

SOS: Save Our Service

The No-Show Bus Crisis Devastating Riders
and Solutions for Fixing DDOT and SMART's
Transit Operator Shortage



TR Transportation
Riders United

July 2023

Transportation Riders United is a Detroit-based nonprofit organization with over 20 years of transit advocacy experience. TRU believes everyone should be able to get where they need to go, regardless of whether they drive. TRU educates, advocates, and mobilizes for more and better public transit transportation and other affordable sustainable mobility options throughout the Detroit region.

Authored by

Joel Batterman, Campaign Manager
Megan Owens, Executive Director

Edited by

Megan Owens, Executive Director
Petra Mihalko, Design Intern

Design by

Petra Mihalko, Design Intern

Published

07.26.2023, Detroit

Contact

Transportation Riders United
PO Box 2668, Detroit, MI 48202
www.DetroitTransit.org

 www.DetroitTransit.org

 [@DetroitTransit](https://www.instagram.com/DetroitTransit)

 [@DetroitTransit](https://twitter.com/DetroitTransit)

 [@DetroitTransit](https://www.facebook.com/DetroitTransit)

 info@DetroitTransit.org

Detroit area bus service is in crisis.

Despite growing public support for public transit throughout metro Detroit, bus service in our region has been severely reduced since the COVID-19 pandemic began and shows no sign of turning around.

This crisis of essential transportation services has disrupted the lives of thousands of people and continues to act as a brake on the region's economic recovery. Yet it has drawn little attention from most elected officials and policymakers.

Public transit in this region has long been limited, but SMART and DDOT buses still managed to provide essential transportation for tens of thousands of people daily. Despite mostly infrequent service, riders could usually count on buses showing up on time.

In the wake of the pandemic, however, DDOT and SMART have faced severe staffing shortages - especially among bus drivers - lacking roughly one-quarter and one-third of their needed workforce respectively. Despite management acknowledging the problem and taking some steps to address it, too little has substantively changed over the past year.

The lack of staff has had **devastating consequences for bus riders**. Most riders have regularly endured hour-long waits due to scheduled buses not showing up. Many miss classes and appointments or have even lost jobs due to no-show buses and infrequent service. To avoid that, others

spend money they cannot afford calling Ubers or trying to buy a "cheap" vehicle of their own, which end up being very costly.

This driver shortage is a national problem and a range of issues contribute to it, including inconvenient schedules for new operators; poor management practices; and overly rigid drug testing, which should all be addressed.

One of the greatest factors in the driver shortage for SMART and DDOT is clearly low pay. DDOT and SMART bus drivers are paid much less than their peers in other cities and in similar jobs locally. Shockingly, DDOT drivers start at only \$15/hour, less than many fast food workers earn.

In this competitive labor market, DDOT and SMART must raise wages for operators and cannot delay. This is essential towards resolving the operator shortage, improving service for riders, and enabling the reliable transit everyone in the region deserves.

Despite increased recruitment and other notable efforts, bus agency management seem unable to address this crisis with the urgency riders need on their own.

Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and County Executives Dave Coulter, Warren Evans, and Mark Hackel – who have all repeatedly voiced the importance of local bus service – need to personally intervene to solve this bus crisis and Save Our Service.

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Stranded Without Service

How Bad Gets Worse



Before the COVID-19 pandemic, public transit in Detroit and the region was already limited, due to decades of consistent underfunding. This has been well documented in numerous reports, studies, and articles.

The main reason the Detroit region provides so little transit is that, on a per-capita basis, the region spends less on public transit than almost any other metropolitan area in the country – just one-third of what most major metropolitan areas invest. Given that the largest costs for transit agencies are buses, fuel, drivers, and insurance, there is no way to provide a lot of transit service with little funding.

Nevertheless, tens of thousands of people in the region still rely on transit on a daily basis to get to work, school, doctors, groceries, church, and other destinations. Many of those riders have little or no other option.

In the city of Detroit, about 23% of all households have no motor vehicle. While car ownership is more widespread in most suburbs, there is a substantial number of no-motor-vehicle households in communities ranging from Westland (9%) to Utica (19%) to River Rouge (25%).¹ A much larger proportion of households lack access to a consistently reliable motor vehicle or one for every working adult in the household.

Unfortunately, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many transit agencies have struggled to hire and maintain enough

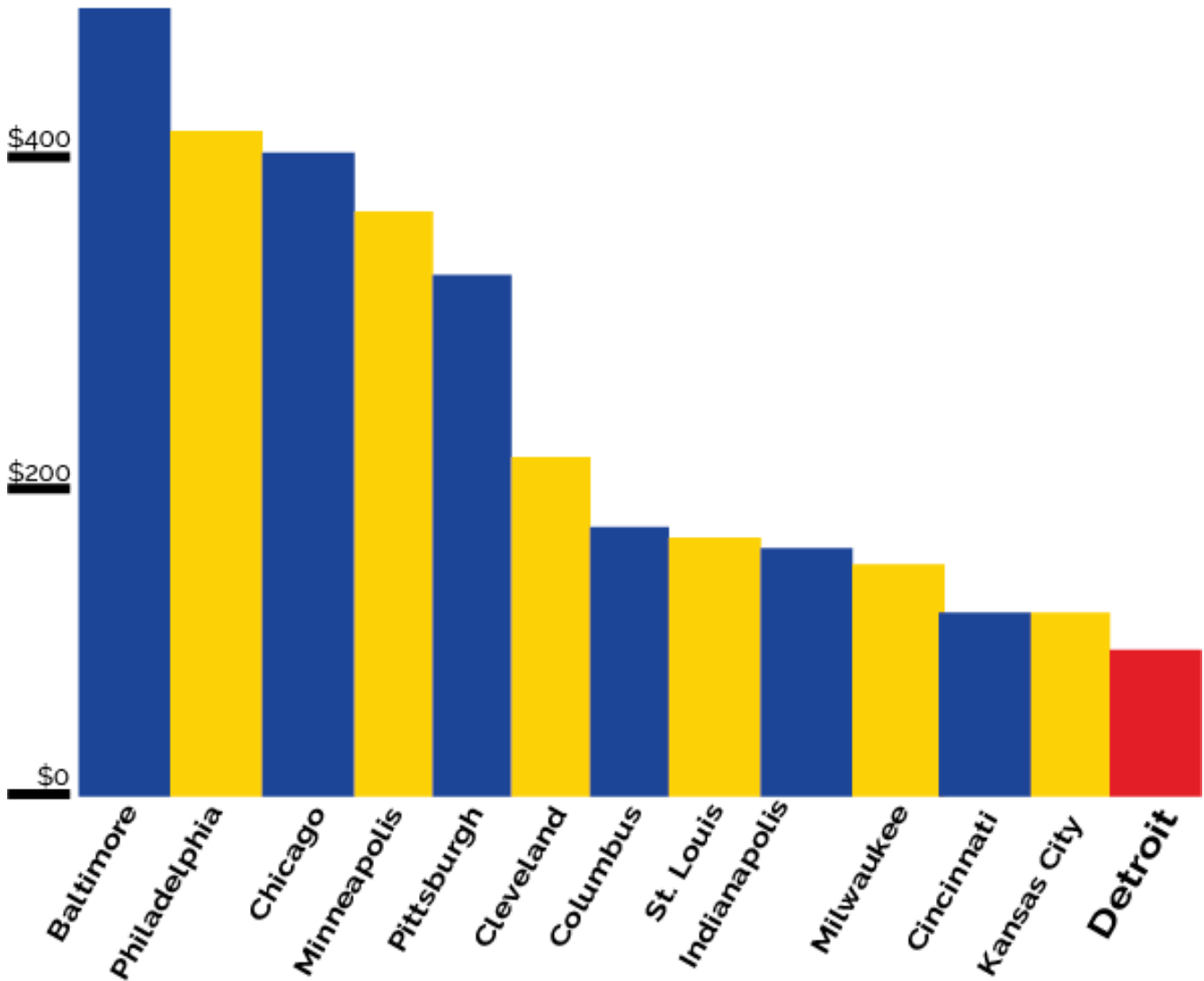


Dozens of riders wait to board DDOT's 5 pm 18-Fenkell, a route that now runs just once per hour, after the previous run failed to show up.

drivers. Due to this growing shortage of bus operators, the region's transit agencies have cut service drastically, leaving the region with even less bus service than before.

DDOT, the largest transit provider in the state of Michigan, reduced frequency on its routes and eliminated several entirely. SMART has also reduced frequency and curtailed routes into Detroit. Previously, SMART had operated "peak hour" service into Detroit on routes like the 125-Fort and 510-Van Dyke, allowing riders to take a single bus between Detroit and suburban destinations, and vice versa. In the wake of these changes, riders are forced to transfer between DDOT and SMART buses at the Detroit city limit, which often requires a lengthy wait.

Spending on Transit Per Person (2019, Metro Area)



Service is Still Down



Although many transit agencies around the country are still operating at reduced capacity, due chiefly to the lack of operators, some agencies have fully restored and even expanded service. Locally, TheRide (Ann Arbor Area Transportation Authority) is operating 103% of pre-pandemic service.

However, SMART and DDOT have not restored service to anything resembling pre-pandemic levels. As of March 2023, the most recent month for which data is available,

SMART and DDOT both rank towards the bottom in terms of the proportion of pre-pandemic service in operation. SMART is operating 82% of scheduled pre-pandemic service, and DDOT just 70%. The latter is less than any other similarly sized agency in the country, with the exception of Metro in St. Louis (68%).²

This shortage of drivers manifests in several ways:

- 1. No show buses** – If a driver calls in sick and there are no extra drivers available, that drivers’ bus runs will not operate that day.

While technology is helping alert riders to missed runs, the technology is inconsistent and even if they're informed, it still leaves bus riders waiting, sometimes for hours.

2. Service cuts – Knowing they lack enough drivers, bus agencies modify their schedules to meet the decreased service available, eliminating some routes and increasing the waits on other routes.

3. Less frequent service - The Detroit region had been making strides towards moderately frequent service before the pandemic but has nearly no frequent routes currently.

4. Difficulty holding drivers to high standards – Knowing there aren't enough drivers already makes it difficult for transit managers to discipline or fire drivers behaving poorly. This lowers the standards for all drivers, potentially hurting already poor customer service quality.

Little Becomes Less

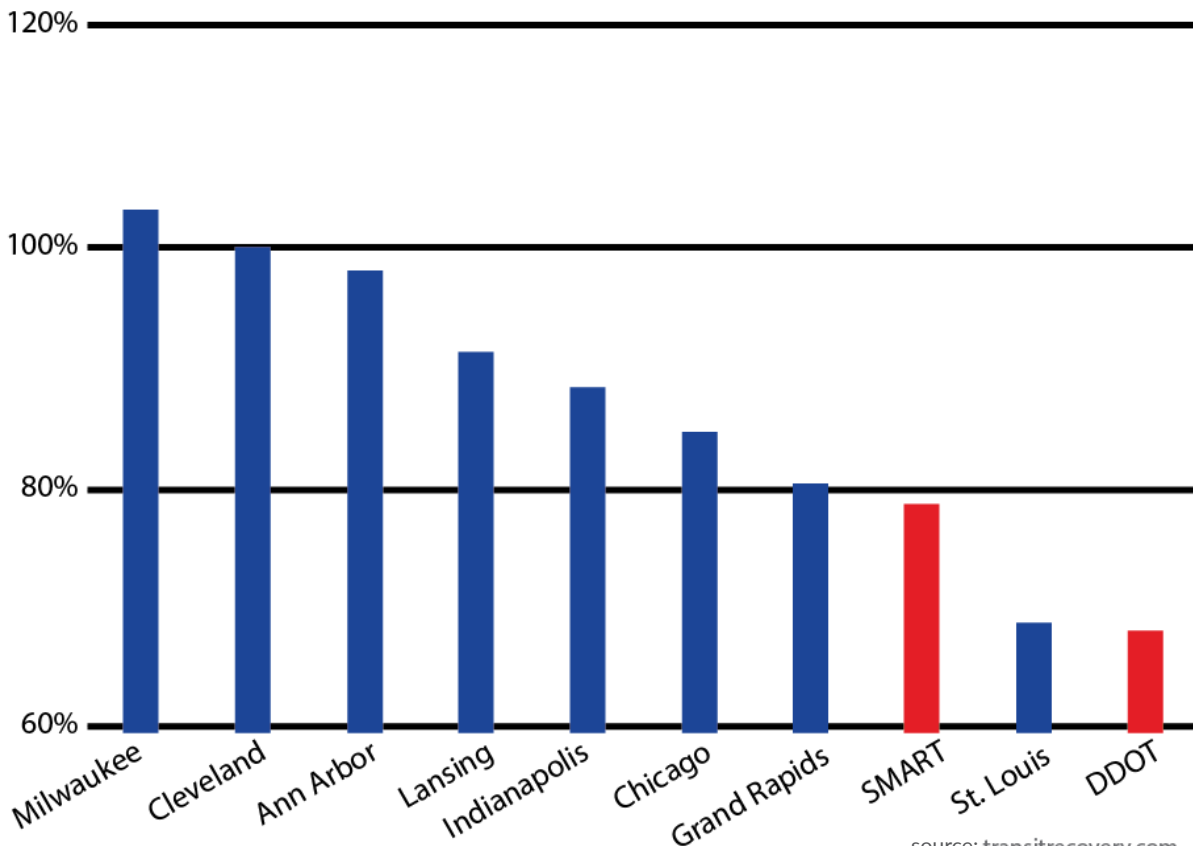


As leading transit planner Jarrett Walker has observed, "frequency is freedom." Without consistent frequent service, generally defined as service every 15 minutes or less, it becomes very difficult to use transit, as even short trips may require a long wait for the next bus.

Prior to the pandemic service cuts, most DDOT and SMART routes were already infrequent. However, each agency had a handful of frequent routes, running at 15-minute frequencies on weekdays. As of 2019, DDOT had six such routes, and SMART operated all-day frequent service on both Woodward and Gratiot.

After the cuts, however, just one route in

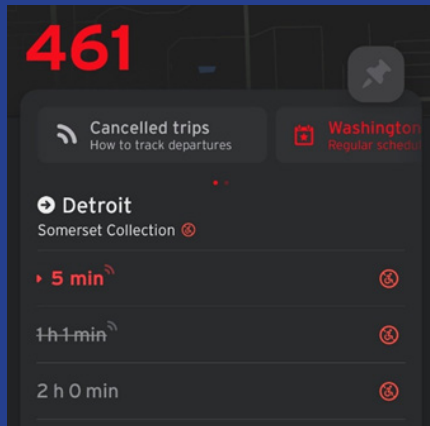
% of Pre-Pandemic Transit Service Restored, Dec. 2022



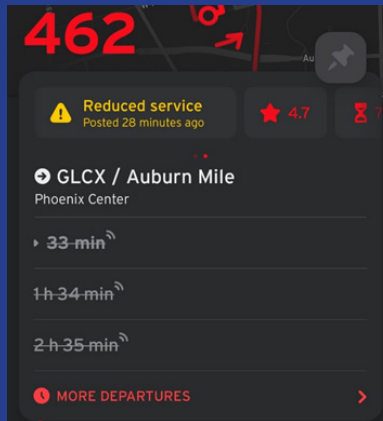
source: transitrecovery.com

Buses have been failing to show up for months

February

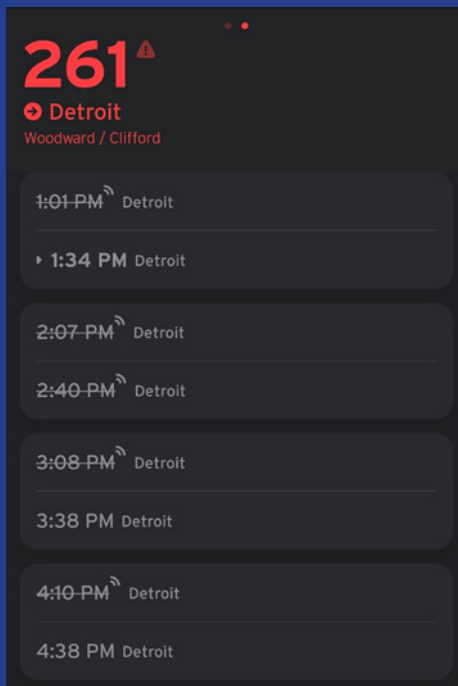


March



Run	3/27
5:17	CUT
6:00	
6:43	CUT
7:28	CUT
8:12	
8:57	CUT
9:39	
10:24	CUT
11:09	CUT
11:54	
12:39	CUT
13:23	
14:06	CUT
14:51	
15:36	
16:21	
17:06	
17:52	CUT
18:47	
19:50	Significant Delay (+40min)
20:52	
21:54	CUT
Pullout %	54%

June

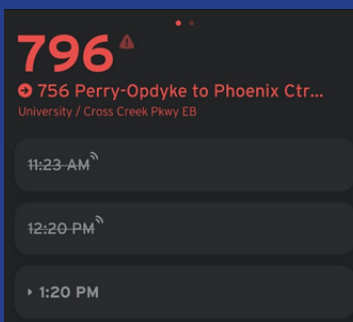


“We’ve started tracking cuts. On Monday, the pullout on the SB 462 was 54% per the RT feed (though note that rarely, officially cut runs do actually show up). 100% is normal. 95-99% is meh. But half? I can’t in good faith introduce anyone to FAST while this continues unchecked.” – 03/27/2023

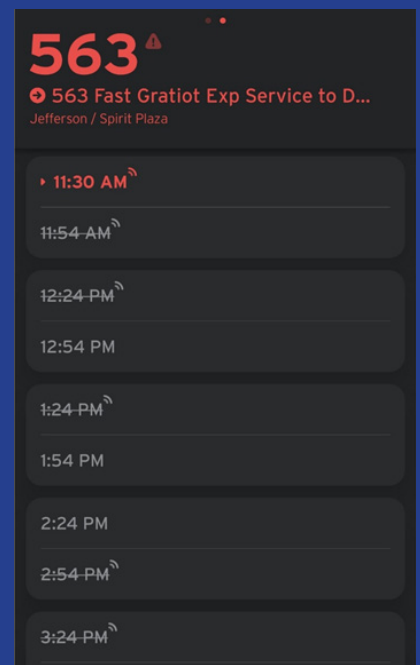
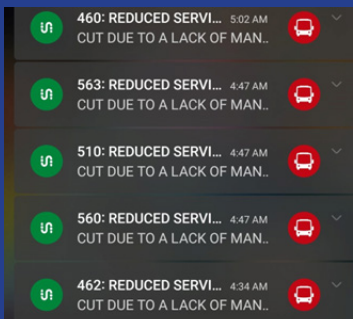
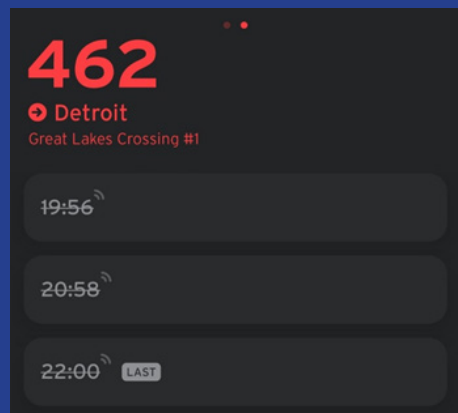
“This same thing happened to me when I tried to take the 462 home from work yesterday! Nothing more frustrating than spending 3 extra hours at the office on Friday afternoon.”

– Josh A, March 18

July



“On March 10, I waited 3 hours for 305 to get to 10 Mile and Haggerty.” – Aywon W.



Bus riders regularly deal with canceled trips - shown as crossed out on the Transit App agencies recommend riders check.

the entire region is operating at 15-minute frequencies: SMART's 560-Gratiot, which operates at 15-minute frequencies during weekday peak hours only (6:30-8:30 am and 3:30-5:30 pm).

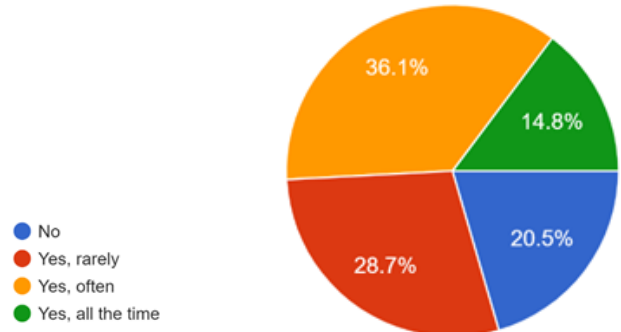
The map below shows the current extent of semi-frequent DDOT service, running every 20 minutes during the day on weekdays.

As seen, in four of the seven Detroit City Council districts, a majority of residents live more than one-half mile from these semi-frequent routes.

According to a Transportation Riders United survey of over 100 SMART riders, 36% reported that they experienced missed runs "often," and another 15% reported that they experienced missed runs "all the time."

Have you experienced missed runs (buses not showing up on schedule) lately? If so, how often?

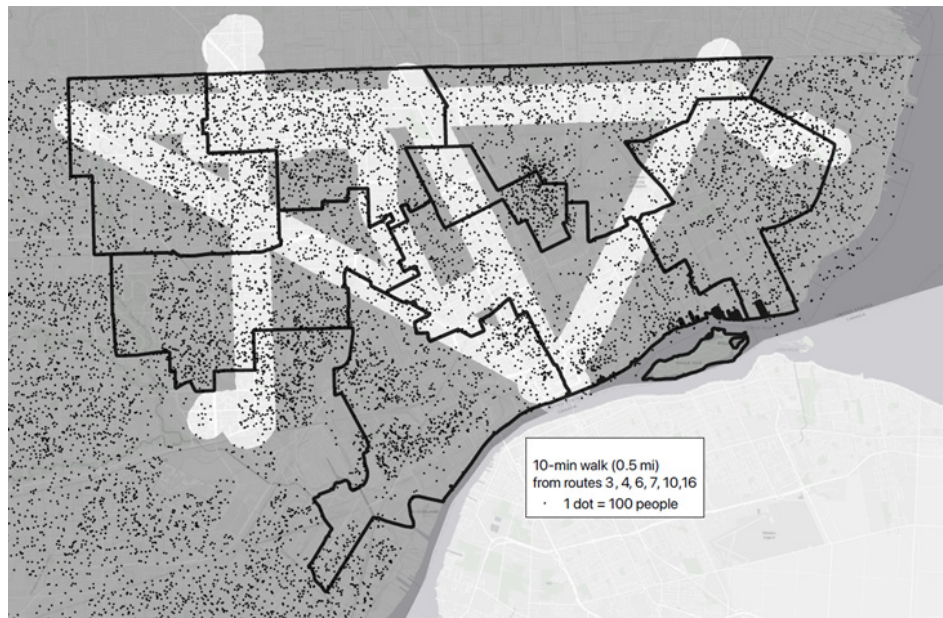
122 responses



Detroit City Council Districts, Population and Semi-Frequent DDOT Corridors, 2023

Population within 0.5 miles of Corridor

District 1:	60.3%
District 2:	69.5%
District 3:	48.0%
District 4:	37.2%
District 5:	53.4%
District 6:	24.2%
District 7:	28.1%





It is difficult to meaningfully quantify the hardships that reduced bus service has imposed on the region's transit riders, but a few of their comments provide some sense of their magnitude, when this is repeated thousands of times every day for years.

"I work at Amazon, and I get my pay docked for an hour if I'm more than six minutes late to my shift." - Joel, SMART rider

"The public transportation 'system' in Detroit has become nearly unusable for the last 3 months. As a regular rider, I would say the service peaked at like 2019 in terms of reliability and effectiveness. By 2022, a quality of service that I would have given a C- started sliding off the cliff. A commute that would take me 20 mins in Brooklyn routinely takes me an hour and 20 minutes in Detroit due to buses coming late or not showing at all." - Medvis, DDOT Rider

"When mass transit looks like a crap shoot few employers will trust you'll be at work by bus. Bless those that are flexible, yet many jobs aren't." - Stephen, DDOT Rider

Bus Crisis Causes Absenteeism

A recent article by *Chalkbeat* shows how the local bus crisis has been causing Detroit students to miss classes, failing our future leaders. Hear from some students and professionals:

"It's 6:30 in the morning, and it's cold, and the bus passed me. The next one's not coming for 45 minutes. I'm going home." - Jay Johnson, Senior at MLK High School

"[The city bus] is why my attendance is shot. I get up at 5 a.m., and I still get to school late." - Perriel Pace, Junior at MLK High School.

"Transportation is one of, if not the biggest barrier [to consistent student attendance in Detroit]" - Sarah Lenhoff, professor of education at Wayne State University and director of the Detroit Partnership for Education Equity and Research



Koby Levin, "How transportation problems fuel absenteeism in Detroit," *Chalkbeat Detroit*, March 22, 2023, <https://detroit.chalkbeat.org/2023/3/22/23650149/detroit-students-transportation-bus-chronic-absenteeism-attendance>.

“You’re pretty much rolling the dice on whether the bus will show.” - Lukas, SMART Rider and Oakland Community College Student, recounting a recent trip when FAST Woodward buses and Woodward local no-showed, causing a multi-hour delay.



“Because of missed runs, I have to rely on Uber or Lyft to pick me up, or call my husband to pick me up, which is a real pain in the neck.” - Kathy, SMART rider, is a classically trained singer whose visual impairment means she can’t drive. She lives near SMART’s 610-Kercheval, but service on the route has been reduced to one bus an hour. When that bus doesn’t show up, waiting on the side of the road for another hour isn’t a safe option.



“It’s bad. I have to tell the boss, ‘I be late!’ I wish they ran on time—like, back to back.” - Stephanie, DDOT rider, works at the Courtyard by Marriott in downtown Detroit. The Grand River bus is scheduled to arrive every 20 minutes during weekday daytime hours, but she is often waiting for 40 minutes or more.



The Operator Crisis

The shortage of transit operators is a nationwide issue, and it did not begin with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the shortage is especially acute for DDOT and SMART, and the pandemic exacerbated it severely. The tragic death of DDOT operator Jason Hargrove from COVID-19, early on in the pandemic, was widely reported by local and national media and likely contributed to the decision of many operators to retire or seek work elsewhere.³

DDOT and SMART, like other transit agencies, initially cut service in 2020 as a public health measure, and in response to decreased demand. However, as an increased number of operators quit and recruitment of new operators lagged, they are now incapable of running the level of service that existed pre-pandemic.

DDOT has conducted an aggressive operator training and recruitment program for years, and SMART has recently increased its recruitment efforts.

However, both agencies will continue to struggle with staffing issues if they fail to retain their employees.

SMART bus drivers have been working without a contract since January, when their last contract expired. SMART management has supposedly been in negotiations with the Amalgamated Transit Union that represents their bus drivers since then, but there has been little sign of progress. Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan has expressed willingness to re-open their ATU contract to address non-



Amalgamated Transit Union Local 26 (DDOT drivers) color guard marches in Detroit Labor Day Parade, 2019

competitive pay, but again, riders have seen no progress.

A variety of issues have led to what the national foundation TransitCenter refers to as the “steady deterioration” of operator jobs, and the associated staffing crisis.⁴

One is scheduling. Traditionally, new employees get the last pick in scheduling. Night shifts and weekend routes are a particular challenge for single parents, given the limited child care facilities available, an issue that agency staff have expressed interest in addressing.

Another is the lack of adequate facilities for employees. Access to restroom facilities at the end of routes was one of the issues that led DDOT operators to stage a sickout in March 2020.⁵ The eventual opening of the new State Fair Transit Center, currently set for 2024, will help to address the problem, as will DDOT’s construction of a new Coolidge

Terminal and planned decommissioning of the 75-year-old Gilbert Terminal on Rosa Parks near I-94.

Safety is another significant concern for operators, particularly as transit systems across the country have become a shelter of last resort for the unhoused. Attacks on bus operators are relatively rare, but several high-profile incidents have occurred in recent years.⁶

Both DDOT and SMART operators note that management practices have contributed to poor morale for operators, and recommend customer service training for road supervisors to address the problem.

For decades, a severe lack of transit agency funding has been the largest problem facing this region's transit. For once, the agencies are not nearly as starved for funding as they have often been. In addition to one-time state and federal funding, the State of Michigan provided an increase in Local Bus Operating funding levels, Oakland County transit expansion has increased funding for SMART, and the City of Detroit included a modest funding increase for DDOT in its recent budget. It's time to invest those much-needed funds into boosting driver pay to enable service reliability.

The Pay Imperative

We Need Higher Wages

While changes on several fronts can help improve recruitment and retention, DDOT and SMART will not be able to resolve the operator crisis and restore service for riders without addressing the critical issue of wages.

DDOT operators start at only \$15/hour after training, no better than many fast-food workers, and face a four-year progression to the top wage. That may have been a reasonable wage five years ago, but it is not competitive in today's economy.

SMART workers are paid somewhat more, starting at \$19.11/hour after training, and have a three-year wage progression. However, their starting pay is still among the lowest for operators in any major system in the country, as shown below.

Notably, Ann Arbor's TheRide pays a starting wage of \$28.65/hour and is not facing a shortage of operators.

Unsurprisingly, according to a recent survey of DDOT drivers, "salary was the number-one reason folks were leaving," DDOT management has reported.

In June 2022, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan announced an attendance-based pay incentive program for DDOT operators, but this program has not substantially improved operator recruitment and retention. As DDOT Director Mikel Oglesby has stated, new drivers are "coming on board slowly, but they're going out the window just as fast."

Why Drive a City Bus?

Bus operators with a commercial driver's license (CDL) can earn equivalent or higher wages at a variety of other employers, without having to navigate some of the more stressful elements of the job.

\$18/hour (full-time)
Amazon delivery driver, Detroit area



\$25/hour (part-time)
School bus driver, Drivergent, Fraser



\$25/hour (full-time)
Bus driver, Metro Cars, Taylor



\$26.99/hour (full-time, second shift)
Truck driver, XPO Logistics, Warren



\$19.50/hour, full time
Courtesy Bus Driver, Avis Budget Group, Detroit



\$20-28/hour based on qualifications
CDL Bus Drivers, Greyhound, Detroit



\$24/hour (CDL training provided, paid) School Bus Driver, Trinity Transportation, Farmington Hills



DDOT and SMART have some of the lowest starting wages in the USA



Chicago: \$28.99

Ann Arbor: \$28.65

Minneapolis: \$26.16

Pittsburgh: \$21.94

Cleveland: \$21.22

New Orleans: \$20.59

Memphis: \$19.79

Philadelphia: \$19.55

SMART: \$19.11

Atlanta: \$17.74

DDOT: \$15.00

For nearly a year, bus riders, TRU staff and volunteers have spoken out at nearly every SMART board meeting and DDOT customer input meeting, drawing attention to this problem and urging quick resolution. **Over 130 people have emailed SMART board members over the past eight months, including the following comments:**

“I attempt to commute from Pontiac to Detroit on the FAST Woodward 461 route. I’m sorry to say that the service remains in a very poor state. The problem is **very low frequency and extreme unreliability**. How can I justify riding the bus when service cuts regularly leave me waiting in the cold for 45 minutes or more? I believe that most of the drivers are doing their best, but **severe understaffing adds undue pressure** on the drivers that do show up to work. For those of us that regularly ride the bus, it is clear that **service levels are in an emergency state**. This is a fire that needs to be put out before any other issues can be addressed.” - Joshua L., Waterford

“As someone who works from home, I primarily use SMART for transportation to the airport, getting to downtown Detroit and Dearborn, and getting to commercial businesses along the Ford Road corridor. Rather than use my personal vehicle, I prefer to use SMART... **Latently, however, I have been experiencing several missed buses and large delays on my routes - sometimes hours at a time**. I firmly believe these issues are **due to an operator shortage**. While I know SMART has taken steps to hire drivers and minimize

these shortages and appreciate the work SMART is doing to address these issues I would like to encourage SMART to take more action get ahead of this issue.” - Matt C., Dearborn Heights

“My husband rides the bus from Royal Oak to Pontiac to work at the hospital. We have four kids. Some days when the bus doesn’t come, he misses dinner or has to wait another hour for the next bus.” - Joyce, Royal Oak

Over 200 people emailed Detroit City Council urging them to boost the DDOT budget so the Department could boost pay for bus drivers:

“While not my only mode of transportation I often use the bus to get around Detroit. With frequency on many routes already to low (every hour or more!) having a bus not come can really throw a wrench in your whole day. We need more drivers and better frequency to serve the 30% of us Detroiters who don’t own a car.” - Alice B., Detroit

“Right now the bus in my neighborhood, the 38 Plymouth, runs once an hour. So many people here do not drive. It’s a huge disservice to all of us that we have such sparse transit. It is hard to build a life around a bus that might come once an hour that might not even show up.” - Claire, Hamtramck

“I’m one of thousands of Detroiters that rely on the bus, and often I know that I **can’t rely on the bus because there aren’t enough buses running**. I live near a major street, yet there’s only one bus an hour, that’s ridiculous in a city the size of Detroit.” - Elizabeth, Detroit

Conclusion: Time for Action

Public transit is a critical lifeline for tens of thousands of people throughout the Detroit region – including people who temporarily or permanently cannot drive due to physical, financial, legal, or other reasons. Riders are hurt by this failure each and every day and cannot continue to wait.

It is **imperative for SMART and DDOT to do more to resolve the current no-show bus crisis**, especially to quickly negotiate contracts with their bus drivers that **provide truly competitive wages**. In return for that major pay boost, new contracts should **ensure new drivers have consistent, livable work schedules**, even if long-term employees have to make some modest concessions to make that possible.

The efforts of DDOT and SMART management alone may not be enough. For over a year, Detroit’s bus agencies have acknowledged that they lack enough drivers and for over a year, their efforts to resolve it have fallen short.

The SMART bus system is overseen by a Board of Directors appointed by the County Executives of Macomb, Oakland, and Wayne Counties. For months they’ve heard dozens of advocates and riders urge prompt action on this bus crisis, yet failed to act. The DDOT bus system is overseen by Mayor Mike Duggan.

It is time for this region’s top elected officials to get personally involved in resolving this crisis. All four of the region’s top leaders - Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel, Oakland County Executive Dave Coulter, and Wayne County Executive Warren Evans - have

regularly made strong statements in support of public transportation and know how essential it is to their residents, businesses, and our region’s economy. Now it’s time for them to act.

“We call on Mayor Duggan and Executives Coulter, Hackel, and Warren to each get personally involved in resolving the current bus crisis.”

As Mayor Mike Duggan said in a recent community meeting, he personally got involved in the negotiations with the Detroit Police union and wouldn’t leave the room until a deal was agreed on. The Police Department got \$10,000 raises. Time to take the same action on behalf of DDOT bus drivers and the riders who depend on them.

The County Executives need to work closely with their Deputies on the SMART Board and with SMART management to speed negotiations and ensure a major boost in driver pay and new driver work-life balance. Together **agency management, the Big Four leaders, and the unions can come to an agreement** for competitive wages that will attract and retain more drivers and **Save Our Service**.

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