

Mobility as a Right Fare-Free Transit in Durham, NC

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, transit agencies nationwide found themselves unexpectedly participating in a fare-free transit experiment. Triangle transit agencies like GoDurham and GoTriangle suspended fares in March 2020 to allow rear-door boarding to help maintain social distancing. These agencies also saw going fare free as a way to ease financial burdens on essential workers.

GoDurham and GoTriangle have been able to use funding provided through the 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the 2020 Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, and the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act to maintain fare-free buses since 2020. With the expiration of these federal funds, GoDurham and GoTriangle are faced with questions of whether they should remain fare free, how to replace farebox revenue if they remain fare free, and how to continue offering high-quality transit service without farebox revenue.



A PARADIGM SHIFT

Nationally, there has been a discernable shift in conversations about fare-free transit. Pre-pandemic, the conversation was about whether transit agencies should offer fare-free transit at the expense of high-quality or expanded service. Today, many agencies have embraced the idea of mobility as a service. There is increased understanding of the critical role that equitable transportation access can play in overcoming residential segregation and other structural barriers to social and economic mobility.

FARE-FREE TRANSIT IN THE TRIANGLE BEFORE 2020

Many Triangle residents were able to ride transit with no out-of-pocket cost prior to the pandemic. In 2019, 30 percent of GoDurham riders rode for free, including seniors, riders under 18 (Youth GoPass), and riders with an employer-provided GoPass. Forty-five percent of GoTriangle riders rode for free, including seniors and those with an employer-provided GoPass.

Chapel Hill Transit has been completely fare free since 2002. The agency is able to offer fare-free service due to a partnership with the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

1. SHOULD TRANSIT BE FARE FREE? WHY OR WHY NOT?

2. HOW CAN THE CONCEPT OF MOBILITY AS A RIGHT RESHAPE HOW WE DESIGN TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS?

CONTACT

Anne Phillips, PhD

E: anne@justcitiescollective.com

P: 850-980-4316

W: www.justcitiescollective.com



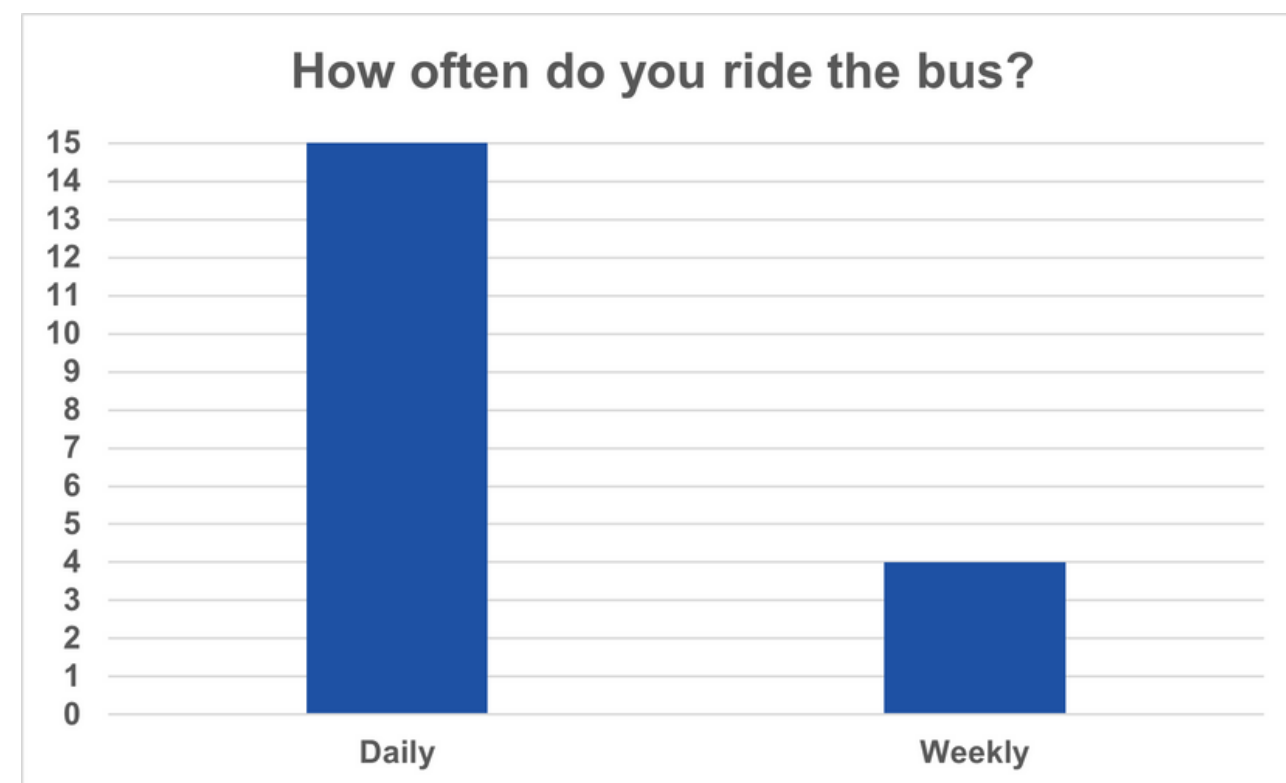
METHOD

I wanted to hear from Durham transit riders about how the shift to fare-free buses has affected them and whether they thought the system should remain fare free.

I designed a one-page questionnaire to collect information about riders' transportation habits, whether their behavior has changed since buses became fare free, and basic demographic information.

I visited Durham Station, the city's transit hub, on April 4 and 18. I spoke to nineteen bus riders and two bus operators. The findings below are a snapshot of how fare-free buses have affected a small set of Durham's bus riders and how these riders feel about fare-free buses. These results should not be perceived as statistically representative of GoDurham's ridership.

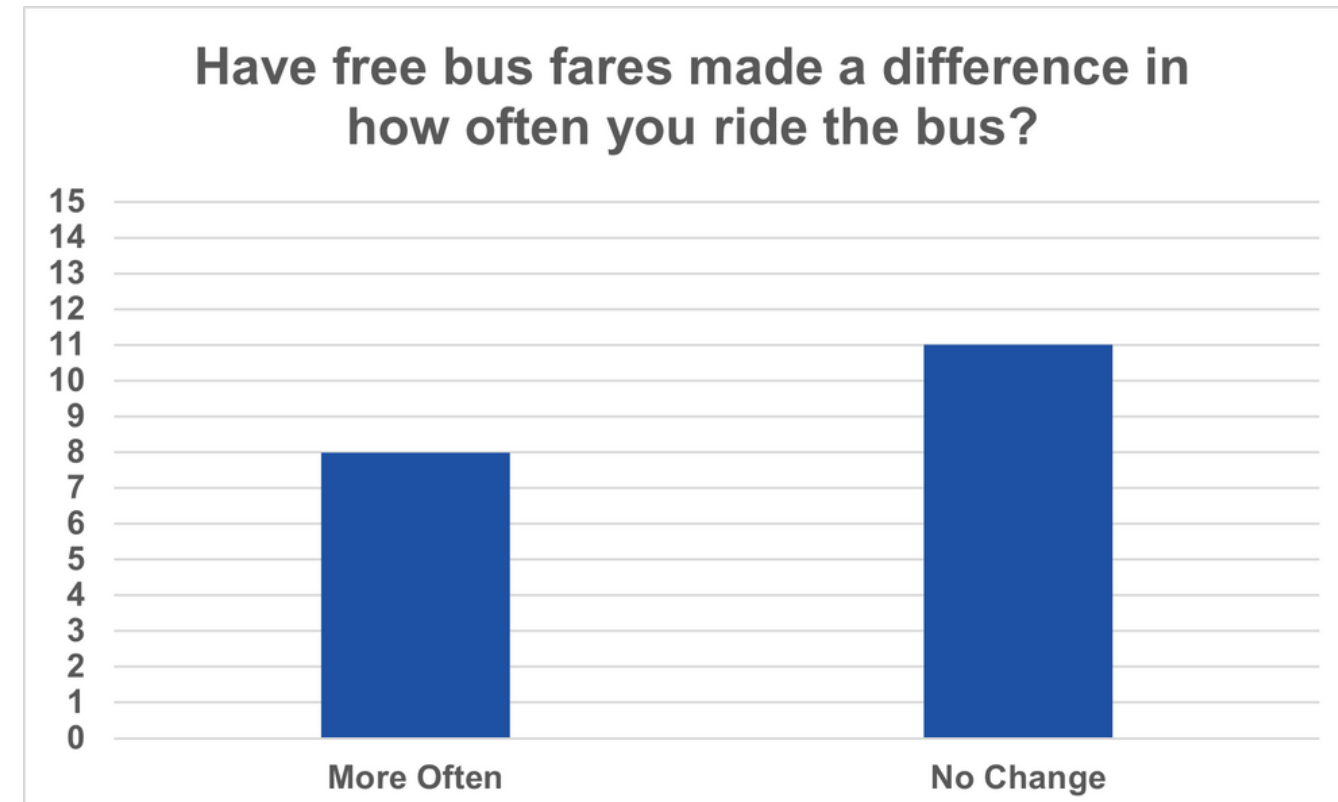
ABOUT THE RIDERS



Most of the riders I spoke with rode the bus daily, relied on the bus as their primary mode of transportation, and rode GoDurham's (local bus) service only.

Eighteen riders were Black/African American. Twelve riders identified as male, and seven as female. Seven riders reported they were over the age of 65 and previously rode the bus for free. One rider reported that she was 19 and used a Youth GoPass to ride the bus for free before the pandemic.

WHAT RIDERS HAD TO SAY



Changes in Behavior

Eight riders reported riding buses more frequently since they had become fare free, while eleven riders reported no change in their riding frequency.

Perception of Others Riding More Frequently

While most riders reported no change in the frequency of their ridership, several riders perceived that others were riding the bus more frequently leading to crowding on some routes. "I've noticed that more people are riding because it is free," one rider shared. "It is sometimes hard to find seats," another stated.

Use of Fare Savings

Eight riders said they were spending fare savings on food or groceries. "Everything has gone up," one rider said about recent increases in the cost of groceries. "Because of the economy – prices of food, it's just crazy," echoed another. Others shared that they were also spending fare savings on bills, rent, medicine, feminine products, and their children's needs.

Fare-Free Buses as an Economic Imperative

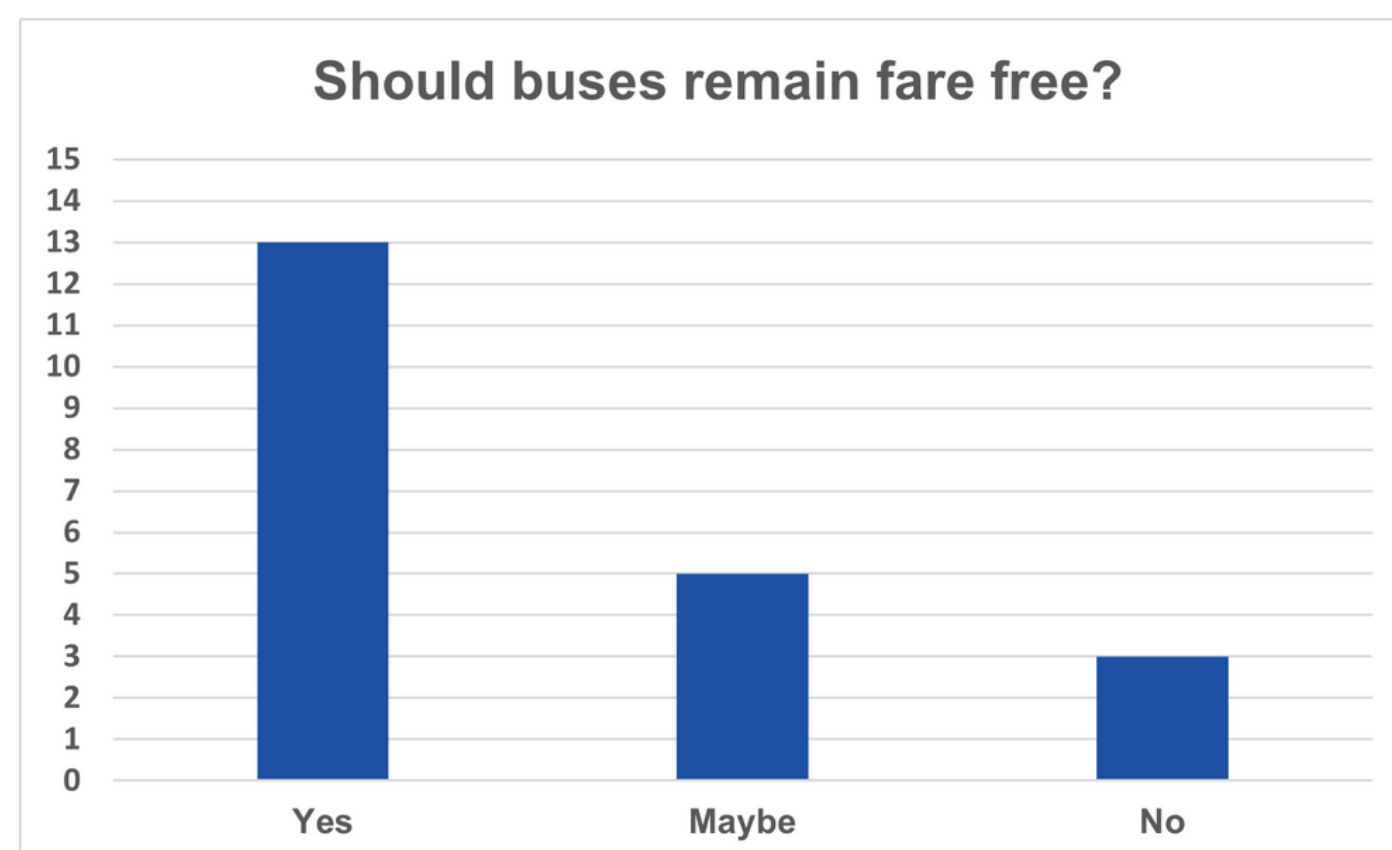
People cited economic hardship, either their own or that of the community, as the primary reason for wanting to keep buses fare free. One rider commented that these are "still hard times, people still going through things even though the pandemic has passed." Another rider stated buses should remain fare free "because a lot of people don't have money."

One rider spoke to the economic hardships faced by working people. "Keep it free for the people who have to go to work," he said. "I own a car and catch the bus to save money on gas," he added. One rider shared that fare-free buses were also helpful for those who are not working. "If you are not working, the \$1 fare/\$2 day fare, it is kind of hard," he said.

CONCLUSION

The Durham bus riders I spoke with were mostly supportive of keeping buses fare free. They were viscerally aware of the extent to which the pandemic has exacerbated financial hardship in the community. Yet, even those who were supportive of fare-free service had concerns about the quality of service they were receiving and how the presence of those facing issues such as homelessness and addiction shape the experience of riders.

The question of whether GoDurham will remain fare free in the upcoming fiscal year will depend on whether the agency receives its request of \$2.7 million in the City of Durham's FY24 budget. The GoTriangle Board of Trustees will decide on whether or how to return to fare collection as part of the agency's FY24 budget process.



Concerns About Remaining Fare Free: Decrease in Quality of Service and Increase in Undesirable Ridership

Even riders who were generally supportive of buses remaining fare free expressed concerns about how increases in ridership have affected their experience of riding the bus. "Sometimes I do think that buses should not be free because some people just joy ride...bums, drunk, stinking and acting up," said one rider.

Another rider expressed concerns about the cleanliness of buses and the attentiveness of drivers since buses have been fare free. "[Buses] used to be cleaner when they were charging," he stated. "Drivers don't de-escalate as much – they turn a blind eye. Driving buses is not easy. Drivers used to stop at a stop, now they keep going," he added.

One rider spoke at length about his concerns about fare-free buses:

"I've been riding for a minute. I've been riding since 2012. [The buses] are my way of getting around. I don't know, [free fares] would benefit some people. A whole lot of people abusing the free opportunity - cussing the drivers out. They filthy, nasty, a whole lot of people get on the bus – [charging again] would eliminate a whole lot of chaos...Start back charging, cut out the chaos. In certain areas, [people are] riding back and forth, people have got no respect. A lot of the homeless, [people with] addiction problems..."

"A Double-edged Sword"

The operators I spoke with echoed some of these concerns. They both described fare-free buses as a "double-edged sword." One operator reported that she liked not having to wait for the "pat down" as riders try to find the right fare when boarding the bus or the excuses that riders make to try to avoid fares. Yet, "there is more crowding on some routes, more violence," she noted. "People who normally won't ride, ride...There is more violence," she said. In spite of these concerns, she stated that she "[wanted] to see people who need [fare-free buses] take advantage."

In Support of Returning to Fares

Three riders supported returning to fares. One rider wanted to pay fares to return to a pre-pandemic sense of normalcy. "Because we were paying before the pandemic...I want stuff to go back to normal," he said.

Another rider didn't like the idea of free fares because he "[didn't] want anything for free...I've always earned what I got. I lived through hell," he stated. One rider worried that fare-free buses would affect the income of bus drivers. "I'm worried it may affect the income of bus drivers. The mom of my kids' mom is a bus driver," he said.

LOCAL VERSUS REGIONAL FARE-FREE TRANSIT CONSIDERATIONS

GoDurham and GoTriangle have very different rider profiles. Seventy-two percent of GoDurham riders make less than \$25,000 a year, while 32 percent of GoTriangle riders make less than \$25,000 a year. Such differences have affected how the leadership of each agency is approaching the question of fare-free buses. While GoDurham has requested funds through the City of Durham's annual budget process, GoTriangle is thinking about how to "crowdfund" funding to ensure equitable access to its services.

According to GoTriangle's Chief Development Officer Katharine Eggleston, farebox revenue is a critical part of GoTriangle's operating budget. Prior to the pandemic, the agency collected \$1 million from GoPass fare revenue and \$800,000 in revenue from cash fares and passes. "We can't maintain reliable service or expand service long-term without additional revenue," Eggleston said. "While fares are not the only place to get money, they are within the agency's control," she added.

As a regional agency, GoTriangle cannot raise taxes to address its farebox shortfall. GoTriangle is therefore considering other measures to ensure that there is equitable access to its service. One proposal is to expand the GoPass program to low-income housing providers, job access programs, and health and human services agencies. They have also approached GoPass employers to explore whether they would be interested in sponsoring fare-free regional buses as UNC-Chapel Hill has done for Chapel Hill Transit. The agency is also planning to move to mobile ticketing which will allow for equity measures such as fare capping.