

Report - February 2011

Behind the Curb

This report finds that a disproportionate share of the city's recent job growth, transit ridership gains and population growth have occurred in the four boroughs outside of Manhattan, yet transit service in the boroughs has not kept pace-and the biggest losers have been the city's working poor. We argue that New York's bus system could step in and fill the gaps, but not without major improvements.

by David Giles

The following is the introduction. Click here to read the full report (PDF).

As the country's largest and densest metropolis, New York City has historically offered a level of public transit service that most other cities could only dream about. Commuting to Manhattan's central business districts has been, and still is, a remarkably easy affair for hundreds of thousands of residents, whose travel options include commuter train, subway, ferry and bus. However, the city has changed dramatically since most of these services were introduced, and more and more residents, particularly lower-income workers, are no longer traveling to Manhattan for work.

Over the last two decades, the other four boroughs have been steadily growing their own vibrant job centers, in neighborhoods like Flushing, Queens, and East Flatbush, Brooklyn. Consequently, the number of commuters who travel to work in their own boroughs or to neighboring boroughs or counties has been growing much faster than the number of commuters who make the more traditional trip into Manhattan. For example, in the Bronx, the number of commuters traveling to Queens and Westchester County grew by 38 percent between 1990 and 2008, whereas the number going to Manhattan increased by just 13 percent in the same time period. Similarly lopsided numbers hold for Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island.

If New York is going to retain a world-class public transportation system and sustain job growth outside of Manhattan, itmust invest in solutions that make these less traditional commuter trips easier for passengers. The median travel time to work has been steadily rising in New York for more than two decades. Although long commutes affect every income group, low-income workers suffer the most by far: Of those residents with an hour or longer commute, two thirds earn less than $35,000 per year.

Fortunately, relatively inexpensive changes to the city's underperforming bus system, if done right, can plug many of the holes in the city's existing transit network and vastly improve the quality of life of many working poor New Yorkers. The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) and the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) have taken tentative steps to improving bus service, but to make a real mark the city and state must think bigger. Legislators need to settle on a sustainable funding stream for the MTA and commit to supporting both small and large-scale improvements to the city's much-maligned bus system, from elevated platforms and time-arrival technology to divided bus lanes and attractive stations. The MTA and the DOT should create a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system for New York that builds off of those emerging in other cities across the U.S. and around the world: a network of buses that look and function more like subways, with routes that travel between boroughs to facilitate nontraditional commutes.

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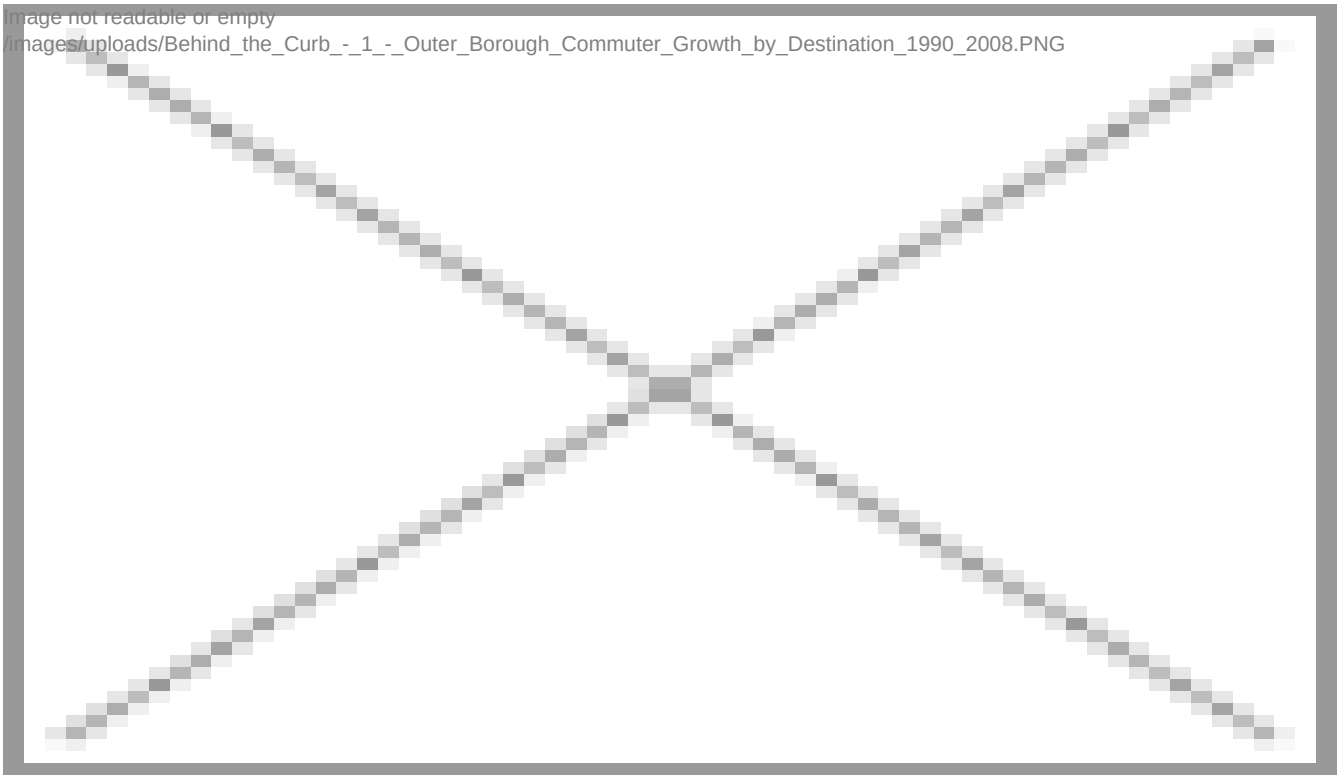
This report takes an in-depth look at transportation challenges facing low-income New Yorkers. It considers how improvements to the city's bus system could improve the lives of the poor and working poor while simultaneously helping to sustain economic growth in areas of the city that are poorly served by transit. The report draws upon extensive economic and demographic analysis and more than 60 interviews with transportation experts, economic development officials, community organizers and business leaders, as well as large and small employers sparking job creation across the city. Because the voices of the poor are notably missing from most policy discussions on transit, we made a point of reaching out to this community and interviewed dozens of advocates for the poor and city residents who live in neighborhoods with little or no public transit access.

People we spoke with were nearly unanimous in saying that transportation posed a big challenge for the working poor inNew York, despite the fact that transportation has not traditionally been perceived as a priority issue for this community. Most of the low-income residents we interviewed rely on the bus to get out of their neighborhoods and complain of multiple transfers and long, undependable commutes. At the Andrew Jackson Houses in the Melrose section of the Bronx, for example, tenant association leader Danny Barber estimates that at least 75 percent of residents use the bus every day. The 4 train is about ten blocks, or a little more than a half mile, from the complex. But, according to Barber, most of the residents with jobs travel across the borough or north to points along East Fordham Road; and those bus trips, he says, are much more complicated than the commute to Manhattan.



At the Castleton Park Houses in St. George, Staten Island, almost all residents similarly depend on the bus, says tenant association leader Sharon Valentin. They ride the bus to the Ferry Terminal and either take the ferry to Manhattan or transfer to another bus. If the latter, says Valentin, they're almost certainly in for a frustrating ride. "Getting anywhere on Staten Island is harder than getting to Manhattan if you don't own a car," she says. "We have a new Target on the other side of the island and the bus lets you off a half a mile away. I know a lot of people here who would like to work at that Target, but getting there every day is too hard."

As our research shows, these are not isolated cases. For the past two decades, the number of New York City residents—of all income groups—who travel to work either within their own borough or to a neighboring borough or county has been increasing much faster than the number who make the more traditional trip into Manhattan. Commuters who rely on public transit have had to depend more and more on city buses, and commute times have gotten longer as a result.

As shown in the graph on page 5, a shift in commuter destinations is prevalent in all four boroughs outside of Manhattan, although it is undoubtedly strongest in the Bronx and Staten Island. While a large percentage of outer borough residents still work in Manhattan, between 1990 and 2008 the number of Bronx residents who travel to Queens or Westchester County for work grew by 38 percent and the number who travel inside the borough jumped by 25 percent; in the same period, the number commuting to Manhattan increased by just 13 percent. Similarly, in Staten Island, the number of residents who travel to work in their own borough increased by 32 percent between 1990 and 2008; those going to Brooklyn or New Jersey increased by 22 percent; while the number traveling to Manhattan barely changed at all—a four percent increase in those 18 years. Brooklyn and Queens both saw significant gains in non-traditional commutes as well. In fact, the number of Brooklyn residents traveling to Queens grew by 32 percent since 1990, compared to a 13 percent increase in commuters going to Manhattan.1 Today, nearly 160,000 people cross the Brooklyn/Queens border for work every day.

One big reason for this shift in commuter patterns is the city's changing economic landscape. During the economic boom between 2003 and 2008, Brooklyn had a bigger percentage increase in jobs than Manhattan did. During the recession of 2008–2009, the Bronx gained 3,647 jobs—the only borough to add jobs during this period; by contrast, Manhattan lost 100,799 jobs in that one year. Driving growth in every borough were gains in health care and education. Between 2000 and 2009, New York City gained nearly 120,000 jobs in those two sectors alone. And although midtown Manhattan has several

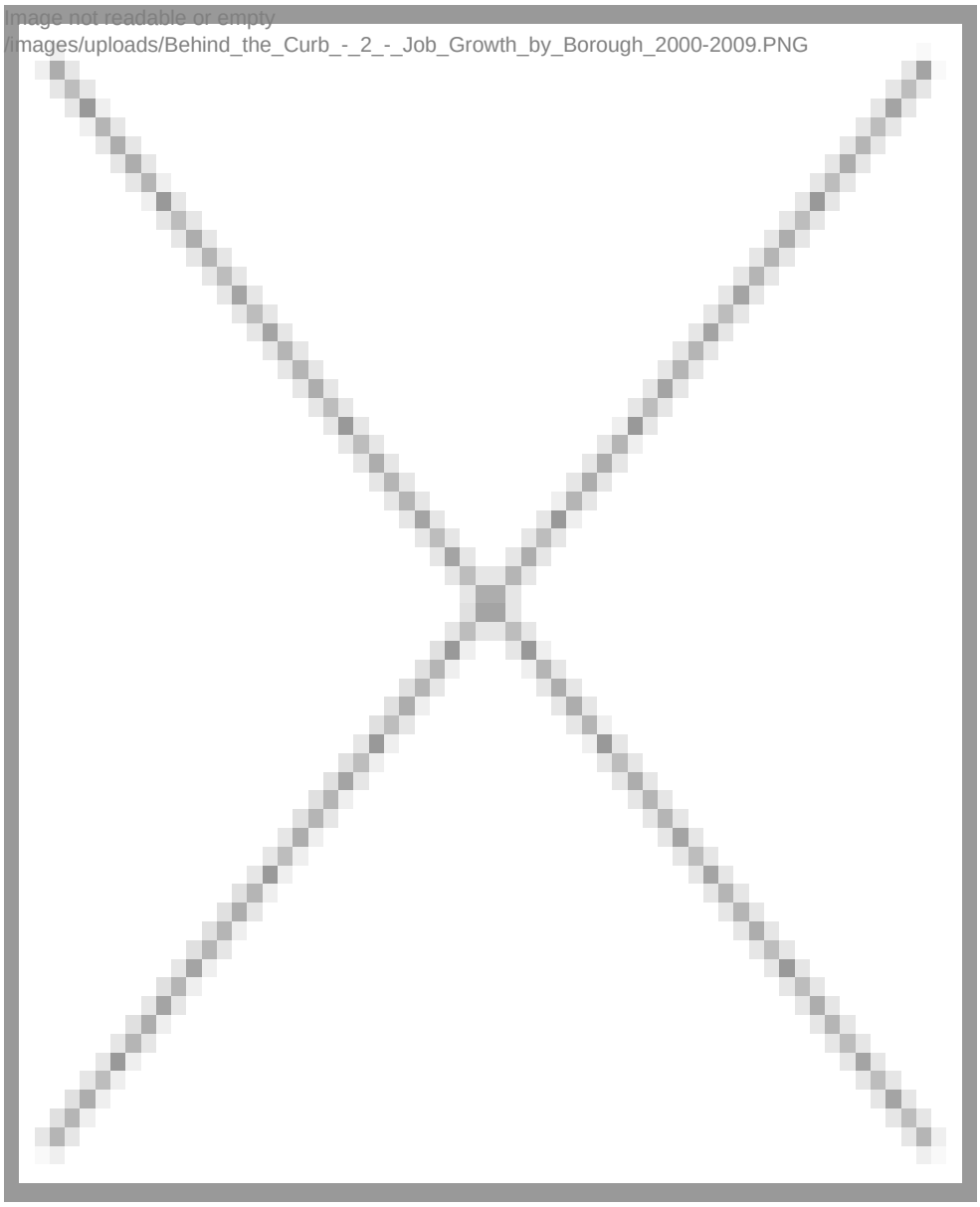
prominent hospitals and universities, collectively, the hundreds of hospitals, nursing homes, community health clinics, colleges and professional schools in the other four boroughs—from Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx and SUNY Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn to Queensborough Community College in Bayside—accounted for the lion's share of jobs in those sectors.

New York City's transit system wasn't designed for commuter trips to jobs within and between boroughs outside of Manhattan, and, partly as a result, the city's median commute times have been climbing for decades. They are now among the highest of any major city in the country. For public transit riders in the boroughs, they range from 52 minutes each way in Brooklyn to 69 minutes each way in Staten Island. "The transit system is all optimized as if everybody works in midtown Manhattan, south of 59th Street," says Jonathan Peters, a transit expert at the College of Staten Island. "The MTA seems to be under the impression that all the job growth in the city is still occurring in the Manhattan CBDs [central business districts], but it's not. In Staten Island's case, the new commuter trips are all going to New Jersey and Brooklyn."

As more and more residents have started to travel to work outside of Manhattan, the city's bus system has come to play a much more important role in the transit network. According to the MTA, bus ridership has increased by 60 percent since 1990, and transit planners believe that future increases of 30 percent or more per decade are a reasonable, even conservative assumption. Yet because of the increase in ridership as well as increased traffic congestion on city roads, the quality of service on city buses has been declining steadily for years. Between 1996 and 2006, average bus speeds in New York slowed by 11 percent, from 9 mph to 8 mph, one of the slowest average bus speeds in the country.2 Moreover, buses regularly fail to keep a schedule. The same trip can take 30 minutes one day and 50 minutes the next, which makes it difficult for riders to budget their time.

Although long, unpredictable commutes affect every income group, they present an especially big challenge for low-income residents. Higher earners with long commutes can buy a car or relocate to a more convenient neighborhood, but lower income New Yorkers can rarely afford these options. Indeed, skyrocketing real estate prices over the last decade have pushed numerous low- and middle-income residents to more affordable neighborhoods further away from Manhattan, many of which are not on subway lines. Also, for low-income workers, failing to be on time can mean trouble at work, since, unlike many white collar office jobs, most blue collar or low-income service jobs require that employees "time in." Or it can mean paying extra at the day care center or losing an appointment at the doctor's office. And for these reasons many of the participants in our interviews complained of long commutes but settled on the unpredictability of buses as an even bigger obstacle. "Buses are not trustworthy," says Dwayne Clark, who until recently commuted from the Melrose section of the Bronx to Hunts Point, where he worked as a loader for a food distribution company. "They can be ahead of schedule or behind schedule; that's the biggest inconvenience."

Providing better bus service is not only an important quality-of-life issue for hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers; it's a key component of the city's continuing economic development. If New York is going to sustain the last decade's incredible job growth in the boroughs outside of Manhattan, it will have to invest in solutions that make these less traditional commuter trips easier for passengers. Many employers we talked to said that a lack of transit access hampers their growth. Because the public transit service in their area couldn't be depended on, several invested in shuttles or reimbursed workers for livery services. Others felt that a lack of transit access limited their pool of employees. For example, Steve Chen, the vice president of Crystal Windows and Doors, a manufacturer in northern Queens that has expanded rapidly in recent years, says that a lack of transit access in their area has exacted an undeniable toll on their business. "College Point has been advantageous for Crystal Windows in many ways," says Chen, "but employee commuting to and from work by mass transit has unfortunately been a challenge. Improved mass transit would allow our expanding business to draw from a larger labor pool, improve our ability to attract and retain new workers and make us a more competitive manufacturer," he says.



Other big job centers with less-than-adequate public transit service include Hunts Point in the Bronx with over 20,000 employees, JFK Airport in Queens with over 55,000 employees and the Kings County-SUNY Downstate medical campuses in Brooklyn with over 20,000 employees.“There are a number of places in the city where you are having a resurgence in industry and business that are not well served by public transit,” says Carl Hum, president of the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce. “And we have got to figure that piece out, because if you want to sustain that growth you have got to have the transportation piece figured out.”

However, improving service on city buses presents a number of unique challenges. According to the DOT, New York City buses currently spend half of their running time stopped at red lights or at stations picking up passengers. Because buses operate in mixed traffic, a small delay can quickly snowball into a major one. Low-cost technical improvements like priority signaling at stop lights and prepaid boarding, if implemented correctly, can solve many of these problems, or at least lessen their effects. With prepaid boarding, for example, passengers pay at the bus stop and board through any of the doors, cutting the dwell time at bus stops by 40 percent or more. Similarly, with traffic-signal priority, buses can get extended green lights as they approach signals, reducing the time buses sit at red lights by 30 percent or more. Other improvements include time-arrival technology, which allows passengers to see real-time updates about when the next buses will arrive, dedicated lanes for buses and raised platforms at bus stops. In Curitiba, Brazil; Bogotá, Colombia; and Guangzhou, China, world-class bus

systems employ all of these measures—and a few more—to create so-called Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems that function just like subways but for a tiny fraction of the cost.

Over the last two years, the MTA and DOT have started to implement several such BRT improvements along Fordham Road in the Bronx and along First and Second Avenues and 34th Street in Manhattan, and so far the results have been overwhelmingly positive. On Fordham Road, prepaid boarding, traffic-signal priority and a dedicated bus lane have reduced running times by 19 percent, while weekday ridership has increased by 11 percent or 5,000 daily passengers. The MTA and DOT are looking to implement similar improvements along two other corridors in Brooklyn and Staten Island and have studied the possibility of creating as many as 27 additional bus routes sometime in the future. Both agencies deserve credit for pursuing these projects in a tough fiscal environment. Nevertheless, transit experts say that to have any real impact on commute times, particularly for the working poor living outside of Manhattan, an even more ambitious effort is needed.

For instance, the MTA and DOT have decided not to build stations with elevated platforms because of the extra money and time required to build the physical infrastructure. This is a big deviation from many of the best BRT systems in other parts of the world, and many of the experts we spoke to thought it was a mistake. Elevated platforms, they argue, are necessary for reducing boarding delays and keeping drivers to a schedule. Transportation experts also think more can be done to connect the proposed BRT routes, facilitating transfers and building a more integrated network; right now, most of the routes exist in isolation from one another.

Similarly, of 32 proposed BRT routes, only a handful travel between the boroughs. Despite being notoriously difficult trips,not a single route will serve the growing number of commuters traveling between Brooklyn and Queens or Queens and the Bronx or Staten Island and New Jersey.

Finally, the MTA and DOT need to look seriously at outfitting every city bus with a Global Positioning System (GPS) in order to allow time arrival technologies to be implemented across the board. This would be a simple and relatively cheap way to help all bus riders better plan their trips, and it could help build good will among skeptical residents and businesses.

Both agencies could undoubtedly do more, but the MTA and DOT don’t operate in a vacuum. If New York is going to reform its bus system and make a meaningful difference in the lives of commuters, then political leaders at both the city and state levels will have to step up too. Politicians will have to settle on a sustainable funding stream for the MTA and work to close the budget gap that has led to drastic cuts in service over the last year. They’ll also have to do a much better job of articulating the need for a better bus system and selling the advantages of BRT improvements like prepaid boarding and dedicated lanes to constituents.

Lawmakers, transportation planners and transit advocates should also reach out to community leaders and employers in underserved areas of the city to see what they might have to gain from improved bus service. In our interviews, we found a number of employers, including major hospitals, colleges and manufacturers, who could be powerful proponents of BRT if they saw that the proposed improvements were meeting their needs. “If we felt the improvements were working to our benefit, then we could be an advocate,” says Ivan Lisnitzer, chief operating officer of SUNY Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn. “But so far,” Lisnitzer says, “nobody has asked for our input.”

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That needs to change. New York City's transit system was once the envy of the world, and it will be again if legislators take the necessary steps to implement a sufficiently ambitious BRT network. Bringing BRT to New York is not only a cost-efficient way of responding to changes in the city's economy and the different places residents are traveling for work; it will address the needs of working poor residents who are disproportionately affected by current gaps in the transit system.

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