

Over 70% of Rhode Islanders live near a RIPTA bus stop.

Could this plan help get ridership up?

Story by Antonia Noori Farzan, Providence Journal • April 9, 2024

More than 70% of Rhode Islanders live within 10 minutes of a bus stop, according to one estimate.

But a far smaller percentage actually ride the bus. It's not hard to understand why: Relying on the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority [can take three or four times as long as driving](#).

To transportation advocates, that's exactly why the state needs to fully fund the [Transit Master Plan](#), which was adopted in 2020 but is still long way from becoming a reality.

"There's so much opportunity," said John Flaherty, the deputy director for [Grow Smart RI](#).

If you pay close attention to the state of public transportation in Rhode Island, you may have heard people referencing the TMP, which outlines the ambitious (and costly) vision, also known as "Transit Forward RI." If not, it may seem wonky.

But it's important because it shows that RIPTA has a plan to transform its existing system into one that could draw double the ridership – and actually offer a viable alternative to driving.

What's in the plan?

Developed over the course of two years with substantial public input, the TMP covers everything from fare-payment apps to commuter rail service to Boston.

Here are some of the main recommendations:

- **Improving bus frequency:** RIPTA buses "operate infrequently and for short hours," the Transit Master Plan acknowledges. The R line is the only bus route in the state that offers "frequent service" – meaning that the bus comes every 20 minutes or less – from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. Under the plan, 19 bus routes in the Providence metro area would run every 15 minutes, meaning that riders would spend less time waiting outside in the rain, wind, heat or snow. The service frequency for RIPTA buses overall would be reduced from 29 minutes on average to 19 minutes.
- **Expanding service hours:** Only five bus routes operate after midnight, the Transit Master Plan states. That's an issue for people who work jobs with non-traditional hours (and also reduces the likelihood that people will choose RIPTA as a safer alternative to drinking and driving). Under the TMP, 19 bus routes would run after midnight.
- **Creating new routes:** The plan calls for adding six new bus routes statewide, plus four new crosstown routes in the Providence metro area. Getting from the east side of Cranston to the west side of Cranston, for instance, would no longer require going through downtown Providence.
- **Reducing trip times:** Currently, the R line is the only RIPTA route that offers so-called "rapid bus" service, with traffic-signal priority and queue jump lanes. Under the TMP, six additional bus lines in the Providence metro area would become rapid bus lines, and four buses serving the West Bay, East Bay, South County and northern Rhode Island would offer regional rapid bus service. The plan also suggests exploring the possibility of light rail between Central Falls and Warwick, or bus rapid transit with a dedicated lane.

- **Improving commuter "express bus" service:** Express buses currently provide weekday service to downtown Providence from far-flung areas of the state, like North Scituate and Pascoag, but often only make one or two trips in each direction. Under the TMP, each of those routes would have at least four inbound and four outbound trips a day. RIPTA would also use commuter coaches, rather than the typical buses, "to provide more comfortable service."
- **Upgrading the passenger experience:** The plan also calls for adding crosswalks and sidewalks that would make it safer to get to bus stops, and creating so-called "mobility hubs" in each community. In smaller towns, that might mean an outdoor bus shelter with real-time information about when the next bus is coming. Large communities would get indoor shelters with restrooms.

What's happened so far?

About 80% to 90% of the projects in the TMP are advancing, said Sarah Ingle, RIPTA's executive director of planning. But when it comes to expanding bus frequency and expanding hours, RIPTA is only 20% of the way there – or less.

RIPTA did create three new bus routes – routes 16, 23, and 68. The agency also launched a federally funded feasibility study to look at the potential of [adding light rail](#) or bus rapid transit. And they're about to kick off of a feasibility study into creating a South County bus and rail hub at Kingston Station.

"We are pushing forward on everything," Ingle said.

What is holding this plan back?

RIPTA is working to hire someone who can focus on improving bus stops, and the board recently approved a contract for new bus shelters, Ingle said. They'll soon be launching a pilot program to offer on-demand service in a ["flex zone"](#) – which means that a van picks you up at your door and drops you off at the nearest bus stop.

And, as part of the ongoing construction, Route 146 will be redesigned so that buses can drive on the shoulder and bypass traffic – "a really big win," Ingle said.

But making bus service more frequent and convenient – perhaps the most crucial piece of the whole puzzle – requires more funding and more drivers.

"We know where we would do it, and how welcome it would be to our riders," Ingle said. "We just really can't do it until the operating dollars are there."

As it stands, RIPTA [faces a massive funding shortfall](#), and [cuts to existing routes are looming](#). Even though the volume of applications increased [after the agency raised starting pay](#), it still doesn't have enough bus drivers to maintain current levels of service, spokeswoman Cristy Raposo Perry said.

"RIPTA's got a fantastic team in place," Flaherty said. "They've been exceptional in uncovering opportunities to get federal funding."

The problem, he said, is that those funds are usually available only for capital improvements, not service – meaning that the changes that would make the most noticeable difference for riders won't be possible without considerably more investment by the General Assembly.

What would it cost?

Implementing the Transit Master Plan would undeniably be expensive: When it was approved in 2020, capital expenses were projected at \$1.9 billion to \$3.1 billion over 20 years, with the higher number reflecting the cost of introducing light rail.

Operating costs, meanwhile, were expected to be roughly double the \$112.9-million combined operating costs of RIPTA and the state Department of Transportation.

Public transportation is expensive, Flaherty said, but so is car-centric infrastructure like highway lighting at night.

"What if we were to say we should be turning the highway lights off after 10 p.m., because the volume of traffic is so low?" he asked. "We would never think of doing that."

Flaherty pointed to a 2012 analysis of Census data conducted by RIPTA's former transit planner, who found that 71.3% of Rhode Islanders live within a quarter-mile of a bus stop. Add in people who live in a "flex zone," and it goes up to 77%.

"I don't think any other state can claim that," Flaherty said.

But RIPTA riders don't reflect a cross-section of Rhode Island, he pointed out. And there's the risk of the so-called "public-transit death spiral," in which decision-makers see buses running half empty and respond by decreasing their frequency, which in turn means that even fewer people use the bus.

"We really admire RIPTA for the care it gives to its passengers," said Patricia Raub of Rhode Island Transit Riders. "It's doing the best it can on a shoestring budget, and it has plans for major improvements. But without the support of the legislature, it's very difficult to achieve that."