



# **Too Many Riders Left Behind: DDOT Still Failing to Provide Adequate Bus Service**

---

TRU's Report Card and Recommendations on DDOT  
Bus On-Time Performance and Service

**Transportation Riders United (TRU)  
November 20, 2012**

**Mayor Bing and DDOT have failed to provide riders with adequate bus service - in terms of reliability, amount of service and customer service. A third of buses are not on time and 40% of customer service calls are unanswered. Poor service results in long waits at bus stops and on the phone. Detroiters are being left behind and are missing employment and educational opportunities.**

This report details the magnitude and scope of the problems and offers concrete solutions that Mayor Bing and DDOT must implement to improve bus service. This is the third of biannual report cards produced by Transportation Riders United, Detroit's transit advocate.

## AUTHORS

**Transportation Riders United (TRU) is Detroit's transit advocate.** A Detroit-based nonprofit organization founded in 1999, TRU is dedicated to improving transit throughout greater Detroit in order to restore urban vitality, ensure transportation equity and improve quality of life. TRU believes the Detroit region needs a balanced transportation network because transportation investments shape our future.

This report was authored by Ruth Johnson, TRU Assistant Director, and edited by Megan Owens, TRU Executive Director.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Shari Hampton served as TRU'S DDOT Bus Campaign Coordinator and led the DDOT bus timeliness observation and customer service evaluation efforts this Fall. She performed a masterful job managing the volunteers and analyzing the customer service data. We are grateful for Mike Whims for his overall guidance and his analysis of the bus timeliness data. We also would like to thank Patty Fedewa, Michael Boettcher and Matthew Trecha for their much-appreciated assistance.

TRU sincerely thanks the volunteers who weathered cold temperatures and post-Sandy rainstorms and high winds, oftentimes without a bus shelter or bench. Special thanks to: Donna, Elizabeth, Joann, Joshua, Margaret, Mel, Patty, Rebecca, Shari, Sidni, Taiasha and Tyrone.

We would also like to thank the many hard-working, dedicated DDOT employees, who despite challenging work conditions, endeavor to provide good bus service.

## **Transportation Riders United (TRU) has graded the on-time performance of DDOT buses. DDOT has earned another inadequate grade: **D**.**

**DDOT continue to provide riders with unreliable bus service** despite operating substantially less service since the Spring 2012 cuts and despite the promises to improve service on the four busiest bus routes. For truly on-time bus service that meets the needs of the bus riding public, a bus should depart either at the time on the published schedule or within the next five (5) minutes. Secondly, to meet the needs of riders, DDOT must increase the amount of bus service being offered. Third, the City of Detroit does not provide the public with adequate access to bus information nor allow the public to meaningfully participate in decisions that affect public transportation services. In all three aspects, DDOT has failed yet again.

**We found that only 67% of buses were on-time, earning DDOT a D grade.** While this represents a small improvement from the D- DDOT earned in April 2012, the bottom line is that DDOT still fails its riders and is unacceptable for an essential city service. Mayor Bing brought in a management team to operate DDOT and to improve bus service. Instead they drastically cut bus service and didn't substantially improve on-time performance as promised. In April 2012, DDOT eliminated overnight service, reduced evening and weekend service and increased wait times for many bus routes. This means that DDOT needed to operate 220 buses instead of 300. Think of it as making the test easier, because there are fewer questions. Yet this also means that when a bus is scheduled every 40-60 minutes, a late or missed bus is more devastating to riders waiting at the bus stop.

TRU is pleased that DDOT adopted our recommendation to provide real-time bus information. DDOT launched the Text My Bus program this Fall, which allows riders to receive text messages about bus arrival times. Unfortunately, real-time information does not replace on-time performance.

Also in April, DDOT announced with much fanfare its 415 plan which promised buses every 15 minutes weekdays from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm on the four routes with the highest ridership: Gratiot, Woodward, Grand River and Dexter. In actuality, the 415 was a reduction in published bus frequency. TRU hoped that DDOT would honor its promises, but again it has disappointed riders.

### ***TRU's Research – Bus Timeliness***

To supplement the personal experiences of TRU members and anecdotes from other bus riders, we collected and analyzed DDOT bus on-time performance data. During the week of October 29 through November 2, 2012, TRU volunteers observed and recorded bus departure times at five pre-selected locations: Rosa Parks Transit Center, State Fair Transit Center, Woodward and Warren, Northland Center and Mack and Moross. In all, **we monitored the actual performance of 511 scheduled bus runs.**

Volunteers documented the on-time performance as follows:

- *Early*: Departed before the scheduled time
- *On Time*: Departed within 0-5 minutes of the scheduled time
- *Late*: Departed 6-15 minutes after the scheduled time
- *Very Late*: Departed more than 16 minutes after the scheduled time
- *Didn't Arrive*: No bus showed up before the next scheduled time

### ***Bus Timeliness Results***

**The likelihood of a DDOT rider experiencing an on-time bus is just 67% - meaning that one third of the time a bus would leave early, late or simply never show up.** The average for the four bus routes that DDOT promised consistent service was no better at 66%. These four routes serve over 3/4 of all DDOT riders.

On-time performance varied dramatically on different routes – from a high of 87% to an outrageous low of 50%. Although DDOT has apparently successfully addressed the

difficulties it had last Fall in getting working buses on the road. Regrettably that improvement has not been translated into better on-time performance. Pullout rates (number of buses leaving the terminals in the morning and afternoon compared to the number needed to operate all scheduled bus routes) averaged 98-100% for 26 out 30 days in the past 2 months. Despite this improvement, DDOT has not figured out how to get the buses to pick up riders when they say they will.

Timeliness of the Dexter and Woodward buses are powerful examples of DDOT's failure to provide reliable bus service. Both bus routes are part of the 415 Plan which promised service every 15 minutes. TRU volunteers observed unpredictable Dexter bus performance – 50% overall. Out of the twenty runs, only half were On-time, three runs were Early, four were Late, two were Very Late, and one bus Didn't Arrive at all.

The Woodward bus performed better than the Dexter bus with 68% on-time, but nowhere near the promise of every 15 minutes. This route connects workers, students, patients and citizens to schools, universities, hospitals, jobs and government offices. It also connects riders to many cross-town routes; two transit centers: State Fair and Rosa Parks; and other transit providers – SMART, Amtrak, The People Mover, Megabus and Transit Windsor. Our volunteers observed over 175 inbound and outbound runs. Sixteen Woodward buses were Early, 26 Late, 3 Very Late, and an astounding 11 Didn't Arrive.

Based upon our analysis of the observation data, we were unable to identify trends or patterns regarding which routes or which days of the week or times of day were more or less problematic. **On the whole, the likelihood of a DDOT rider experiencing an on-time bus is just two-thirds.** For riders working a six day week, DDOT would make them late twice every week – clearly unacceptable to any boss.

For riders working a six day week, DDOT would make them late twice every week – clearly unacceptable to any boss.

Moreover, when the next bus arrives, it is too often overcrowded and the people waiting may not be able to board. Volunteers noted that 20-40 riders boarded Grand River buses at a single bus stop. Other volunteers observed the large number of riders boarding at the State Fair Transit Center. From anecdotal experiences, the Woodward bus picks up many riders at the transit center, in Highland Park and in the New Center area. By the time it reaches Midtown or Mack Avenue there isn't room for anyone else. When overcrowded buses arrive, people using wheelchairs and scooters are even more likely to be left behind.

### ***TRU's Research - Customer Service Calls***

For the first time, TRU evaluated the DDOT customer service phone system. We wanted to know how long it took to reach a customer service representative (CSR) and how customers were treated when they called. Volunteers called the DDOT customer service number 313-933-1300 during published hours Monday through Friday 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. During the week of November 5–9, 2012 volunteers placed a total of 50 calls during 4 time periods – 6:00-6:30 am; 11:30 am-12:30 pm; 3:00-4:00 pm; and 5:30-6:00 pm. These time periods were chosen to replicate when someone seeking bus information before going to school or work or an appointment would likely call. The calls made by volunteers were evaluated on how many times the volunteer needed to call to reach a CSR, call length and the CSR's tone of voice.

### ***Customer Call Evaluation Results***

**We were appalled by how hard it was to get through to a customer service representative on the phone. Overall, 40% of the time volunteers never reached a representative after five tries.** Looking at the volunteers who reached a representative the first time, the percentage drops to 31%. Getting through to a CSR required many volunteers to call multiple times and wait more than 5 minutes. These problems were experienced during all call periods, but were far worse for evening callers. From 5:30 – 6:00 pm, 75% didn't reach a CSR. Volunteers who called during the 6:00 am and lunch hour

periods had longer call waits than afternoon and evening callers. Happily, the volunteers found when they were able to reach the CSRs, the representatives used a friendly or neutral tone of voice.

What was particularly troubling about the customer call center was that on November 5 – Election Day – volunteers were unable to reach a CSR throughout all time periods. Callers were either automatically disconnected or the recording continuously repeated. This had the potential of affecting voters who came to the wrong polling location and needed bus information to get the correct polling location. To make matters worse, there was no prior notice or day-of notification that DDOT was not adhering to its published customer service hours.

**It appears that DDOT does not have the capacity – either due to inadequate technology or inadequate staff levels – to provide customer service when it says it will.** For persons without ready access to the Internet or smart phones or simply cannot manage the automated system, they will have to endure long waits on the phone, make multiple calls or give up. DDOT must do better not to leave customers hanging.

### ***The Impact of Poor Bus Service***

Overcrowding is likely the result of not having enough bus service to meet the needs of riders. DDOT cut service dramatically earlier this year – eliminating overnight service, severely reducing evening and weekend service, and decreasing the number of bus runs for many routes. Riders are left with longer wait times and overall commute times even if the buses are on time. TRU demands that service be restored to January 2012 levels, because Detroiters and others who use DDOT would be more likely to get where they need to go. When bus riders are left behind, the City of Detroit will continue to trail other areas with adequate and reliable transit options.

The impact of this unreliable and insufficient bus service is that **Detroiters cannot get to the places they need to go – work, school, doctor’s appointments or shopping – and some riders leave up to an hour or two early to ensure on-time arrival.** Employees are late for work or are forced to have back-up plans. High school students worry about being late to school or have difficulty getting to their after school jobs, even when the workplace is only two miles away. Detroit residents lose out on job opportunities, because they are fired or employers will not hire them because they rely upon DDOT buses. TRU is aware of several instances where Detroiters turned down jobs that were offered to them due to unreliable DDOT buses. TRU’s Faces of Transit project documents the impact of DDOT bus service on riders and transit supporters.

What does it mean to the City of Detroit?

- Its young people lose out on class time they need to acquire knowledge
- Employers lose valuable, trained, experienced employees
- Recent college grads and other entrepreneurs move to other cities with better transportation services
- Its citizens lose income because they are unable to get to work, and thus the
- **City loses tax revenue.**

**Detroit will continue to struggle economically until it can ensure that everyone can truly be a productive and contributing member of society, regardless of whether or not they own or drive a personal motor vehicle.**

## ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

Unfortunately, we cannot give the City of Detroit extra credit for effort, because this has been an ongoing, yet neglected, problem for years. In fact with less service, the test is an easier one. Despite promises by the Bing Administration and the management team the Mayor brought in, timeliness remains totally unacceptable.



Every public transit system in the country has funding limitations, labor struggles, and difficult conditions. Yet few systems have as bad bus service and as many ongoing problems as Detroit. It is past time for Detroit to learn from other cities and provide consistently reliable bus service.

Although TRU is pleased with the attention the City Council, media and Governor Snyder have placed on Detroit transit, the responsibility and authority to operate DDOT buses is an executive branch function. **For this reason, Mayor Bing must take strong and immediate action to drastically improve bus service.**

As Detroit's transit advocate, Transportation Riders United offers the following proposals as solutions to these problems based on in-depth research, analysis of other systems, and a good bit of common sense. Some can be implemented by DDOT management, yet many others by Mayor Bing and others within his administration. **TRU recommends that the City of Detroit immediately implement the following management practices to dramatically improve bus timeliness and service.**

## **1. Prioritize On-Time Performance**

Bus passengers should be able to rely on the bus to arrive within a few minutes of its scheduled time. This is too often the exception today, but can be addressed in several specific ways.

- a. A culture of timeliness must be promoted by DDOT. **Management must hold all employees including mechanics, drivers, and road supervisors accountable for on-time performance.**
- b. DDOT management must **hold Road Supervisors accountable for the on-time performance** of the buses under their watch. Having tablet computers that tell

Road Supervisors about no-time performance doesn't necessarily mean they'll take action to address problems in the field. If the Road Supervisors know they will personally be impacted by on-time performance, their efficacy will improve as well.

- c. DDOT management should seek to **address 'bus bunching'**, when one bus is running late and others crowd behind it at the same stops, thus delaying the whole schedule. To this end, we suggest that dispatch and/or road supervisors actively communicate with drivers and coordinate a solution (such as one bus driving ahead and start operating mid-route).
- d. There must be **more regular monitoring and public reporting on-timeliness**. Although TRU is pleased that DDOT posts its pull-out rates on its website, we demand daily on-time performance statistics be communicated to the public, City Council and to riders.

## **2. Schedule Bus Service When and Where It Is Needed**

Overcrowding is likely caused by fewer and late buses on the road. As previously mentioned, TRU demands that service be restored to January 2012 levels, because if DDOT operates this amount of service and provided it on a timely basis, Detroiters and other who use DDOT buses could more dependably get where they need to go.

## **3. Provide Customers with Bus Information When They Need It**

Callers should not have to make numerous calls per time they call to reach a customer service representative nor should they have to wait more than 5 minutes to reach a representative. Whatever DDOT must do, just do it. It is also just as important to have advance notifications when DDOT is not adhering to their regularly published customer service hours. Additionally, we ask DDOT to consider extending customer service hours to evenings and weekends in light of the number of Detroiters who work various shifts and throughout Metro Detroit.

#### **4. Provide Meaningful Opportunities for Public Involvement**

Providing meaningful opportunities for public involvement focuses on ensuring that all DDOT riders and interested parties are welcomed and have the opportunities to play meaningful parts in proposed service changes, share concerns, and offer ideas. This would also enhance DDOT's ability to achieve its stated mission to "provide public transit services that are reliable, clean, customer-focused, safe and secure." Through public participation, riders grow a sense of fairness and partnership with DDOT as long as DDOT opens the door, listens, and acts on riders concerns.

#### **5. Actively Pursue Long-Term Regional Solutions**

Few other major cities run their own bus service as a city department. No other major city attempts to fund its transit out of its general fund. Nearly every other major city is part of a regional transit system funded by a dedicated transit tax. Detroit must pro-actively move more towards a new regional solution.

**DDOT must have enough funding to increase scheduled service and provide sufficient bus service** in order to avoid overcrowding and allow for a better, more reliable system throughout. While Detroit may not be able to afford to increase funding at the present time, there must be additional funding for Detroit transit in the near future. Ultimately, Detroit must seek a new way of providing transit to its citizens.

**Greater Detroit needs a dedicated regional transit tax.** Most major cities utilize a regional (multi-county) sales tax, income tax, vehicle fees, or other mechanisms to fund their regional transit systems. The greater Detroit region must do the same. Governor Snyder has proposed a local vehicle registration fee, which would not raise enough money to fund all of DDOT and SMART, but would be a good step in the right direction.

Not only should Mayor Bing and his administration **support an effective Regional Transit Authority, it should actively lead and publicly promote efforts to get the RTA bills passed by the Michigan Legislature.** The Regional Transit Authority, if passed, would

coordinate and oversee all transit services within the southeast Michigan region. This agency would not take over DDOT, but could enable new funding mechanisms and increased federal support, in addition to improved coordination with SMART and other transit providers. To be effective, a Regional Transit Authority must have a regionally focused and democratically structured Board and have real taxing and oversight authority.

The Mayor is the ultimate boss of DDOT bus service and he must actively manage this department. This includes hiring the right people to manage, rewarding creative solutions and positive results, disciplining employees that are not doing their jobs to standard, and developing effective long-term regional solutions. All of greater Detroit depends on it.

## **Conclusion**

Good bus service is important to the thousands of riders who rely upon DDOT to get them to their jobs, schools and important activities and appointments. TRU finds 67% on-time performance unacceptable. We do not minimize the improvements that DDOT has made in pullout rates or launching the Text My Bus program or the tremendous financial pressures the City of Detroit is under, but our focus is on bus timeliness and service. Our report card cannot be based on effort or promises for improvement, but is based on actual performance.

TRU strives to work with the Bing Administration, DDOT management and unions, City Council members, Financial Advisory Board members, community leaders and riders to improve and promote public transportation throughout Detroit and the region. We envision a balanced transportation network that anyone would choose to use, because it is reliable, clean, customer-focused, safe and secure. We demand that Mayor Bing and DDOT do not leave the many Detroiters, who have no other option than to cope with unreliable and inadequate bus service, behind any longer.