Bus Rapid Transit for the Boroughs:

How the MTA & City Hall can transform your bus ride

PCAC
PERMANENT CITIZENS ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO THE MTA

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Executive Summary

Bus rapid transit (BRT) is a concept unfamiliar to most New Yorkers used to riding the nation's slowest buses. Yet it is a tool that New York City can use to bring key, high demand corridors up to the standard that dozens of other cities have already reached — or, better put, the standard that bus riders around the five boroughs deserve. BRT differs from a standard bus network by incorporating: protected bus lanes; priority at intersections; off-board fare payment; accessible level boarding; and other key elements on stretches 1.9 miles and longer, to achieve a true, uninterrupted rapid transit experience for bus riders. Some of these elements can now be found individually in Select Bus Service (SBS), but not to the same extent or standards as BRT.

Despite being the largest and highest ridership system in the country, New York City's buses are also some of the slowest, plagued by record traffic, inadequate on-street infrastructure, and outdated transit policies. In many cases, they are slower than walking; buses run by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), excluding express buses, ran at an average speed of 7.8 mph in 2024, while SBS routes averaged 9.2 mph.[1] Although Congestion Pricing has improved bus speeds in the Congestion Relief Zone, overall, the benefits for bus riders are not yet far reaching enough in the rest of the city.

Both the MTA and New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT) have implemented desperately needed initiatives to provide better service to bus riders. These programs have individually and collectively helped increase bus speeds and reduce repeat offenders, but none of these initiatives have yielded true BRT:

- Select Bus Service incorporates farther stop spacing, all-door boarding, and generally uses longer three-door articulated buses. SBS routes exist within the larger bus network and often have local counterparts making more frequent stops.
- Borough Bus Network Redesigns are comprehensive reviews and as-needed overhauls of MTA bus routes, on a borough-by-borough basis, to better reflect the needs of today's bus riders. As of this writing, only the Bronx redesign is complete, with Queens Phase 1 in effect and Phase 2 following later this summer, and Brooklyn about to undertake next steps.
- Bus Priority Projects are redesigns of city streets with the goal of improving bus service using a toolkit developed by NYC DOT, including bus lanes and busways. Most are lanes along the curb or offset by parking, doing little to improve the accessibility of bus stops and facing constant blockages. Center-aligned bus lanes are standard in international BRT systems, yet exceedingly rare in New York. Augmenting traditional traffic agents, the Automated Camera Enforcement (ACE) program targets vehicles blocking bus stops and improperly using bus lanes.

However, successful case studies from around the world show that there is a path to addressing the shortcomings of New York City's busiest buses. Policymakers in cities like Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Cleveland, Curitiba, Guangzhou, and Mexico City have all designed BRT differently in ways that consider their riders, larger public transit network and urban environment. It is time for all of the parties responsible for ensuring that New Yorkers have quality bus service to get on board with the single goal of improving the lives of millions who rely on buses in the five boroughs — which are served by an extensive, yet Manhattan-centric subway system, and showing high demand for rapid transit within and between the other four boroughs.

To implement BRT that is up-to-par with international standards, New Yorkers need a system that is fast, frequent, reliable, accessible, and easy to use. Although this report identifies Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn and Northern Boulevard, Queens as two key places for possible implementation, the following suite of recommendations should be used together to create a cohesive network of BRT for underserved neighborhoods across the boroughs:

- Install protected bus lanes aligned to the center of streets, avoiding the chronic issues that block New York's existing curbside and offset bus lanes.
- Continue implementing technology innovations to speed up buses, such as transit signal priority, and other intersection safety tools such as left turn bans and queue jumps when necessary.
- Build accessible BRT stations with level boarding, full shelters, clear signage, lighting, seating and countdown clocks. Strengthen coordination between MTA & NYC DOT to deliver higher-quality and more effective bus priority projects in compliance with the legal mandates of the NYC Streets Plan.[2]
- Overhaul signage and wayfinding by adopting a recognizable and unified design language for wayfinding at BRT stations. Integrate BRT into the subway map to improve wayfinding for riders.
- Pilot a new bus fleet with doors on both sides to enable construction of bi-directional island platforms, a standard design on most international BRT systems.
- Reform boarding and fare payment by enabling all-door boarding and piloting fare gates at BRT stations to speed up service and reduce fare evasion.
- Launch the next generation Select Bus Service as BRT by upgrading existing infrastructure, extending existing SBS to better connect Manhattan's Congestion Relief Zone with the boroughs outside of Manhattan, and launching new interborough SBS by using this report's suite of recommendations in tandem with one another.

BRT in New York City is more than just possible — it's a necessary goal for NYC's bus mayor. For a more sustainable and transit-driven future, there must be more commitment to better coordinated efforts between the MTA and NYC DOT, whose most recent update to the Streets Plan states the agency's desire to "work with the MTA to plan — and fund — the next generation of major transit capital investments, including subway, rail, and bus rapid transit."[3] Through this report's recommendations and proper investment, PCAC is confident that the next generation of Select Bus Service can achieve the bus rapid transit standards that New Yorkers from all five boroughs deserve.

The B46 SBS and other buses wait in traffic on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn.
Photo: Raymond Cho (@raytac23)

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1. Introduction

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) operates over 200 local/limited bus routes, 20 Select Bus Service (SBS) routes, and 75 express bus routes within New York City — serving a daily ridership of over two million.[4] Running such an expansive network relied on by so many riders, and on city streets they do not have control over where space comes at a premium, is no easy feat.

Despite being the largest and highest ridership bus system in the country, New York City's buses are also some of the slowest, plagued by record traffic, inadequate on-street infrastructure, and outdated transit policies. In many cases they are slower than walking: MTA buses (excluding express buses) ran at an average speed of 7.8 mph between January 2024 and January 2025.[5] None of this is helped by the wrongful reputation of the bus as a third-class transportation mode, an afterthought in the city's transit network which only serves places – and people – the subway does not reach.

Bus rapid transit (BRT), a concept unfamiliar to most New Yorkers, differs from a standard bus network by incorporating: **protected bus lanes; priority at intersections; off-board fare payment; accessible level boarding;** and other key elements on stretches 1.9 miles and longer to achieve a true, uninterrupted rapid transit experience for bus riders. It is a tool that New York City can use to bring key, high demand corridors up to the standard that dozens of other cities have already reached — or better put, the standard that riders in the five boroughs deserve.

Case Study: *Curitiba, Brazil*

The world's *first* BRT:

The Brazilian city of Curitiba is credited for implementing the world's very first bus rapid transit system, "Rede Integrada de Transporte," beginning in 1974 with the opening of its north-south corridor.[10]

Its uniquely recognizable tube-shaped stations, turnstiles, wheelchair access, high-floor articulated fleet and dedicated bus lanes have made the network a definitive model for BRT across the globe.

Photo: WRI Brasil via flickr (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Its closest relative in New York City is Select Bus Service, launched in 2008 after an initial push for BRT by transit advocates such as the Pratt Center for Community Development. Rollout of SBS in the 15+ years since has fallen considerably short of the speeds, frequency, reliability, accessibility, and ease of use which international BRT systems have achieved for their riders. In 2024, SBS routes ran at an average speed of 9.2 mph — not even 1.5 mph faster than the system-wide average.[6]

Recent reports such as *Speeding Up Slowly* by the New York City Independent Budget Office,[7] *Behind Schedule* by the Office of the New York City Comptroller,[8] and *How Much Faster Are We Moving?* by the group People Oriented Cities corroborate these findings and offer highly data-driven analysis into the results of New York's disparate bus-related initiatives.[9]

However, successful case studies from around the world show that there is a path to addressing the shortcomings of New York City's buses. This report highlights BRT systems that excel at different fundamental elements and offer a glimpse of what could be for the five boroughs, if we have a mayor and political leadership who are willing to work with the MTA and New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT) to be true champions for bus riders.

The Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA (PCAC) encourages elected officials, community groups, agency leadership, urban planners, and everyday straphangers alike to use this report's recommendations to bridge the current gap in imagination between what the bus system looks like now and what it can be in the future with thoughtful, targeted investment.

2. What is BRT?

The Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), publisher of *the BRT Standard* and a leading proponent of the transit mode, defines bus rapid transit as:

> ... a high-capacity bus-based rapid transit system that delivers fast, high quality, reliable, safe, and cost-effective services at relatively low cost. It achieves that through **dedicated bus lanes that are [center-] aligned, [have] off-board fare collection, level boarding, bus priority at intersections, and fast and frequent operations.**[11]

- Dedicated bus lanes are street lanes reserved exclusively for buses. They often run in the center of roadways, reducing the conflicts which plague the curbside and offset bus lanes frequently found in New York.
- Off-board fare collection involves collecting fares from riders before they board in order to speed up bus travel. It can take the form of turnstiles at BRT stations or a proof-of-payment system involving ticket inspections. ITDP also recognizes all-door boarding with on-board payment as an acceptable, albeit less effective model for BRT. New York City's SBS currently uses off-board fare collection, often combined with the honor system and sporadic enforcement efforts that include proof-of-payment, and on-board payment, depending on whether the rider pays with coins, MetroCard or OMNY.
- Level boarding matches the height of the platform with the floor of the bus to make boarding faster and easier. It is achieved by building accessible BRT stations, usually in the middle of roadways, with platforms that meet the door level of buses running on a dedicated bus corridor. There is currently no precedent for level boarding through accessible platforms on SBS, nor New York City's buses at large.
- Bus priority at intersections, or transit signal priority, is a system in which transponders in buses communicate either directly or through a remote server with traffic signals as they approach intersections to reduce wasted time at red lights and make service more reliable.

It is the combination of all factors that make the difference between a street on which buses merely run and a corridor built to bus rapid transit standards. As part of ITDP's efforts to create a common definition, four rankings exist to recognize the quality of a corridor, which itself must be at least 1.9 miles in length: basic; bronze; silver; and gold.

ITDP currently does not recognize New York City as having *any* BRT corridors of any ranking. To better understand BRT's foundational elements, the next section analyzes existing conditions in New York City and the reasons why they do not meet bus rapid transit standards.

***Case Study:** Bogotá, Colombia*

City of 8 million, with no trains?

The TransMilenio in Bogotá, Colombia was launched in 2000 and is often praised for being the direct inspiration for all BRT systems which came after it.[12] Its many fully or partially grade-separated corridors, fare gates, platform screen doors, high-floor articulated buses, level all-door boarding and extensive coverage throughout the city make for a truly impressive network.

However, its major pitfall is its status as the only rapid transit mode for a city of eight million residents: Bogotá lacks rail transport of any kind. This has overwhelmed the TransMilenio system from its inception and pushed the city to build its first metro line, scheduled to open in 2028. If BRT is to be implemented in the five boroughs, it should work to complement and fill gaps in New York's world-renowned subway system — our rapid transit spine of over a century.

Photo: Oscar Amaya via flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0)

3. Existing Conditions

Bus operations in New York City suffer because of split roadway responsibilities between the MTA and NYC DOT. While the MTA's role is to operate its fleet and plan bus routing as efficiently as possible, NYC DOT's responsibility is to design highly utilized roadways with accessibility and traffic safety of all street users in mind. The city's Streets Plan includes legal mandates for the number of bus and bike lanes it is required to install per year, but NYC DOT has fallen woefully short in its implementation. The lack of bus lane construction is due to several factors, including the pandemic, significant cuts to NYC DOT staffing and interference by the Adams Administration, and most importantly, the Streets Plan's lack of an enforcement mechanism for its legally binding mandates.

Despite intense political headwinds, the MTA and NYC DOT have implemented various initiatives to provide better service to bus riders throughout the five boroughs over the past two decades. Most importantly, over 23 miles of camera- or physically protected bus lanes have been installed since the start of the current 2022-2026 Streets Plan, although that is falling short of the Plan's mandate of 150 miles.[13]

Select Bus Service and Bus Priority Projects

Since the launch of Select Bus Service in 2008, riders have been paying with their MetroCards and spare change at off-board fare machines located on sidewalk-level bus stops. The machines dispense a ticket as proof-of-payment, and riders may board through all doors when the bus arrives. When OMNY was introduced in 2019, riders were also given the option to tap their card or mobile device at OMNY readers enabled on all doors of the bus. SBS routes are still the only ones in the system which allow for all-door boarding; even local buses that run alongside SBS do not take advantage of an all-door boarding policy. The majority of SBS routes make use of three-door articulated buses, as opposed to the standard two-door fleet. Buses make few stops with much farther spacing compared to local routes, prioritizing major destinations and transfer points.

Though the limited-stop service pattern associated with BRT was accomplished through SBS, almost every other key element remains missing in New York City's implementation. Bus corridors have not been redesigned sufficiently in the ways that international BRT systems have, leading to operational issues with SBS. Intended to improve bus service, NYC DOT's street redesigns for bus priority projects are almost always curbside or offset bus lanes that preserve stop placement on the city's crowded sidewalks. NYC DOT has begun pursuing bus lanes offset by parking, and moving away from installing the curbside variety, to address the high demand for curbside space along city streets. However, both have proven to be consistently blocked by other vehicles and ineffective without consistent enforcement.

Augmenting traditional traffic agents, the Automated Camera Enforcement (ACE) program allows for the unbiased targeting of both bus lane and bus stop violations — issues which remain rampant despite these enforcement efforts due to ineffective street design. In practice, buses are chronically unable to fully pull into stops due to illegal parking and other blockages resulting from the curb's high demand; since 2019, the city has issued over 435,000 notices of violations for blocking bus stops and lanes.[14] Rampant traffic law violations in New York City often force bus riders to step off the curb into mixed traffic to board their bus, putting riders with mobility issues especially at risk.

The last SBS route to have been inaugurated is the M14 SBS, launched in tandem with Manhattan's 14th Street busway in 2019. Travel times decreased by 24% after launch,[15] and ridership increased by as much as 30%.[16] Busways occupy the entirety of the roadway and only permit drivers to enter for local access needs; generally, drivers must make the next possible turn off the busway to keep the right of way clear for bus riders. Only a handful are currently in operation, mostly on the busiest sections of high demand corridors served by many converging bus routes. The Main Street busway in Flushing, Queens is one of the best examples. The busway turned a previously almost impassable car-clogged section of Main Street into a smooth flowing area for the many local buses that originate/terminate in downtown Flushing, as well as the Q44 SBS, which thru-runs along its route between the Bronx Zoo and Jamaica, Queens.

Even less common in New York City are center-aligned bus lanes and median lanes on arterials, which relocate bus boarding from traditional sidewalk stops to ones built in the middle of roadways. Though these may require more upfront investment, they avoid the conflicts which plague offset and curbside lanes. Relocated bus stops in the form of islands or medians also double as pedestrian safety infrastructure, reducing distances for people crossing the street.

However, even in the few places where bus stops have been built into the middle of roadways, NYC DOT's *Street Design Manual* specifies they cannot currently be built with a height greater than 10.5 inches[17] — meaning rebuilt bus stops do not reach door level and limit accessibility.

Accessibility Implications

The MTA's bus fleet became one hundred percent ADA-compliant in 1993,[19] a commendable and important accomplishment. However, network-wide accessibility is achieved through mechanical kneeling and wheelchair ramps on the buses themselves, deployed at the operator's discretion. Not only does this slow down the boarding process for riders with disabilities, it also increases dwell times and creates more responsibilities for bus operators. International BRT systems, where center-aligned bus lanes are the universal design, incorporate station platforms built to match the door level of buses for greater accessibility and reduced dwell times.

Both the quality and quantity of NYC DOT's bus priority projects fall far short of the legally mandated benchmarks specified in the NYC Streets Plan. Created by Local Law 195, passed by the City Council in 2019, the current 2022-2026 iteration of the NYC Streets Plan mandates an average of 30 camera- or physically-protected bus lane miles per year. NYC DOT installed, upgraded or protected 17.8 miles of bus lanes in 2024 — only 13.5 miles of which are protected according to the agency's most recent update.[20]

The M15, mainly running on 1st and 2nd Avenues, was upgraded to SBS in 2010 and now serves an annual ridership of 16.4 million along its north-south route in Manhattan's far east side.[18] Despite being the single busiest bus route, not just in New York but the entire country, the M15 lacks adequate street design to support its high ridership. Riders are often made to board/disembark through mixed traffic and illegally parked cars at bus stops, while operators are forced to weave around vehicles blocking the curbside and offset bus lanes along its route.

Photo: Marc A. Hermann/MTA via flickr (CC BY 2.0)

Curbside & Offset Lanes

ex: *Utica Ave, Brooklyn*

Bus lanes located curbside or offset by a parking lane are the most common variety in New York. NYC DOT has identified offset lanes as preferable due to the preservation of the curb for parking or other uses. However, blockages from turning vehicles and double parking remain an issue on the offset variety.

Photo: Raymond Cho (@raytac23)

Center-aligned Lanes

ex: *E. L. Grant Hwy, the Bronx*

Center-aligned bus lanes avoid the illegal parking and other blockages which plague the curbside and offset varieties. Riders board from stops built into the middle of roadways, which also shorten crossing distances for pedestrians. Center-aligned bus lanes are exceedingly rare in New York, sections of 161 St and E. L. Grant Hwy in the Bronx being the only notable installations.

Photo: NYC DOT via flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Median Lanes on Arterials

ex: *Woodhaven Blvd, Queens*

Arterials with "main" and "service" roads cut through many neighborhoods outside of Manhattan, creating highway-like environments in what are usually areas inadequately served by the subway. A handful incorporate bus lanes which run alongside and make stops on the medians of these excessively wide roadways.

Photo: Raymond Cho (@raytac23)

Busways

ex: *Main St, Queens*

Busways occupy the entirety of the roadway and only permit cars to enter for local access needs. Generally, drivers must make the next possible turn to keep the right of way clear. Most are located in dense commercial areas where many bus routes converge and terminate.

Photo: PCAC

Existing Bus Lanes & SBS

as of May 2024*

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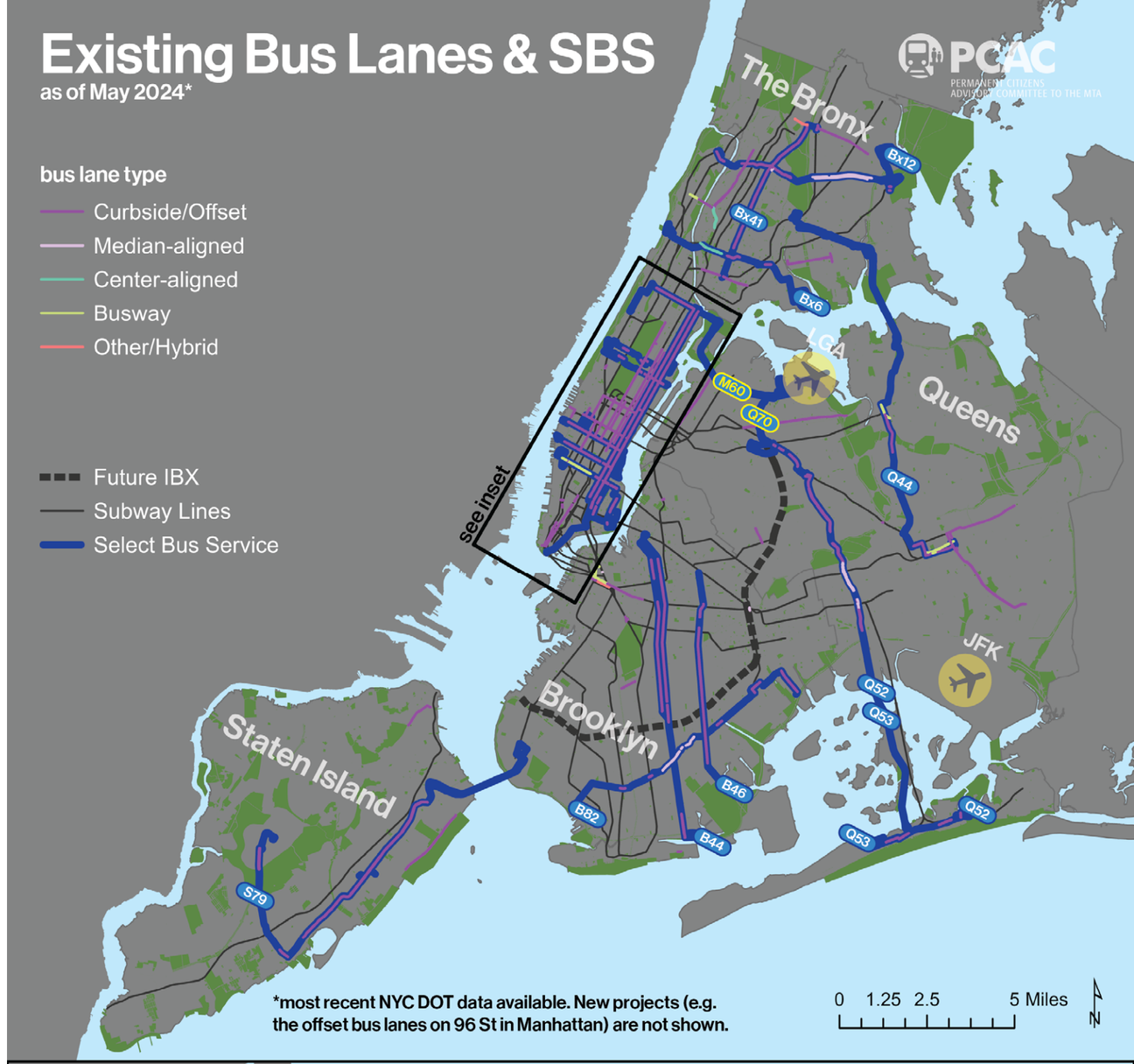
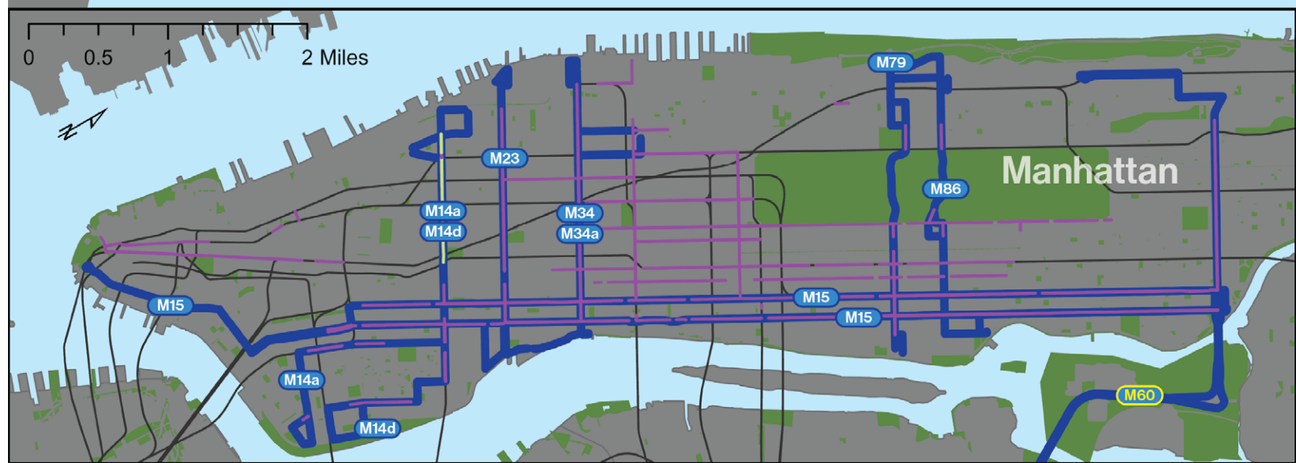
bus lane type

- Curbside/Offset
- Median-aligned
- Center-aligned
- Busway
- Other/Hybrid

- Future IBX
- Subway Lines
- Select Bus Service



*most recent NYC DOT data available. New projects (e.g. the offset bus lanes on 96 St in Manhattan) are not shown.



Borough Bus Network Redesigns

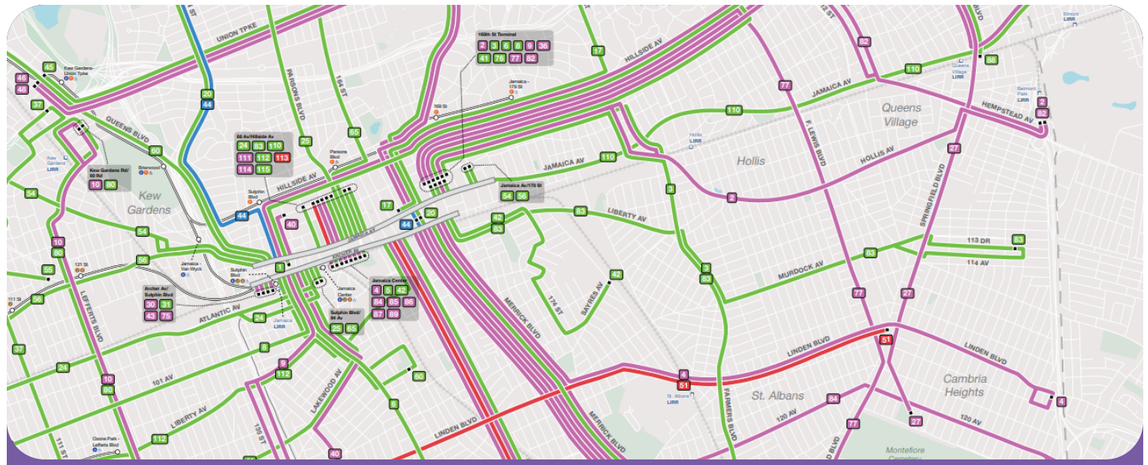
The MTA is undergoing an overhaul of the 300+ routes under its purview to consolidate, shift, and create entirely new bus routes one borough at a time. Having inherited a legacy bus network throughout the twentieth century from private operators who were in competition with each other and thus did not plan centrally, the MTA continues to run routes that are unchanged since the days of streetcars.

Rush routes are the new addition to the bus network, starting in Queens.[21] They will make frequent stops on one end of the line while making much fewer towards the other. The idea is to "rush" straphangers from the farthest reaches of the borough into dense commercial areas and toward subway/rail hubs, such as downtown Jamaica and Flushing.

Only the Bronx Bus Network Redesign is fully complete and implemented at this time; the Queens Bus Network Redesign has begun implementation over the summer of 2025 and Brooklyn is currently in planning. Though they are commendable efforts, the planning logic by and large continues to treat buses as feeders into the subway and commuter railroads, as opposed to a potential rapid transit mode in its own right. The MTA has not launched new SBS as part of the Bronx Bus Network Redesign, nor is it planning to with the upcoming Queens implementation. Attempts to make spot upgrades to existing SBS have yielded mixed results. The MTA and NYC DOT succesfully installed a busway on Main Street, Queens along the Q44 SBS route,[22] but failed to do the same for Bx12 riders on Fordham Road in the Bronx as result of undue political pressure.[23]

As the MetroCard is being officially retired, and with it the MetroCard fare machines at SBS stops, the future of Select Bus Service is unclear. When OMNY completely replaces the MetroCard, SBS will essentially be a limited bus with all-door boarding and New York City will be back to square one after almost two decades since the launch of SBS.

New York City's leadership has the opportunity get BRT done right, both by learning from past missteps and looking towards international award-winning systems to understand what functioning bus rapid transit could look like in the five boroughs. If not, New Yorkers will face a future of even longer commute times and ever more dysfunctional buses — which, despite their flaws, serve over two million daily riders.



Rush routes (in purple) are being launched as feeders to subway/rail hubs, primarily in Eastern Queens.
Source: MTA Queens Bus Network Redesign

4. Recommendations

To implement bus rapid transit that is up-to-par with international standards and that best serves riders, **New Yorkers need a system that is fast, frequent, reliable, accessible and easy to use.**

For straphangers in New York, the experience is currently lacking in all parts of their bus ride. However, MTA and NYC DOT can build on proven best practices here in New York while looking towards award-winning systems in other major cities which excel at particular aspects of BRT.

The following context-dependent design solutions, if implemented in tandem with certain system-wide policies to enhance bus service, would bring all parts of the rider's experience up to BRT standards on key corridors throughout the five boroughs.

Install protected bus lanes aligned to the center of streets.

NYC DOT, as the lead agency responsible for the on-street design of bus corridors while considering the accessibility and traffic safety of all street users, has the opportunity to fundamentally change its current approach to bus priority projects. PCAC strongly recommends that NYC DOT:

1. Discontinue the implementation of curbside and offset lanes as permanent layouts. These traditional varieties serving sidewalk bus stops, which make up the majority of New York City's existing bus lanes, are inherently less effective due to chronic illegal parking, turning vehicles, and other curbside conflicts. They necessitate a high standard of enforcement that is seldom achieved, making them unreliable in the long-term.

2. Upgrade existing curbside/offset lanes and install more effective designs, ideally center-aligned lanes, for future projects. In conjunction with the MTA and stakeholders along bus corridors, NYC DOT should identify alternative lane designs that reduce illegal parking and conflicts with turning cars — increasing bus speeds and availability of the curb for non-bus uses.

Continue upgrading intersections to speed up buses.

1. Continue installing transit signal priority on key bus corridors. Transit signal priority, which typically uses tracking technology between traffic signals and buses, can extend the green light cycle or trigger an early green signal depending on when the bus approaches an intersection. NYC DOT installed transit signal priority at over 700 intersections in 2024,[24] and should continue the practice as part of a BRT implementation.

2. Implement left turn bans for center-aligned bus lanes. Left turn bans for general car traffic are a prerequisite for certain bus lane designs, especially the center-aligned variety. In addition to reducing conflicts for buses, left turn bans also increase traffic safety for all road users due to the relative danger left turns present when compared to right turns. This is a best practice that NYC DOT should adopt.

3. Install queue jumps where other tools are not feasible. Typically, queue jumps allow buses to enter a short pocket lane at intersections with a dedicated signal phase. When a bus is in the pocket lane, a specialized signal phase allows it to jump ahead while other vehicle lanes in the same direction remain red. The signal phase can also integrate a leading pedestrian interval (LPI), offering people crossing the street a head start. Though PCAC applauds NYC DOT for its recently announced commitment to installing 25 new queue jumps per year,[25] it should be noted that they are usually ideal for streets without dedicated bus lanes. Thus, queue jumps should only be considered when more effective tools are not feasible.

Build accessible BRT stations with level boarding.

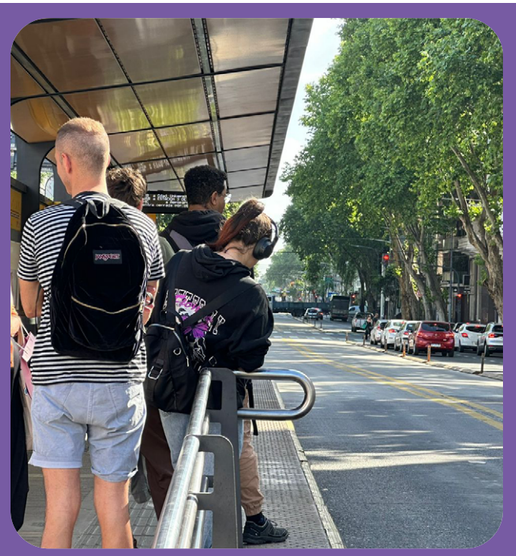
Prioritizing bus speeds between stops is only half the work of achieving BRT; the stops themselves are essential parts of the rider's experience. To create stations of BRT standards, the MTA and NYC DOT must work closely to ensure that their planning, design, construction and operational practices are as effective and mutually beneficial as possible.

Generally speaking, all on-street bus infrastructure has been the responsibility of NYC DOT. Bus priority projects that the agency has completed in recent memory have usually been street improvement projects (SIPs), meaning projects that NYC DOT has implemented using their operating budget, as opposed to capital funds. Although there are numerous additional requirements and longer timelines, capital projects typically result in a higher-quality and more robust end product. NYC DOT has built bus boarding islands, for example, with its operating budget. Aside from the boarding islands not meeting door level, the amenities are also restricted to a street furniture toolkit contracted to private franchisees. Bus shelters, where they exist, are currently franchised out to JCDecaux. A franchise model may not be effective for the construction and maintenance of BRT stations.

PCAC recommends that the MTA play a more central role in the capital construction and operational maintenance of BRT stations. This will mean leveraging existing in-house talent at MTA Construction & Development to create robust platform designs and passenger amenities for a true BRT experience in partnership with NYC DOT.

BRT stations would enable level boarding, without the need for mechanical bus kneeling, and include many of the same elements found on subway platforms. Full shelters, lighting, benches, signage, tactile edges, and countdown clocks will create an inviting environment for riders. Riders will more immediately recognize the level of investment that the MTA and NYC DOT are putting into their bus journey, more convincingly making the case for streetscape changes that integrate bus lanes.

Case Study: *Buenos Aires, Argentina*



Center bus lanes & stations:

Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, has built public infrastructure to facilitate the smooth operation of its many buses on select city streets under the branding "Metrobús."[26] Metrobús certainly does not exist in a vacuum and instead works to complement the Buenos Aires Subte, opened in 1913 and currently made up of six lines.

Most Metrobús corridors consist of center-aligned bus lanes. Multiple routes often share the same infrastructure for part or all of the corridor's length. Stations incorporate well-lit, fully sheltered platforms with clearly marked signage. Most importantly, Metrobús platforms are accessible by ramps that reach boarding level — a huge achievement for accessibility.

However, the Buenos Aires model lacks an efficient fare payment system. Riders board single file, verbally tell the driver their destination, and tap their SUBE fare card once the driver sets a custom price based on journey distance. Due to this, there is no off-board fare collection like New York City has with Select Bus Service.

The lack of integrated fares, off-board fare collection and all-door boarding makes the Buenos Aires model a peculiarity among Latin American BRT systems.

Photos: Heira Zaracho

Pilot a new BRT fleet.

In the future 2030-34 MTA Capital Plan, the MTA has the opportunity to order a pilot fleet of articulated buses with doors on both sides of the vehicle. This will enable the construction of island platforms on BRT corridors which serve buses going in both directions, ensuring that vehicle design is not a limiting factor in creating effective street infrastructure. Though this will be a new vehicle type in the MTA system, it will decrease the cost of building BRT stations by necessitating a single platform instead of the two platforms needed for a traditional bus fleet.

Case Study: *Cleveland, Ohio*

Dual-side bus boarding:

The HealthLine BRT in Cleveland, Ohio employs a unique articulated fleet with doors on both sides of the bus. This enables passengers to board through the conventional righthand side and from island platforms to the left of the vehicle.[27]

The fleet is built by New Flyer, a Canadian company with locations in the U.S. that supplies much of the MTA's rolling stock in New York.

HealthLine is one of the only BRT systems that takes advantage of this arrangement in the United States.

Photo: "wyliepoon" via flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Overhaul signage and wayfinding.

Branding is often overlooked in transportation, even though it deeply shapes how riders navigate a transit system. When done right, riders should not have to think about visual identity; getting around should be intuitive and simple. If the MTA is to treat SBS as its flagship bus network, it must:

1. Adopt a recognizable and unified design language for wayfinding at BRT stations. Currently, identifying which bus routes stop at a given street corner and in which direction is confusing and unintuitive. This is especially true at major transfer points, where many bus and subway lines converge. SBS stops are often indicated only by a small panel on the side of the road, same as any local bus, or by their off-board fare machines. The MTA can look towards the design language used for the subway, tried-and-true since its introduction in the 1970s (albeit with minor modifications), to create a cohesive identity for BRT.

2. Incorporate BRT into the subway map. SBS is not currently displayed on the subway map unless it acts as an airport connection, which does not give riders confidence that SBS is a reliable part of New York City's transit system or grounded in the city's physical environment. Fully-fledged BRT would be reflected on the subway map and recognized as part of the rapid transit network.

Reform boarding and fare payment.

PCAC recommends that the MTA enable all-door boarding on buses system-wide when the MetroCard is officially retired at the end of 2025,[28] following an extensive campaign on the importance of fare payment on buses. For several years, OMNY fare validators have been installed at all doors on all MTA buses. However, validators at the rear door of local buses remain disabled due to the absence of all-door boarding system-wide — despite the upfront capital costs the MTA has already paid to install the equipment.

All-door boarding, regardless of any distinction between local service and SBS, will reduce dwell times and be especially crucial in the buildout of BRT corridors. Disjointed boarding policy between local and SBS routes on the same corridor confuses riders and slows down their trips by increasing boarding times. On future BRT corridors, which are likely to overlap with the current SBS network, the MTA has two primary options for handling fare payment:

1. Remove the off-board MetroCard machines and switch to exclusively on-board OMNY/contactless payment for both SBS and local service.

2. Pilot the installation of fare gates and platform screen doors at feasible BRT stations to reduce dwell times and fare evasion. Fare gates are commonly found on BRT systems in Latin American cities, as their stations see extremely high ridership that would overwhelm a proof-of-payment model such as currently exists on Select Bus Service. Platform screen doors are also a common way to prevent fare evasion, an especially important consideration if the BRT system is reliant on low-floor buses as opposed to a high-floor metro-style fleet. Though fare gates would increase upfront capital costs for the buildout of BRT in New York, they would reduce operational staffing costs from police and Eagle Team enforcement against fare evasion. They would help address concerns of unequal enforcement, consolidate the difference in payment policy between local service and SBS, speed up the boarding process, and cement the goal of SBS as rapid transit. All stated benefits further incentivize more New Yorkers to ride the bus and take pride in paying their fare, fundamentally changing the current reputation of the bus as a third-class transportation mode.

Regardless of the method chosen to adapt SBS to a post-MetroCard context, PCAC maintains that all-door boarding should be universal across all MTA buses. No New Yorker should have to shout "back door!" ever again.

Case Study: *Mexico City*

Paying fares before boarding:

Riders of the Mexico City Metrobús board through all doors and pay a flat fare with an integrated transit card, which includes a free transfer between other Metrobús lines.[29] Riders can reload their cards at machines behind fare gates at most stations, which are built to door level and incorporate full-length shelters. Stations do not have platform screen doors due to the high-floor buses and platforms the system uses, as opposed to the low-floor fleet bus riders are accustomed to in New York.

Photo: Steve Boland via flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Launch the next generation Select Bus Service as BRT.

Equipped with previous recommendations, New York City will be ready to upgrade and expand its flagship bus network to BRT standards after years of stagnation. This will be the next generation Select Bus Service, with the investment and fundamental elements that will bring world-class bus rapid transit to the five boroughs.

This will mean using this report's recommendations together to:

1. Upgrade existing SBS to bus rapid transit standards. Existing SBS routes, which already have some of the highest ridership in the MTA system, should meet the standards that peer networks in other major cities have already reached. Equipped with this report's previous recommendations, New York City can transform existing SBS routes into BRT lines by providing them with the dedicated on-street infrastructure, stations, visual identity, new technologies, and policy reforms they need.

2. Extend existing SBS between Manhattan and the other boroughs where feasible. Congestion Pricing has significantly decreased traffic on the Manhattan street grid south of 60th Street, as well as the East River Crossings between the Congestion Relief Zone, Brooklyn and Queens. The MTA has piloted the removal of timepoints on seven bus routes in the Congestion Relief Zone, originally meant to regulate bus scheduling pre-Congestion Pricing, to take advantage of the decreased traffic. This has led to a 4% increase in average speeds during the pilot's first few weeks.[30] The MTA can further leverage the benefits of Congestion Pricing by extending crosstown Manhattan SBS into Brooklyn and Queens via the East River crossings (e.g. M34 via the Queens Midtown Tunnel; M14 via the Williamsburg Bridge).

3. Introduce new SBS for high-demand corridors and underserved neighborhoods. Demand for inter- and intra-borough rapid transit is growing outside of Manhattan entirely, a role that BRT is ideal in fulfilling.

Two grade-seperated BRT proposals on Staten Island have been discussed for years; the North Shore BRT would reuse a former rail alignment while the West Shore BRT would use the alignment of the Korean War Veterans Parkway and Bayonne Bridge to connect the borough with Bayonne, New Jersey.

There is no mass transit of any kind, not even a local bus, across the Throgs Neck Bridge nor the Bronx span of the Triboro (RFK) Bridge. Considering that the Interborough Express (IBX) light rail is not being planned to connect Queens and the Bronx, BRT could instead be used to better connect the two boroughs by utilizing the MTA controlled bridges.

Planned highway reconstruction projects, such as the capping of the Cross Bronx Expressway, are prime opportunities to take advantage of potential federal funding and a prolonged capital timeline. Such polluting expressways can become fully grade-separated BRT corridors and provide an unprecedented rapid transit connection to the residents of neighborhoods long divided by Robert Moses-era car infrastructure.

Existing riders of local buses on the city's main, excessively wide roadways would benefit immensely from street-level BRT; the following section takes a look at just two possible examples. Compared to previous attempts, which did not incorporate effective bus lanes nor meaningfully upgrade bus stops, this new generation of Select Bus Service will be BRT from the very start.

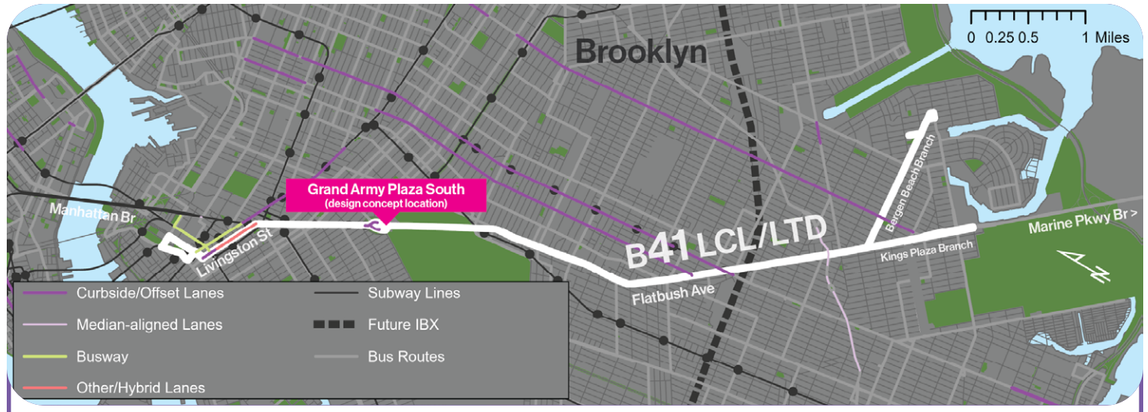
5. Design Concepts

What could the **next generation Select Bus Service**, with the previous section's recommendations as its basis feasibly look like? This section focuses on design concepts and the ways they could address current issues on two key corridors: Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn and Northern Boulevard, Queens. Both are long, uninterrupted main roadways which span practically the entirety of their respective boroughs and are currently without SBS.

Though these are just two instances where BRT could be immensely beneficial, they are far from the only possible use cases. PCAC encourages New Yorkers to think of these general concepts as an adaptable toolkit; exact implementation should aways be responsive to the needs of riders and surrounding neighborhoods.

Flatbush Avenue:

at Grand Army Plaza South



Existing B41 Route Overview

Stretching between the Manhattan Bridge and the Marine Parkway Bridge, Flatbush Avenue is served almost in its entirety by the B41 local/limited bus – one of the MTA's top ten busiest routes. Several other routes use Flatbush Avenue for short stretches. NYC DOT is currently in the planning stages of a bus priority project and is splitting up the busy corridor into three distinct sections: southern, central, and northern.

The southern end (Marine Parkway to Flatbush Junction) is not served by any subway or commuter rail; strap-hangers in this area of Brooklyn are completely reliant on bus service to travel within the borough or to connect with the subway if traveling farther. It is the widest section and can most easily accommodate center-aligned BRT.

The central section (Flatbush Junction to Prospect Park) is the narrowest and may not be ideal for center-aligned BRT along its entirety. The B, Q, 2, and 5 trains are nearby and offer residents subway access.

The northern end of Flatbush Avenue runs through Downtown Brooklyn and leads to the Manhattan Bridge. It may be wide enough for center-aligned BRT – a worthwhile effort as bus speeds can average less than 4mph in this section during rush hour.[31]

As part of a separate capital project, NYC DOT plans on redesigning Grand Army Plaza to simplify traffic flow while better connecting pedestrian and cyclist pathways.[32] Despite Grand Army Plaza being the B41's gateway between Downtown Brooklyn and areas south of Prospect Park, current NYC DOT literature speaks little to how the agency's separate projects will interact.

The following pages present a BRT concept that could significantly improve conditions for B41 riders, address additional problems faced by other users of the street, and ease car dependency in Brooklyn's subway deserts.

Photos: Raymond Cho (@raytac23)

NYC DOT does not construct bus boarding islands to the same height as bus doors, leading to the same gaps found on sidewalk bus stops. Mechanical bus kneeling helps, but is only activated at the front of the bus and slows down the boarding process. The existing island is built with a curb cut leading riders down Flatbush Ave, away from local attractions (e.g. Brooklyn Public Library and Prospect Park).

Flatbush BRT

This design concept focuses specifically on what BRT could look like at Flatbush Avenue on the southern end of Grand Army Plaza. Flatbush Avenue varies greatly in roadway width from section to section, meaning the design of bus lanes and stations would likely vary as well.

The existing B41 limited would be upgraded to SBS and could potentially be extended on both ends to Canal Street (Manhattan) and Rockaway Park (Queens), reducing the need for subway transfers for many riders. In doing so, the B41 SBS would enable a one-seat ride across three boroughs while the B41 local can take advantage of the same BRT infrastructure for faster inter-neighborhood connectivity along its existing route.

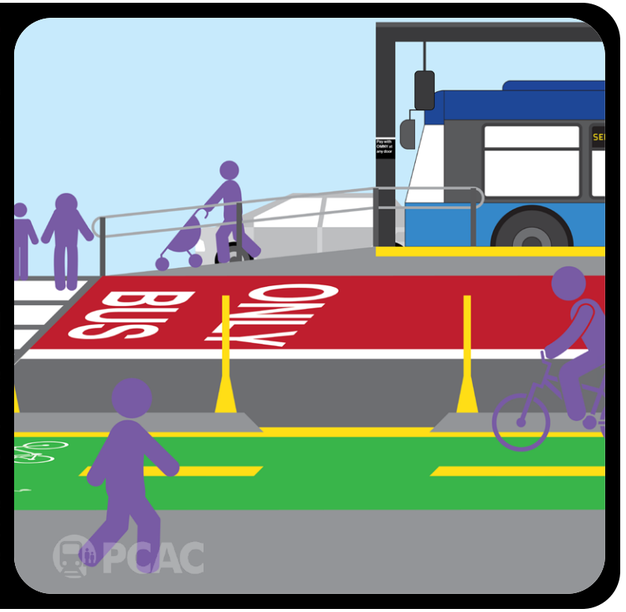
Feasibility of inter-borough SBS via Flatbush Avenue hinges on whether the on-street infrastructure is designed/enforced effectively and on the continuation of Congestion Pricing, which has significantly reduced traffic in Lower Manhattan and across the Manhattan Bridge.

Bikes & Buses Together

BRT implementation is a prime opportunity to redesign infrastructure to work better not just for bus riders, but for all users of the city's busy streets.

The parking-protected bike lanes on Flatbush Ave, next to Prospect Park, are an important connector to the other major streets feeding into Grand Army Plaza (e.g. Eastern Pkwy bike path). Their original installation required a rudimentary bus boarding island be built to accommodate the southbound B41 stop. The tight footprint and limited toolkit NYC DOT used for this operational project meant awkward placement and few passenger amenities.

Building BRT, and taking advantage of the Grand Army Plaza capital project, could result in a more orderly allocation of roadway space for all users.

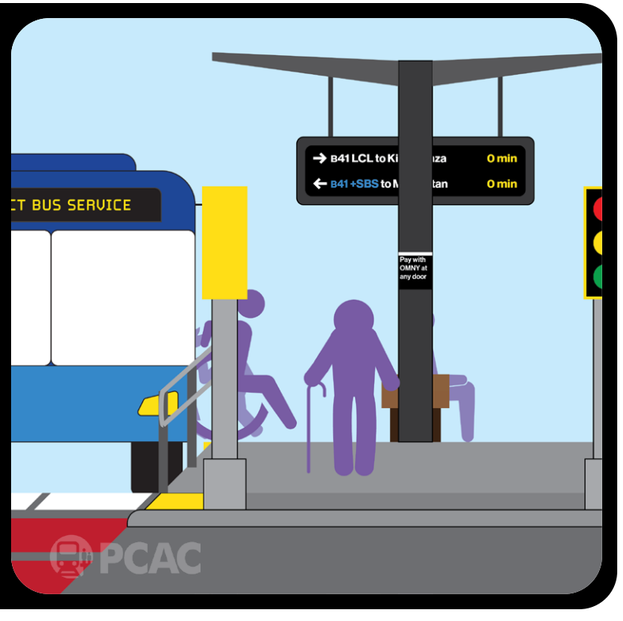


Center Platform

This design concept imagines a B41 fleet using articulated buses with doors on both sides of the vehicle, unlocking the ability to construct a single island platform with bus lanes on either side.

This design would save roadway space on relatively narrow sections of Flatbush Avenue served only by the B41; a two-platform station design could be used in wider sections served by a variety of routes using standard buses.

Platforms should be built to the height of bus doors to enable level boarding. Dwell times would be improved by reducing the need for bus kneeling and mechanical wheelchair ramps.



Faster Boarding

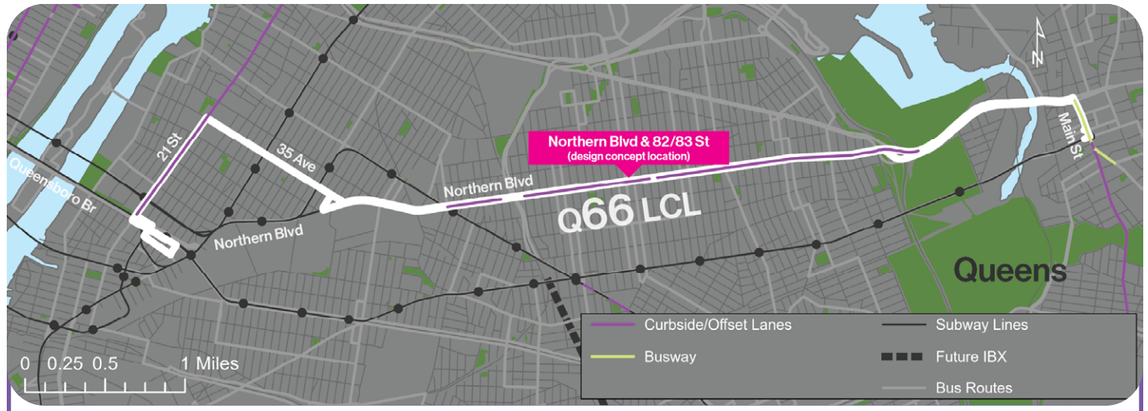
Though all-door boarding should be in place for all MTA buses, it is imperative for BRT.

Citywide, SBS and local routes currently have different fare payment and boarding policies even if they run on the same street and share the same stops. Universal all-door boarding would create a consistent experience for bus riders across different service types.

Riders should be able to board/disembark through any door when the bus arrives for a faster ride and rapid transit experience.

Northern Boulevard:

at 82nd/83rd Streets



Existing Q63/Q66 Route Overview

Northern Boulevard serves the Q66 local bus on its route between Flushing and Long Island City, paralleling the 7 train about a mile south on Roosevelt Avenue. The major east-west roadway marks the start of a subway desert in the residential areas near LaGuardia Airport, where straphangers rely heavily on buses that feed into the subway. MTA express buses, serving eastern Queens, also use Northern Blvd during rush hour without making stops.

In 2021, some bus stops were removed on the Q66 local as they were previously spaced extremely close together – in some places less than two blocks apart.[33] Bus stop consolidation, although facing backlash initially, did result in modest improvements to bus speeds. MTA metrics indicate that the Q66 ran at an average speed of 8.0 mph in 2022, the first full year with stop consolidations in effect, compared to 7.6 mph pre-pandemic.[34]

NYC DOT installed offset bus lanes, the standard design in their toolkit, on Northern Boulevard as part of a bus priority project in 2023.[35] MTA metrics indicate that the Q66 ran at an average speed of 8.1 mph in 2024,[36] the first full year with offset bus lanes in effect. This marginal improvement of 0.1 mph may be due to the lack of level all-door boarding at bus stops, chronic double parking, and frequent intrusions into the bus lanes that are legally allowed (e.g. right turns, access to curbside parking). However, bus speeds on the bus priority corridor itself (between Broadway and 114th Street) increased by as much as 25%.[37]

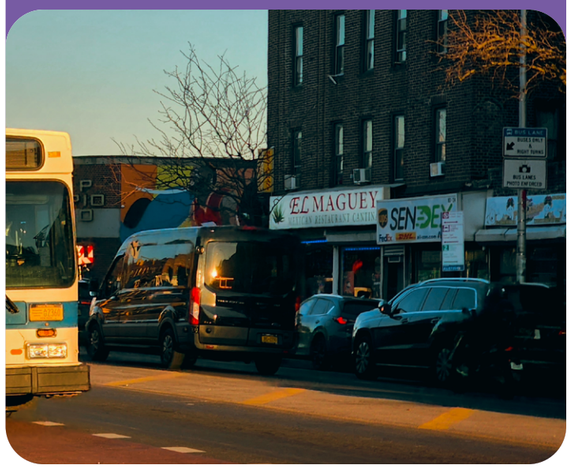
The MTA has launched the new Q63 rush route in summer 2025 as part of the Queens Bus Network Redesign;[38] the route is nearly identical to the existing Q66 local, but runs straight on Northern Boulevard in Long Island City without detouring through 21st Street and 35th Avenue in Astoria (the Q66 will continue to run on these streets).

These efforts are bringing incremental improvements to bus service, but continue to treat the bus primarily as a feeder into the subway. The offset bus lanes do not extend west of Broadway, where the Northern Boulevard M/R train station is located, and the upcoming Q63 rush route will not take advantage of decreased traffic on the Queensboro Bridge to cross into Manhattan's Congestion Relief Zone.

Photos: Raymond Cho (@raytac23)

Drivers often block bus stops and the offset bus lanes. Bus operators frequently cannot pull into the curb adequately, especially on blocks with many storefronts and in need of curbside management, making riders walk into mixed traffic.

This is especially an issue for older adults, people with mobility devices, and riders carrying small children.



Northern Blvd BRT

Unlike Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, which varies widely in roadway width from section to section, Northern Boulevard is relatively consistent in road layout and thus a streamlined BRT design can be more feasibly implemented. Though these pages focus on the block between 82nd and 83rd Streets in Jackson Heights, the characteristics of this specific location are applicable to most of the boulevard.

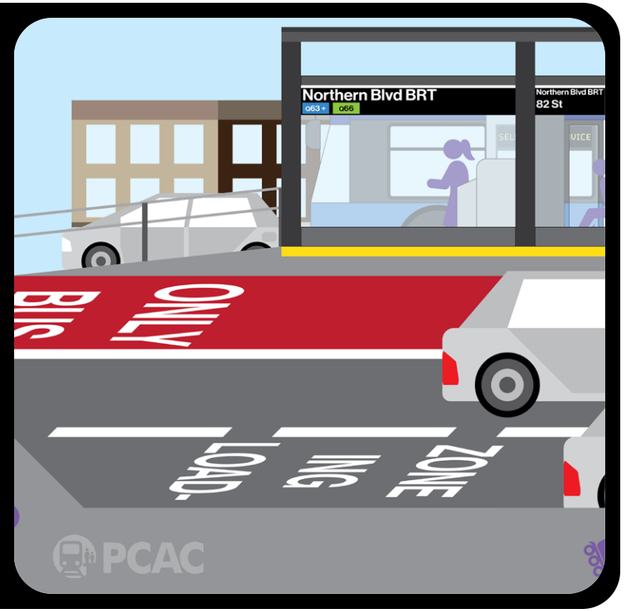
This design concept imagines an articulated bus fleet with doors on both sides of the vehicle, unlocking the ability to construct a single island platform with bus lanes on either side. Riders of the Q63 and Q66 would use the same stations built in the middle of the roadway, currently occupied by a yellow-striped median and left turn lanes at a few intersections. Fare gates and platform screen doors, unprecedented among BRT systems in the United States, are ideal solutions for speedy off-board OMNY payment and fare evasion mitigation. The Q63 rush route could be further upgraded to Select Bus Service and extended across the Queensboro Bridge into Manhattan, greatly reducing the need for bus riders to transfer to the subway in Queens.

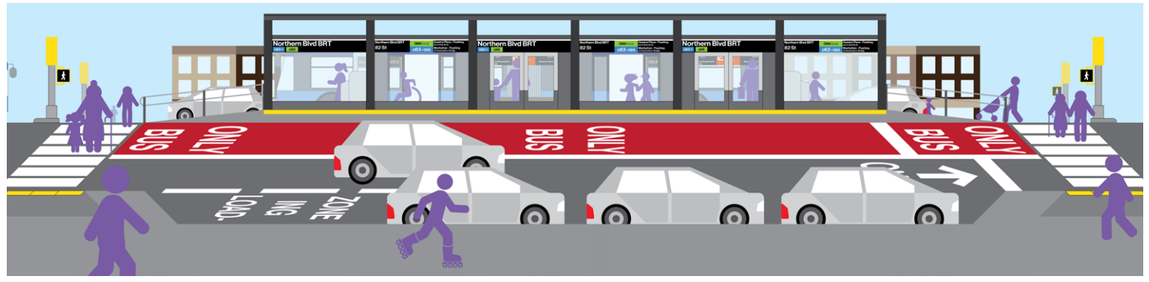
A Better Street for Everyone

Existing curbside bus stops are constantly blocked by delivery vehicles and other obstructions, indicating a need for better loading accommodations.

By moving bus boarding onto an island platform in the middle of the street, existing bus stops along the curb can be repurposed for other uses such as loading zones. This change would ensure that deliveries can be easily made for the many storefronts along Northern Blvd without conflicting with bus operations.

Other street uses to consider include outdoor dining setups, bike racks, and rain gardens (stormwater runoff mitigation). Every street corner can be designed in ways that consider the multiple users of Northern Boulevard.





Fare Gates

Although fare gates are common in BRT systems internationally to enable all-door boarding, especially in Latin America, they are exceedingly rare in the United States.

Existing SBS in other parts of the city incorporates off-board MetroCard ticket machines, which will be phased out with the retirement of the MetroCard, and on-board OMNY payment. Existing fare policy requires heavy enforcement to prevent fare evasion.

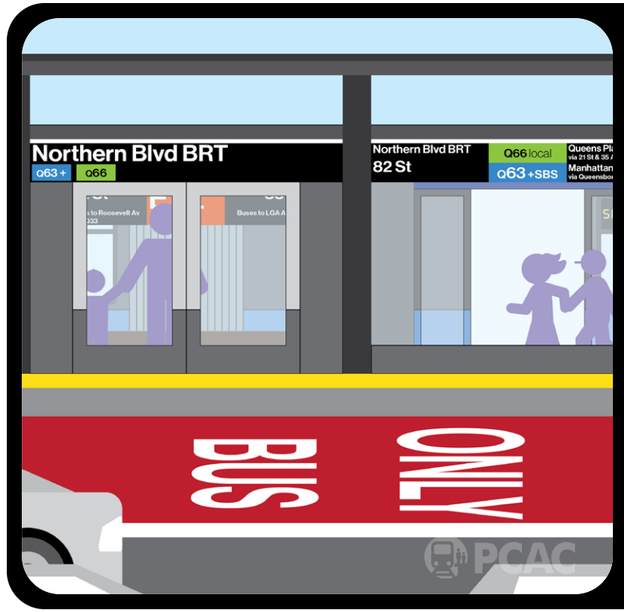
Fare gates at BRT stations would combine the convenience of contactless OMNY payment with faster boarding, making it the ideal solution on streets where streamlined station design is feasible.

Platform Screen Doors

Like fare gates, platform screen doors are common in international BRT systems but are unheard of in the United States.

They would greatly increase safety and comfort for bus riders waiting on the platform while also preventing fare evasion and jaywalking mid-block.

Though requiring additional capital investment, both fare gates and platform screen doors would give bus riders the highest quality experience while decreasing operational costs in police/Eagle Team enforcement against fare evasion.



6. Conclusion

Bus riders throughout all five boroughs deserve a system that prioritizes their **need for fast, frequent, reliable, accessible and easy to use service.** With slowest-in-the-nation buses, now is the time for New York City to revamp and invest in its bus infrastructure.

Riders wait for the B82 SBS and local buses on Kings Highway.
Photo: Raymond Cho (@raytac23)

PCAC

Case Study: *Guangzhou, China*

850,000 ride the GBRT daily:

Running down the center of Zhongshan Avenue in Guangzhou, China is a 22.5-kilometer (14 mile) BRT corridor, a gold-ranked project that was developed by ITDP and the Guangzhou Municipal Engineering Design and Research Institute. With four center-aligned lanes stopping at fully sheltered platforms, GBRT serves 850,000 daily riders in the southern Chinese metropolis.

Its passenger flow and vehicle capacity are second only to the TransMilenio in Colombia's capital of Bogotá, often cited by urban planners as the definitive model for BRT. However, Guangzhou's achievement is even more significant considering that GBRT complements an existing metro system, while Bogotá lacks rail transport of any kind.[39]

Photo: "Benjamin" via flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0)

To date, Select Bus Service has been implemented primarily as a service pattern; it's in the name. However, farther stop spacing and longer buses are just one piece of the puzzle. The robust infrastructure that international bus rapid transit systems enjoy has not been built in New York City. For bus riders, this means that their needs are not being sufficiently met. Current initiatives, including the Borough Bus Network Redesigns, camera enforcement, and bus priority, are all important steps towards the bus system riders deserve — but more can be done to make buses a dependable and attractive option.

This crossroads comes at a moment when bus riders continue to sit in traffic, as residents outside of Manhattan need better rapid transit options more than they ever have, and as North American subway construction has become more expensive than it has ever been. Congestion Pricing has unlocked potential for faster buses within Manhattan's Congestion Relief Zone and on the East River crossings, while demand for intra- and inter-borough rapid transit continues to grow outside of Manhattan.

Policymakers in cities such as Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Cleveland, Curitiba, Guangzhou and Mexico City have all designed BRT differently in ways that consider their larger public transit network and urban environment. It is time for New York's leadership to do the same for its five boroughs.

BRT in New York City is more than just possible — it's a necessary goal that the MTA and the city must work together towards for a more sustainable and transit-driven future. Through this report's recommendations and proper investment, PCAC is confident that the next generation of Select Bus Service can achieve the bus rapid transit standards that New Yorkers from all five boroughs deserve.

Appendix A

The following is a glossary of acronyms and technical terms used throughout the report.

ACE: Automated Camera Enforcement; targets bus lane and bus stop violations.

Articulated Bus: A 60 foot or longer bus with separate compartments connected by an open gangway.

BRT: bus rapid transit

High-floor Bus: High-capacity vehicles with the floor raised several feet off the ground which serve BRT platforms, built to the same height, for level boarding. They are comparable to the design of subway trains and are commonly found in Latin American BRT systems.

IBX: Interborough Express; an upcoming grade-separated light rail line between Brooklyn and Queens currently in the planning stages.

ITDP: Institute for Transportation and Development Policy; publisher of *the BRT Standard*

Low-floor Bus: All MTA buses, except for express routes which use coach buses, are considered low-floor. They have a raised section towards the back of the vehicle which require passengers to go up/down steps, limiting capacity.

LPI: leading pedestrian interval; a specialized signal phase which allows pedestrians to cross the street without the conflict of turning drivers.

MTA: Metropolitan Transportation Authority

NYC DOT: New York City Department of Transportation

PCAC: Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA

SBS: Select Bus Service

SIP: street improvement project; non-capital projects undertaken by NYC DOT utilizing the agency's operating budget

Appendix B

The following is a mockup by Noelle Hunter (@un.bateau) of how subway lines and existing SBS could look like in a single diagram.

Appendix C

Endnotes

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PCAC

PERMANENT CITIZENS
ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO THE MTA

The PCAC is the coordinating body for the three riders councils created by the New York State Legislature in 1981: the Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council (LIRRCC), the Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council (MNRCC), and the New York City Transit Riders Council (NYCTRC). These councils were created to serve as a voice for users of the MTA system in the development and implementation of policy, and to hold the MTA board and management accountable to riders. To accomplish these goals, the PCAC, councils and their professional staff hold regular public meetings; provide public commentary in a variety of forums; and undertake frequent research projects.

Each of the three councils has held one non-voting MTA Board seat since 1995, sitting on and providing input into the relevant MTA agency operating committees at all times. The PCAC's 38 total members are required to be regular users of the MTA system and serve without pay. The 11 MNRCC members and 12 LIRRCC members are appointed by the Governor's Office upon the recommendation of appropriate county executives and borough presidents. The 15 NYCTRC members are appointed by the Governor upon recommendation of the mayor, public advocate, and borough presidents.