated in search of lower rent. People who could fled the cities, especially as the coronavirus tore through New York in the early days of the pandemic, and some white-collar workers took advantage of remote work and school to live wherever they pleased.

“Second-tier cities are succeeding to attract people from the big cities, and this is something new,” said Mohamed Mezghani of the International Association of Public Transport. “It's not just about people moving to the periphery of cities, but people moving outside of the big cities.”

“Second-tier cities are succeeding to attract people from the big cities, and this is something new.”

— Mohamed Mezghani

Some of that was just the continuation of a trend that was already happening, and in the cases of New York and San Francisco, it took some much-needed pressure out of an overheated housing market. But in other metro areas, real estate boomed in outlying areas as city dwellers burst out of cramped apartments and indulged in a suburban backyard once everything they had loved about city living was closed.

Whether they moved out of necessity or by choice, those moves put many outside the reach of transit — something which could become more problematic as the world reopens, if those relocations end up being long-lasting.

Rush hour disappeared

The policy hackers noted that the pandemic may have permanently changed commuting patterns, and that has long-term implications for public transit.

“We will never have everyone going back to 9-to-5 commuting the way they did before,” said transit consultant Jarrett Walker.

The pandemic has proven that many people were as productive, or more, working from home as they were in an office — no more commute and fewer fruitless meetings. That’s opened the floodgates for a trend that was already underway: increased remote work.

Our transportation systems are built for rush hour. It’s why highways are so wide and it’s when transit runs most frequently. But peak travel flattened during the pandemic, as many people working from home ran errands in the middle of the day. Even as riders slowly return to transit, hackathon participants noted that we’re seeing an afternoon travel boom but very little morning rush. If, post-

pandemic, white-collar workers continue to work from home at least a few days a week, or come in as needed for meetings but not stay all day, rush hour could continue to stay flat.

“This unlocks an enormous opportunity,” said Walker. “The opportunity to run better all-the-time service is not just really important to encouraging lower car dependence and lower carbon emissions — it's also fundamentally an equity and racial justice strategy, because lower-income people, people of color in particular, are just much less likely to be rush hour commuters and much more likely to be traveling all the time.”

Hub-and-spoke systems became obsolete

Most transit was built on a hub-and-spoke model — bringing people from the suburbs into city centers for work or shopping. That hasn’t worked well for decades, as suburban office parks decentralized business districts and sprawl lured — or pushed — residents farther and farther out into places where population density and land use patterns didn’t lend themselves to mass transit.

But transportation agencies have largely collected information on commuting, not other kinds of trips, so they haven’t had the tools to plan systems differently. Walker noted that trips to work make up only 20 percent of transit rides.

“Journey-to-work data becomes the underpinning of so many of our decisions, and then we exclude everyone else.” — *Zabe Bent*

“Journey-to-work data becomes the underpinning of so many of our decisions, and then we exclude everyone else,” said Zabe Bent, director of design for the National Association of City Transportation Officials. “Community colleges and technical schools are destinations. Why aren't most of them accessible by transit?”

Bent also noted that the trip to work doesn’t happen in isolation — people drop their kids off at school or stop at the grocery store after work. “Unless they can actually make the entire trip, including all their intermittent stops by some other mode — if they have to take a car to one of those — then they’re just going to take the car the whole day,” she said.

Beth Osborne of Transportation for America said that going forward from Covid, transit agencies’ “singular focus” should be on improving access to all the trips people make aside from work.

“A work trip that is 30 to 45 minutes is completely acceptable, and a work trip is 30 minutes is considered quite desirable,” Osborne said. “But a grocery trip that is 30 minutes is a public policy problem.”

PART 2: HOW TO FUTURE-PROOF PUBLIC TRANSIT FOR LIFE AFTER COVID

When local governments and transit systems ask voters to pay higher taxes to improve transit, voters overwhelmingly agree. But at the federal level, POLITICO’s policy hackers said the government hasn’t been nearly as successful in creating a unifying vision for transportation. It shows in the fact that the federal government hasn’t even tried asking people to pay more for transportation since 1993.

“One thing this pandemic has done is it ripped off so many seams that it provides us with a tremendous opportunity to really fight for the hearts and minds of the American public,” said Beverly Scott, four-time public transit CEO and infrastructure consultant.

Our hackathon participants had some ideas about where to start in the fight for hearts and minds. Here are five takeaways from the discussion.

1. It’s time to end transit red-lining.

In the wake of both the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, conversations about equity are in the spotlight. Katharine Kelleman of the Port Authority of Allegheny County, which serves the Pittsburgh area, said that as transit agencies begin their recovery they should be revisiting “service decisions from the previous century” and wrestling with ways that they might have contributed to redlining and other harmful policies.

“You know, Covid didn't break these things,” Kelleman said. “Covid showed us what was broken.”

“Covid didn't break these things. Covid showed us what was broken.” — *Katharine Kelleman*

Hackathon participants largely rejected the idea that there’s a trade-off between serving the transit-dependent riders who already make up their core constituency and trying to attract new constituencies by luring people out of their cars. Most said that agencies should continue to focus on their core ridership — people without access to cars who rely on transit, essential workers who travel at off-peak hours and not just to central business districts.

“Transit is one of the only places where we are expected to neglect the consumer who uses our service 30 to 35 times a week and chase after someone who might use it five times a week,” said Kelleman.

Higashide of TransitCenter suggested that “one of the most reliable ways to build ridership is to improve transit service in places where ridership already exists, where ridership is already strong. What that means now is really focusing on communities of color, focusing on the places where people didn't stop using transit.”

Overall, the participants rejected the idea that they should have to choose to serve one group over another.

“That was a conversation we had when we all agreed to grossly underfund transit,” said Osborne.

2. Refocus on bus service.

While rail transit — often the mode built to lure the coveted “choice rider” — was generally built to bring commuters into the city center to work, many of the hackathon participants stressed that the bus is the workhorse and even in some cases, the “hero” of the transit network.

Walker noted that the flexibility of buses — the ability to change routes easily — is often held against them, with rail

considered a better driver of economic development because of its permanence.

“And now we have everyone coming from the tech world pushing micro transit, [saying] fixed transit is so rigid,” Walker said. “The sweet spot that we're in with bus service... this is the only thing that is both efficient and scalable.”

“Bus service … is the only thing that is both efficient and scalable.”

— Jarrett Walker

He said now, bus-oriented development is beginning to happen where he lives in Portland, Ore., and other places, “lining bus routes with four-story apartment buildings.”

Hackathoners endorsed that kind of alignment of housing development with transit development so transit serves population centers and residents can get where they need to go without driving.

3. Detangle jurisdictions.

Hackathon participants unanimously criticized the fragmented authorities governing city streets and transportation operations that disempower city leaders and make even small changes prohibitively cumbersome.

If a city has 10,000 bus stops, “every one of them requires a permit, a permit that I don't give,” said Scott.

Bent noted that some hurdles “went away during the pandemic because we realized that we needed to make some serious moves, and we need to do more of that.”

How? Our hackathoners — primarily representing cities, not states — advocated for direct funding to cities, rather than funneling all federal money through state Departments of Transportation which tend to focus on highways rather than transit, biking and walking. Competitive federal grant programs that allow cities and transit agencies to apply for funds directly are enormously popular, but formula funding goes through states.

Keith Benjamin, transportation director for Charleston, S.C., said the conflicting and overlapping maze of authorities makes his job particularly complicated. Some larger cities “own all their streets, bond their transportation dollars, don't have state legislative stipulations that are in the way of how they make decisions,” he said. “We’re fourth in the country in the amount of roads that are owned by the state DOT. That means I need permission from my district office just to put up a stop sign.”

Osborne noted that highway agencies will always need to be involved in improving transit, since “most transit rides on the roadways,” which are “outside the control of transit agencies.”

Mezghani pointed to integrated mobility agencies that are cropping up in some European cities and Dubai that combine all modes of transportation and have achieved better transit adoption.

“The issue is not just about money,” Mezghani said. “I mean money of course will help, but it's a governance issue.”

4. Make driving worse.

Some residents complain about “social engineering” when cities intentionally set out to make driving alone less appealing. But hackathon participants noted that public policy has long done the opposite by subsidizing gasoline and parking, disincentivizing transit use and dedicating a large amount of public space to private car traffic and storage — essentially, engineering the car dependency that rules today.

“If we let the motorists go wherever they want to go, they can park wherever they want to park and they can use their cars whenever they want, then we cannot increase the market share of public transport,” said Mezghani.

Part of the problem with private cars is that they erode the efficiency of buses and make them run slower. Inefficiency often leads to inequity, and as people with low-incomes are priced out of inner cities, the people who end up living near convenient transit access are those for whom that access is an amenity, not a necessity.

“We have chosen as a society to really underinvest in the quality of transit services we provide.”

— Yonah Freemark

We live “in a world of scarcity, in a world of austerity in our public transportation system,” said Yonah Freemark of the Urban Institute. “We have chosen as a society to really underinvest in the quality of transit services we provide. That's why we've ended up with this situation, where there's this perception that only poor people use transit.”

“But the reality is, if you look at some of the biggest metropolitan areas in the country, actually the transit use rates are highest among the highest-income individuals,” Freemark went on. “And that's because in those places, the transit services are better quality.”

President Joe Biden’s push to electrify vehicles will advance our climate goals, but “a clean traffic jam is still a traffic jam,” Mezghani noted. High-quality transit addresses climate, congestion, land use equity and social inclusion all at once by prioritizing public space for the most efficient modes.

5. Revamp data systems.

In order for the transportation system to achieve its goals, it needs good data. But our panelists were united in saying that governments are measuring the wrong things, and measuring them poorly.

“We tend to say that as long as your ridership numbers are trending in the upward direction that your system is healthy,” Bent said. “We need to be more nuanced than that. We need to look at travel times and how competitive they are to driving. We need to make sure that accessibility between modes is there. We need to make sure that on-time performance works… across the network, not just on the core system.”

Instead of measuring congestion in terms of how much time traffic adds to car trips,

advocates have been pressuring policymakers to measure people's access to destinations across modes. They also want to see carbon emissions become part of how projects are evaluated. And when highway projects are assessed, the metrics should take into consideration "induced demand," or the amount of additional driving that will happen when a roadway's capacity is expanded.

"The inclusion of induced demand on our highways would lead to a very different kind of investment overall."

— Beth Osborne

"The inclusion of induced demand on our highways would lead to a very different kind of investment overall in every state in the union," Osborne said.

Better metrics will also lead to greater equity, said Bent. It's important to "have a framework that is based on actual information" instead of just listening to the loudest voices, who "are always going to be the most privileged voices."

CONCLUSION

POLITICO's policy hackers didn't agree on every point, but they all conveyed a sense of urgency about recalibrating public transit goals and practices for the post-pandemic era. For all the damage Covid did to city transportation systems, it also provided them an opportunity to learn more about how transit is used, reconsider the mission, and reallocate resources.

In the short term, Steven Higashide said he worries that continued low ridership could become a self-fulfilling prophecy if transit agencies hoard federal Covid relief dollars in anticipation of a slow recovery. Instead, he said, as an economic recovery gets underway, this is a key moment for transit officials to show what they've learned and what their systems can do.

"We need service on the street," Higashide said. "We need improvements now to lead the recovery and compete for everyone."