

# SAFE(R) TRANSIT DURING COVID-19

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This is a summary of the report **produced in September 2020 by Transportation Riders United**, Detroit's public transit advocate.

TRU believes everyone should be able to get where they need to go, regardless of whether they drive. TRU educates, advocates, and mobilizes for improved public transit and other sustainable mobility options.

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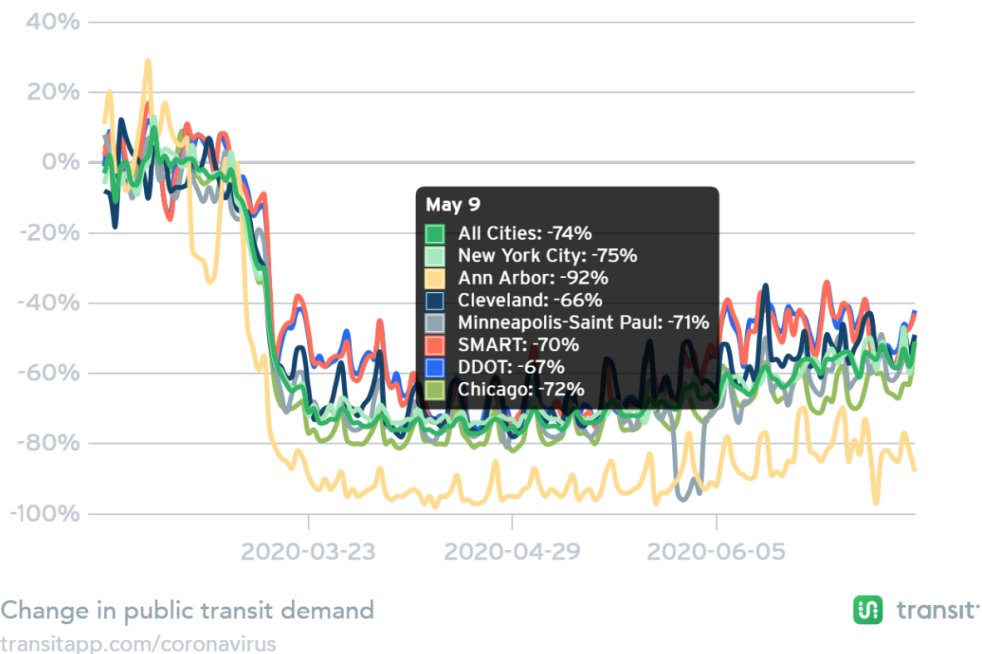
In March of 2020, COVID-19 turned Detroit and American society on its head.

It transformed work, schools, grocery shopping, restaurants, funerals, and every other way people come together.

Public transit has long been the most efficient way to move lots of people. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic required people to avoid crowds and stay at home as much as possible. Many people rightly did just that.

**Transit ridership across the United States dropped roughly 75%** during mid-March. Commuter services into downtown business districts dropped 90% or more, as did service in college towns like Ann Arbor. DDOT and SMART bus services saw their ridership drop around 70%. The QLINE and Detroit People Mover stopped operating all together.

Despite that, **bus services kept operating, because they must.** Census records show at least 36% of transit riders work in essential industries - they're the **nurses, janitors, grocery clerks, and pharmacy techs that keep our society functioning.** A national survey found that 92% of people still using transit rode it to work. Of those, 20% worked in healthcare and 20% in food service.



Unfortunately, transit workers were among the front-line workers hit hard by COVID-19 early on, before safety practices became common. Detroit bus driver Jason Hargrove tragically passed away from coronavirus in late March, shortly after complaining of a rider coughing without covering her mouth.

During the spring, transit systems both globally and locally figured out the critical steps to minimize transmission risk:

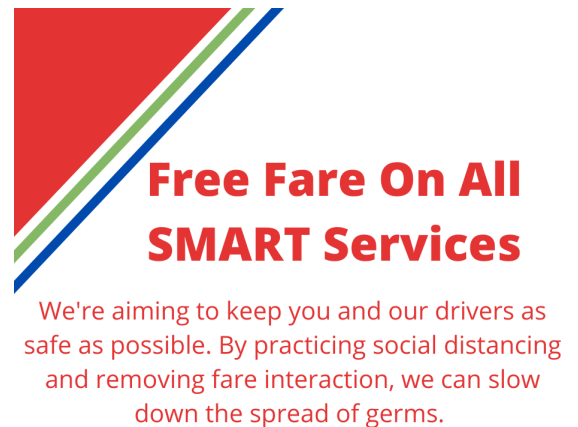
- **Requiring masks**, handing them out when possible
- **Separating drivers** by directing passengers to use the rear doors, not charging fares, and installing plexiglass barriers
- **Enabling maximum airflow** with open windows when possible
- **Extra sanitation**, like cleaning buses at the end of each run
- **Avoid crowding** and provide passengers as much space as possible.

**DDOT and SMART quickly implemented most of these best practices.** In fact, SMART was among the first in the nation to provide no-fare rear-door boarding upon recommendation from staff. **DDOT has handed out more than 500,000 masks** to passengers who need them. Riders report that the buses as cleaner than they had ever been before.

However when COVID-19 struck, many bus drivers were unable to work themselves. Agencies cut back on the amount of bus service they operated. SMART dropped to 60% of normal service, then to 30%, then increased as demand increased.

DDOT has struggled to provide enough service. Despite a goal of no more than 15 riders per bus, infrequent service has meant either risking overcrowded buses or leaving residents stranded without a ride. DDOT leadership recognizes this problem and are working to address it.

For the safety of riders and our broader community, **DDOT must immediately provide enough bus service to ensure everyone can get where they need to go safely.**



These safety measures proved to be effective. There has been no evidence across the globe of public transit being a major source of COVID-19 transmission. Studies in Paris, Tokyo, Austria, and other places with extensive contact tracing found no infection clusters tied to public transit, despite active transit systems.



While no public activity is 100% safe, when agencies provide frequent enough bus service and everyone is consistent in wearing masks, **public transit can be a low-risk way for Detroiters to get where they need to go.**

This is critically important. Our nation and our region are facing an economic crisis too. Reliable bus service can be a lifeline for unemployed residents struggling with the high costs of cars and insurance, providing Detroit families the safe affordable access they need to weather this storm.

Transit can help metro Detroit and the nation build back better.

