

RIDERS ALLIANCE

~~LONGER WAIT~~
#6MINUTESERVICE

**SIX REASONS NEW YORKERS
NEED #6MINUTESERVICE
ON SUBWAYS AND BUSES:
AN ISSUE BRIEF FOR
GOVERNOR KATHY HOCHUL**

INTRODUCTION

Public transit should run more frequently throughout the day and week.

The frequency of buses and trains is not constant. State cuts to the transit budget translated to steep service declines after the 2008 financial crisis. When New York locked down in 2020, service cuts followed. Even as the city has struggled to build back from the pandemic, train crew and bus operator shortages have left riders waiting 15 or 20 minutes for service in the middle of the day and on weekends. Yet research confirms that service is what [riders care about most](#).

Every day, millions of New Yorkers wait too long for buses and trains.

Most lines don't run frequently enough during non-rush hours, which means most of the day and week. Women, service-sector workers, and riders of color depend more on off-peak transit service and lose more time to long waits. Time wasted on subway platforms and at bus stops is time lost with family, at work, getting an education, and securing healthcare. Equity demands frequent public transit service, not only for white-collar office commuters, but also midday, in the evening, and on the weekend.

Right now, New York does not make the most of our extensive public transit system.

Our iconic rail and bus network is a trillion dollar asset, the priceless lifeblood of our city and state's economy. But our thousands of buses and trains spend too much time parked. Transit ridership is languishing while too many trips are made by car, worsening traffic congestion, carbon emissions, air pollution, and a rising number of deadly collisions. The return of more riders, the recovery of our transit system and the resilience of our region demand more competitive, welcoming and most of all frequent public transit service.

Post-pandemic public transit ridership and revenue growth have stalled with insufficient reason to get on board.

Work from home is here to stay, persistent lockdown habits keep people in their neighborhoods, and broader social problems make some riders wary of subways. With roughly two million fewer daily trips than before the pandemic, the MTA needs to be able to do more to induce and attract non-work trips. Slashing wait times would bring more of the city within reach from every neighborhood and give transit a sharper edge over other ways of getting around.

Governor Hochul must invest now to cut waits and maximize the value of New York's public transit system.

In 2021, the NYC Comptroller estimated that running most subway and bus service at least every six minutes – rather than every 12, 15, 20 or even 30 minutes – would cost \$250 million, less than 2% of the MTA's \$18 billion budget and a tiny fraction of the state's \$221 billion spending plan. Unlike with megaprojects that take decades to complete, Governor Hochul can cut waits for millions of New Yorkers, take climate action, and transform the role of transit in New York in a few short months once the next state budget is adopted in 2023.

HOW #6MINUTESERVICE WORKS

The MTA runs our buses and trains on varying schedules throughout the day and week. The time between buses or trains is called the **headway**. A shorter headway means more frequent service than a longer headway: think of the #7 train at rush hour (arriving every 2 minutes) versus the R train on the weekend (arriving every 12 minutes).

Sixty percent of subway lines run at least every six minutes during rush hour.

However, fewer than one in ten lines runs at least every six minutes on Saturdays. Only one subway line, the L train, runs better than every six minutes on Sundays. On top of infrequent service, weekend ridership, which has come back stronger than weekday ridership, experiences chronic service interruptions for construction, further discouraging New Yorkers from riding transit.

Every time the MTA runs a bus or train, there's a cost attached to pay for workers to operate the service, the energy required to move the train or bus, wear and tear, and more. At the same time, every run is an investment in the future of the transit system. **As the [movie line](#) goes, "If you build it, he will come." In transit, the equivalent is, "If you run it, we will ride." When transit is still missing millions of riders from before the pandemic, this is critical.**

Running subways and the 100 highest ridership bus routes at least every six minutes will cost an estimated \$250 million — less than 2% of the MTA's \$18 billion operating budget. For just \$250 million, the MTA could run subways and 100 bus routes at least every six minutes from 5am to 9pm on weekdays and 8am to 10pm on weekends.

NOTE: The Comptroller's estimate does not account for the ridership and revenue growth anticipated with more frequent and more convenient transit service that competes better with other modes of transportation for a bigger share of trips around our city.

SIX REASONS GOVERNOR HOCHUL SHOULD FUND SIX MINUTE SERVICE

1 FREQUENCY IS FREEDOM

"Freedom is a crucial sensation, and in most places it is the private car's crowning virtue. When limited transit schedules interfere with people's lives—forcing them, for example, to decline a last-minute dinner invitation or cut short the family's day at the zoo—we see why transit is not the mode of choice for more of the trips we make. In transit, the real test of freedom is spontaneity. Can I change my plans suddenly? Can I get home if I need to, or to my child's school if something comes up? Can I simply move freely around my city, following whatever impulse I may feel at the moment?"

– Jarrett Walker, [Human Transit](#), (2012) p. 31.

“Public transit is of course crucial for getting New Yorkers to work so we can make a living – but our lives are about more than work. The ongoing pandemic has been incredibly isolating, and it’s crucial for my mental health that I be able to connect – in person and not through a screen – with the people and the city that I love. Affordable, reliable public transit is what gives me the freedom to see friends, to go to the theatre, to visit public parks and art installations, and to explore new communities. Without safe, accessible transit, I’m cut off from relationships and experiences that are key to my mental wellbeing, and that all New Yorkers – regardless of race, income, or ability – deserve to access.”

– *Riders Alliance member Emily Rose P. from Crown Heights*

For too many New Yorkers, too much of the time, our extensive public transit system is not as freeing as it should be. Rising rents have pushed people from the core of the city to its edge. Too often, the steep price of housing affordability means less frequent transit and more transfers to reach most destinations. At the same time, fiscal austerity in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis drove [subway and bus service cuts](#), many of which were never fully restored even as ridership grew in the wake of the Great Recession. Since 2020, wait times have spiraled upward again, as MTA downsizing helped drive crew shortages and led to a wave of canceled buses and trains.

The majority of New York City households lack access to a car. To the extent that millions of New Yorkers can freely move around the city, it’s because of public transit. But too often, that freedom is stymied by long waits, particularly coupled with long trips and multiple transfers that have become increasingly common. **To restore and expand New Yorkers’ free access to all of the opportunities that our city has to offer, Governor Hochul should make a targeted investment in MTA operations to deliver public transit service at least every six minutes.**

2 FREQUENCY IS EQUITY

“A large portion of the city aren’t car owners or even frequent cab takers. Does that mean they have to be content with their decrease in community engagement and job opportunity? Should they have to be prone to scarier situations rather than folks who often can simply drive or Uber away? Frequency is equity, because it shows a sense of urgency from the state that they care and see we have needs and places to be just as much as car owners and/or people of higher incomes who rely on both cabs and personal cars.”

– *Riders Alliance member Ronnie A. from East Flatbush*

“Public transportation can offer a ‘ladder of opportunity,’ providing affordable and convenient connections to jobs, goods and services, medical care, and other essentials of daily life. But pervasive racism and discrimination in land use, transportation, and transit planning have created wide gaps in transit access across race, income, and other characteristics, worsening social inequity. The New York region is no exception: Transit provides less access to opportunities for BIPOC residents than white residents.”

– *TransitCenter [Equity Dashboard: The New York Story](#) (2021).*

New York’s infrequent transit service has a harsh disparate impact on low-income riders of color. In its equity analysis of the MTA network, TransitCenter found that public transit puts white New Yorkers live within reach of twice as many jobs as Black New Yorkers during a 45 minute-long commute. Black transit riders endure long commutes from areas including the northeast Bronx, southeast Queens, East New York, and Staten Island’s North Shore. Long trips and transfers multiply the impact of long waits for service, taking precious time away from people who need it.

The inequity of infrequent service goes beyond race. The Comptroller [reported](#) that “the median income of bus riders (\$30,374) and off-peak subway commuters (\$37,048) is far below that of rush hour subway (\$50,783) commuters.” Because housing prices are generally higher nearer subway stations and many white-collar office workers earn more than service workers, rush hour subway commuters are a comparatively privileged group of New Yorkers. Enhancing equity means delivering more transit service off-peak on a par with what rush hour subway commuters experience.

By reducing waits and travel times for bus and off-peak riders, Governor Hochul will improve transportation equity across the city, helping make fast, affordable transit possible for all hard-working New Yorkers, not just those with Manhattan offices.

3 FREQUENCY IS SAFETY

“Many times when I pick my daughters up from their after school activities we end up waiting a long time for the bus home after dark. Waiting in the dark with my girls makes me nervous, and sometimes I’ll take an Uber home to ensure our safety. This is extra money I could spend on something else if I knew the bus would arrive within six minutes.”

– Riders Alliance member Norma G. from the South Bronx

“Reductions in subway and bus service have left New Yorkers standing alone on the streets and in subway stations for long periods of time, especially in the middle of the night. This is an entirely inexcusable recipe for danger. New York must increase the frequency of buses and subways to ensure that New Yorkers reach their destinations safely (and on time).”

– New York State Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic, and Asian Legislative Caucus [Impact-Based Ten-Point Plan For Public Safety](#) (2022).

“Women are more likely to travel off-peak, generally late at night or midday. Off-peak transit schedules can be prolonged, less frequent, less reliable, and prone to service cuts. Waiting at bus stops or in subway stations late at night, especially when there is a long wait, can be confusing or formidable. The sparse ridership portends a lack of bystander assistance.”

– NYU Wagner Rudin Center [The Pink Tax on Mobility: Opportunities for Innovation](#) (2022).

New Yorkers need and deserve a public transit system that is safe, welcoming and inclusive of all riders. In recent years, particularly with the pandemic-driven ridership decline, transit crime has made frontpage news and may have discouraged some riders from taking subways and buses. While much of the crime discussion has centered on the role of policing, frequency of service has an important part to play as well.

Infrequent service leaves riders waiting longer on subway platforms and at bus stops, too often feeling vulnerable and anxious. Long waits contribute to anxiety and frustration in transit that leads to disputes between riders, which can both make the system less welcoming and also delay service, interfering with reliability. Long waits give people a reason not to ride subways and buses at all, taking away from the safety in numbers that made New York’s subway system so safe for a generation prior to the pandemic. Because of travel patterns, women, people of color, and low-income service workers are more likely to be made less safe by infrequent service.

By investing in more frequent service, Governor Hochul can complement other safety initiatives in the subway and on buses. More frequent service means less time waiting on platforms and at stops for buses and trains. Shorter overall trip times cut down on potentially explosive levels of anxiety and frustration. ^

4 FREQUENCY IS RESILIENCY

“It’s often 90 degrees outside and it’s frustrating when the station is just as hot if not hotter than street level. The longer the wait the more people are tempted and take a cab or Lyft, which just adds to our congestion and pollution problems. Six-minute service gives people tangible relief from the effects of climate change and makes it easy for them to make environmentally friendly transit choices.”

– Riders Alliance member Ariel S. from East Harlem

New York’s ambitious Climate and Community Protection Act mandates a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and 85% by 2050. Without MTA services, regional greenhouse gas emissions would be [30% higher](#). Leveraging our extensive public transit network is essential to meeting our climate goals. But we still have a long way to go. Unnecessary car trips are far too frequent. More frequent buses and trains will be key to getting people out of cars and cutting carbon emissions as quickly as we must.

While New York’s transit system is essential to mitigating climate change, it also must adapt. Increasingly frequent extreme rainfall events literally stop the subway in its tracks as tunnels serve as alternatives to overflowing sewers. Meanwhile, [increasingly frequent extreme heat](#) makes station conditions unbearable for more than a short period of time.

More frequent bus and subway service is critical to adapting the transit system to increasingly frequent instances of extreme rainfall and extreme heat. Bus service must be made more frequent to provide redundancy when the subway cannot cope with rain like during Hurricane Ida when the entire subway shut down but 90% of buses kept running. At the same time, subway service itself must be more frequent to address dangerously hot station conditions and cut the amount of time that riders spend on platforms during epic heat waves like July 2022.

More New Yorkers must make more trips by transit to meet our climate goals. At the same time, transit must be made more redundant and resilient to the threats posed by extreme weather. Meeting all of these needs demands a focused investment in more frequent bus and subway service. **In confronting one of humanity’s greatest challenges ever, Governor Hochul must leverage public transit like never before.**

5 FREQUENCY IS RECOVERY

“Six minute bus and subway service would be life changing for millions of New Yorkers, including myself, someone who lives a 20 minute walk from the nearest subway station and therefore has to rely on the bus. Commuting can frequently be a nightmare, with constant delays and long waits. Buses in my neighborhood are the epitome of unreliable; even the trains don’t run frequently, and it’s no surprise most people in my neighborhood own a car because of this embarrassing service. Six minute service would absolutely have me using the MTA way more often. I could get to school and work on time; I could use public transit to go see friends or family; it would make commuting so much less stressful.”

– Riders Alliance member Michael F. from Middle Village

New York’s future success hinges on the recovery of a public transit system that faces a fiscal calamity. The pandemic devastated MTA finances. Trains and buses are only running today as frequently as they are because of federal pandemic assistance which is rapidly running out. New state revenues will be essential to balancing the MTA’s books in the months and years to come. But restoring the status quo is not enough in the new normal. The pre-pandemic MTA relied overwhelmingly for revenue on a rush hour commute of office workers who may now work from home or anywhere else.

The long term recovery of our transit network demands new state revenue for the MTA to complement riders’ new and growing service needs for work and [non-work trips](#). Before the pandemic, job growth was [particularly strong](#) outside the Manhattan core. During the past two years, [weekend subway ridership regrew](#) at a pace exceeding weekday ridership. Future service planning and investment must also center the outer borough commuters that [stayed in transit](#) while Manhattanites stayed home or fled the city. That’s not just social equity, it’s going where the growth is.

Governor Hochul must invest in what today’s and tomorrow’s transit ridership needs most so that MTA services become more attractive and competitive than they were before the pandemic. As Metro-North President and Long Island Rail Road Interim President [Cathy Rinaldi](#) told Politico in July: “Frequency is one of the really strong factors that draws more people back.” Subway safety is largely a function of City services in the underground ‘[public square](#)’ that the subway has always been. Meanwhile, megaprojects from Penn Station to Second Avenue to the Interborough Express will take years or decades to realize and build ridership. **In her next state budget, Governor Hochul should ensure that subways and the hundred busiest bus lines run at least every six minutes all day, every day because that is what riders most need now.**

6 FREQUENCY IS THE FUTURE

“Public transportation is the lifeblood of New York City. We can not expect a future recovery with the present status quo of unreliable and infrequent trains and buses.”

– Riders Alliance member Josh S. from Richmond Hill

In the old normal, successive MTA funding battles ended in “shared sacrifice.” To close a budget gap that opened up during the Great Recession, the governor and legislature created the payroll mobility tax, a half measure that left the MTA to make major operations and maintenance cuts.

The result of the 2010 cuts: bus ridership fell by one-quarter and subway delays quadrupled in the next decade. Similarly, after the 2017 Summer of Hell, the governor and legislator finally authorized congestion pricing, the single largest source of funds for the largest ever MTA capital program, to fix the subway. But that too came with the MTA “transformation,” which ultimately cut more than 2,000 frontline operator and maintainer positions and led to the crushing crew shortages that have canceled so many trains and buses in the past 18 months.

In the new normal, MTA funding must represent an investment in the future of the transit system with a new awareness of its role in the city and region. Again coupling a new revenue stream with budget cuts, belt tightening, efficiencies or other euphemisms for worse service would only drive more riders and revenue away, triggering a death spiral of service cuts and fare hikes. Instead, the next round of MTA funding must make a targeted investment in New York’s future with better, more frequent public transit service.

Governor Hochul broke a historic glass ceiling by becoming the first woman to lead our state. As a popular incumbent, she will likely govern as long as she wishes. As the first western New Yorker to govern in a century, she also has a special opportunity to make a bold and lasting impression on New York City. **The governor should make her mark by elevating the role of the transit system in the life of the city and targeting an investment in our future with more frequent service.**

CONCLUSION

Governor Hochul owes millions of daily transit riders a positive vision for the future of subway and bus service. Ascending at a time of concern about subway crime, she focused initially on policing efforts, coupled with some megaprojects, most inherited from past administrations. In her first budget, she adopted modest increases for upstate public transit systems that will seed new ridership across the state. But millions of subway and bus riders, the people to thank for the state’s lowest-in-the-nation per capita gas consumption, were left out.

In the next state budget, Governor Hochul will have to grapple with the state’s aggressive mandate to cut carbon emissions. More than ever, given the US Supreme Court’s moves to hamper federal emissions reduction efforts and Congress’s halting progress toward a just transition to a post-carbon future, strict adherence to the state’s robust climate law is crucial to national and even global chances of preventing catastrophic climate change. In this light, leveraging our transit network is essential to our common future.

The governor must complement bold climate action with a new source of revenue for the MTA as the transit agency once again approaches the fiscal abyss. MTA CFO Kevin Willens said in February: “The key to 2022 is the return of ridership.” But, midway through the year, successive infection waves and restructuring of the commercial office market make clear that the MTA cannot sit back and wait for riders to return. Governor Hochul must deliver public transit service to a new standard that meets riders’ needs and competes with other modes of transportation better than before. **Governor Hochul must provide run subways and most buses at least every six minutes to level up and meet this watershed moment in her next budget.**