



Failing DDOT's Riders

Report Card and Recommendations on DDOT Bus On-Time Performance

By Transportation Riders United

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The Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) has failed to provide adequate on-time bus service, leaving tens of thousands of Detroiters stranded. This report details the magnitude of the problem and offers concrete solutions that Mayor Bing and the DDOT management should implement to substantially improve on-time performance. This is the first of biannual report cards that Transportation Riders United (TRU) will be producing on the quality of DDOT bus service.

Transportation Riders United (TRU) is Detroit's transit advocate. A Detroit-based nonprofit organization founded in 1999, TRU is dedicated to improving transit throughout greater Detroit in order to restore urban vitality, ensure transportation equity and improve quality of life. TRU believes the Detroit region needs a balanced transportation network because transportation investments shape our future.

This report was authored by Ruth Johnson, TRU Assistant Director, and edited by Megan Owens, TRU Executive Director.

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Transportation Riders United (TRU) has graded the on-time performance of DDOT buses. DDOT has earned a failing grade - an **F.**

DDOT has consistently failed to provide riders with reliable bus service according to its published schedules and its Service Standards. For truly on-time bus service that meets the needs of the bus riding public, a bus should depart either at the time on the published schedule or within the next five (5) minutes. In this regard, **DDOT has utterly failed.**

TRU's Research

To supplement media reports, the personal experience of TRU members, and anecdotes from other bus riders, we conducted analysis of our own. During the week of October 17-21, 2011, TRU volunteers compared the published schedule for eight major DDOT bus routes with the actual time each bus departed from pre-selected checkpoints including Rosa Parks Transit Center, State Fair Transit Center, Fairlane Center, Northland Center and bus stops located in downtown Detroit. In all, **we monitored the actual performance of nearly 4,000 scheduled bus runs.**

On-time performance varied dramatically – from a high of just 66% to an outrageous low of 10%.

Volunteers documented the on-time performance as

- Early:* Departed before the scheduled time
- On-Time:* Departed within 0-5 minutes of the scheduled time
- Late:* Departed 6-15 minutes after the scheduled time
- Very Late:* Departed more than 16 minutes after the scheduled time
- Didn't Arrive:* No bus showed up before the next scheduled time

The likelihood of a DDOT rider experiencing an on-time bus is just 50% - no better than flipping a coin.

An example of the unpredictable and erratic bus performance was observed by a volunteer on October 19 in downtown Detroit. She observed the #16 Dexter bus between 4:00 – 6:00 pm. During this 2-hour period that bus was scheduled to run approximately every 12 minutes and thus should have had 13 runs. The Dexter bus was on-time for 6 runs or less than 50%; 3 runs were Early; 1 was Late and 4 buses Didn't Arrive.

Based upon our initial analysis of the observation data, we were unable to identify trends or patterns regarding which routes or which days of the week or times of day were more or less problematic. **On the whole, the likelihood of a DDOT rider experiencing an on-time bus is just 50% - no better than flipping a coin.**

In addition to whether the bus was on-time, our volunteers also tracked whether the bus traveled at all, before the next scheduled bus. **An astounding 20-50% of scheduled buses did not show at all!** For example, the #53 Woodward bus on October 21 didn't arrive 7 out of 12 runs. That means that riders waited for a bus that 58% of the time didn't show up.

To make matters worse, there is no communication from DDOT. When waiting at a stop, **DDOT riders have no way of knowing** whether their bus is just running a few minutes behind or whether it is running at all that day. Passengers are unable to make a decision to seek alternative transportation (assuming an alternative is available to them at all). When the next bus arrives, it is all too often crowded or even over-crowded and the people waiting may not be able board. When overcrowded buses arrive, people using wheelchairs and scooters are often left behind.

The Impact

The impact of this unreliable, sporadic bus service is that **Detroiters are left stranded.**

It means that **people cannot get to the places they need to go – work, job training, school, doctor’s appointments or shopping.** Employees are late for work. Detroit residents lose out on job opportunities, because they are fired or employers will not hire them because they rely upon DDOT buses. High school students, even honor roll students, are sent to detention for being late. People miss necessary medical care, even lifesaving chemotherapy treatments.

Too many problems means that people who do have alternatives will drive instead, even if they cannot afford insurance or have lost their

**People cannot get ahead
if they cannot get around.**

drivers license. They’ll spend money on gas, parking, car repairs, insurance, and other car expenses – thousands of dollars that could have been better spent on rent, food, job training, or other things that better benefit the local economy. These additional drivers will add more traffic to the roads and more pollution to our air.

It also impacts people who don’t personally ride the bus. When two cooks at the Grand Trunk Pub were not able to get to work because their bus was not running, not only did they not get paid for the day, but the owner had to explain to customers that their lunches would be late. He lost some customers and others who waited returned to work late. The impact can be even worse when nurses, teachers, fire fighters, day care workers, and other essential employees cannot get to work.

What does it mean to the City of Detroit? Its young people lose out on class time they need to acquire knowledge. Employers lose valuable, trained, experienced employees. Recent college grads and other entrepreneurs move to other cities with better service. Its citizens lose income because they are unable to get to work and thus, **the City loses tax revenue.**

Recommendations

Unfortunately, we cannot give the City of Detroit extra credit for effort, because this has been an ongoing yet neglected problem for years. Despite promises by Mayor Bing to resolve the current bus crisis within 30 days, timeliness remains totally unacceptable. No action plan is clearly in place and no specific approaches have been made public. Not only has the City of Detroit failed to resolve the current crisis stemming from a lack of available buses in good working condition, it has been unable to resolve the many long-standing management problems.

Every public transit system in the country has funding limitations, labor struggles, and difficult conditions. Yet few systems have as bad bus service and as ongoing problems as Detroit. It is past time for Detroit to learn from other cities and take clear concrete steps to not only alleviate the immediate crisis, but to also put DDOT on the path towards consistently reliable bus service.

Although TRU is pleased with the attention the City Council and media have placed on the bus crisis, the responsibility and authority to operate DDOT buses is an executive branch function. **For this reason, Mayor Bing must take strong and immediately actions to drastically improve bus service.**

As Detroit's transit advocate, Transportation Riders United offers the following proposals as solutions to these devastating problems, based on in-depth research, analysis of other systems, and a good bit of common sense. Some can be implemented by DDOT management, many others by Mayor Bing and others within his administration, and a few may require outside help.

TRU recommends that the City immediately implement the following management practices to dramatically improve bus timeliness.

Fix the Buses

DDOT buses are not substantially older than other systems and DDOT has plenty of buses that should have plenty of useful life in them. Plenty of cities in northern climates manage to run buses regularly despite snow and ice. But all too often, Detroit's buses are non-operational due to mechanical problems.

1. **Mechanics must work consistently and diligently to repair and maintain the bus fleet.** That is the job they are paid to do and that a hundred thousand Detroiters are depending on them to do. Regardless of challenges, it must be done.
2. DDOT management should ensure that a **clear set of repair standards** are in place, based on national best practice, regarding how long any mechanical or other repair work should take and how long the repair should last once made. This will provide mechanics clear expectations and will help management hold employees accountable if mechanics are consistently taking far longer than the standards or the repaired work is not holding up nearly long enough.
3. **If any current DDOT mechanics are unable to complete their work to the standards DDOT sets, they should be let go and new mechanics hired.** This must be done fairly and legally, but it must be done. Disciplinary actions made by DDOT must be fully supported and defended by the Detroit Labor Relations Department and the Mayor's office.
4. Union work rules should be adjusted to **schedule employees to work when the buses need repaired**, not just when it is most convenient for employees. Similarly, mechanics need to work in the areas and on the parts that need repaired. These should be included in **the supplemental agreement that is currently under negotiation.**
5. **Mechanics must have the parts they need** to fix the buses as well. DDOT management and City purchasing must ensure necessary equipment and supplies are available when they are needed.

Improve Hiring Practices

Throughout the Detroit City Government, inefficient hiring and complex bureaucracy within the Human Relations Department cause significant problems. This is especially problematic within DDOT. Unfortunately over recent years it has been standard practice at DDOT to start out each day without enough drivers to run every scheduled bus route. That leaves managers scrambling and riders guessing, leading to expensive overtime, bus trips delayed, or bus trips skipped completely. Part of this is due to delays in hiring. On average each month, ten drivers retire, are fired, or otherwise leave staff. Yet there are not enough people on the eligibility list and it is not refreshed frequently enough.

6. **DDOT must consistently maintain enough drivers to run the full schedule of buses**, regardless of retirements, firing, vacation days, sick leave, or other staff loss.
7. **The HR department must add people to the eligibility list** now and on a regular basis, long before the list runs out. Given regular losses, there must be enough drivers in the pipeline ready to be hired as soon as a vacancy opens.
8. Also, even once positions have been approved in the annual budget, DDOT management must still go through numerous bureaucratic steps to get permission to fill a vacancy. **The hiring process must be expedited** so bureaucratic steps are not preventing full staffing of this essential agency.
9. Another critical way to ensure full staffing is to actively manage absenteeism. Because all employees get all their vacation and personal leave days for the year on July 1, absenteeism skyrockets in July and August. One solution would be to **stagger when employees receive their leave time**, perhaps tied to the anniversary of their start date. That would smooth out the absenteeism throughout the year better.
10. Management must also ensure enough drivers are available to replace any employees who take a sick day or are on vacation, especially during peak vacation times in the summer and during holidays.

11. One last critical component of hiring is the replacement of retiring director Lovevette Williams. Effectively managing a transit agency as large and as important as DDOT takes specialized skill and relevant experience. Detroit should benefit from the experience of other transit agencies around the country and **hold a nationwide search for a new DDOT Director and hire someone with substantial experience running a successful transit agency** in another city. There are new ideas, technologies, and practices that DDOT could learn from to improve our service. Import top transit talent to Detroit.

Prioritize On-Time Performance

Bus passengers should be able to rely on the bus to arrive within a few minutes of its scheduled time. This is more often the exception today, but can be addressed in several specific ways.

12. Management must demand on-time pull-out from the terminal in the morning and afternoon, and **drivers must begin their routes on-time**. While delays may occur during the route, there is no excuse for drivers starting out late.
13. DDOT management should seek to **address 'bus bunching'**, when one bus is running late and others crowd behind it at the same stops, thus delaying the whole schedule. To this end, we suggest that dispatch and/or road supervisors actively communicate with drivers and coordinate a solution (such as one bus driving ahead and start operating mid-route).
14. A culture of timeliness must be promoted by DDOT. **Management must hold mechanics, drivers, and road supervisors accountable for on-time performance.**
15. To ensure this, there must be **more regular monitoring and public reporting on timeliness.**

16. Road supervisors need to **track bus drivers' on-time performance** and drivers must know they are being monitored and that there will be consequences for their actions.
17. DDOT management must **hold Road Supervisors accountable for the on-time performance** of the buses under their watch. If the Road Supervisors know they will personally be impacted by on-time performance, their efficacy will improve as well.
18. If any employee is not willing or able to do their jobs to clear standards, they must be disciplined. **If employees cannot or will not improve their performance, they must be fired.** This must be done fairly and appropriately, but it must be done. When DDOT management disciplines an employee, Labor Relations staff must fully support and actively defend that decision.

Improve Efficiency and Communications

There are many additional ways that the timeliness, speed and overall efficiency of DDOT bus service can be improved.

19. DDOT should make fare cards more widely available to **speed up the process of getting on the bus**, as cash and coins take longer to insert in the fare box. It may also be helpful to place a change machine in Rosa Parks Transit Center, decreasing the number of passengers scrambling for change.
20. **The City of Detroit must provide more accurate and up-to-date statistics about on-time performance** to the public. The percentage used in the Detroit Performance Dashboard for "Bus on time frequency" do not appropriately account for buses are not operating that day – which is often 10% or more of the scheduled routes. Buses that do not operate at all should be counted as late, as that is the experience for riders.

21. Improve communications with riders by utilizing email and text notification system to **advise riders when buses on a particular route not in service** or running substantially later than the published times. Many other transit systems provide real-time information to passengers online utilizing their pre-existing AVL systems. This is something DDOT should actively develop. While information does not solve the timeliness issues, it enables passengers to plan and respond effectively.

Work for a Long-Term Regional Solution

DDOT must have enough funding to increase scheduled service and provide sufficient bus service in order to avoid overcrowding and allow for a better, more reliable system throughout. While Detroit may not be able to afford to increase funding at the present time, there must be additional funding for Detroit transit in the near future.

Ultimately, Detroit must seek a new and different way of providing transit to its citizens. Few other major cities run their own bus service as a city department. No other major city attempts to fund its transit out of its general fund. Nearly every other major city is part of a regional transit system funded by a dedicated transit tax. Detroit must pro-actively move towards a new regional solution.

22. Mayor Bing and his administration must **actively support an effective Regional Transit Authority** to coordinate and oversee all transit services within the southeast Michigan region. This agency would not take over DDOT, but could enable new funding mechanisms and increased federal support, in addition to improve coordination with SMART and other transit providers. To be effective, a Regional Transit Authority must have a regionally-focused and democratically structured Board and have real taxing and oversight authority.
23. **Greater Detroit needs a dedicated regional transit tax.** Most major cities utilize a regional (multi-county) sales tax, income tax, vehicle fees, or other mechanisms to fund their regional transit systems. The greater Detroit region must do the same. Governor Snyder has proposed a local vehicle registration fee, which would not

raise enough money to fund all of DDOT and SMART, but would be a good step in the right direction.

24. DDOT must improve coordination with SMART and other transit services.

Despite numerous efforts and opportunities in recent years to better coordinate and improve bus services and information, Detroit has too often failed to productively participate and work together for the betterment of the whole system.

25. DDOT should seek more reliable and cost-effective transit options, including light rail and hybrid buses. Detroit has been a strong leader in advancing Woodward Light Rail, and must continue this progress. Light rail is not only more reliable and more cost-effective than bus service, but once built, it is cheaper to operate on a per-passenger mile basis than buses. Similarly, hybrid-electric buses cost more initially, but cost substantially less over the life of the vehicle due to fuel savings and decreased wear-and-tear on the engine. Since the federal government pays for much of the initial capital costs while Detroit pays nearly all of the operating costs itself, DDOT must seek these more reliable and more cost-effective solutions whenever feasible.

The Mayor is the ultimate boss of DDOT bus service and he must actively manage this department. This includes hiring the right people to manage, rewarding creative solutions and positive results, disciplining employees that are not doing their job to standards, and developing effective long-term regional solutions. All of greater Detroit depends on it.