



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Better Buses, Better Cities: How to Plan, Run and Win the Fight for Effective Transit

By Steven Higashide

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Sept. 6, 2023 to discuss **Better Buses, Better Cities: How to Plan, Run, and Win the Fight for Effective Transit**. Gray is a city planner and former director of research at a transit think tank.

His book is about how cities could build ridership for their public transit systems if they concentrated more on improving bus services than rail extensions. But it is also a book about the role that advocacy could play in reforming public institutions—if it were done well.

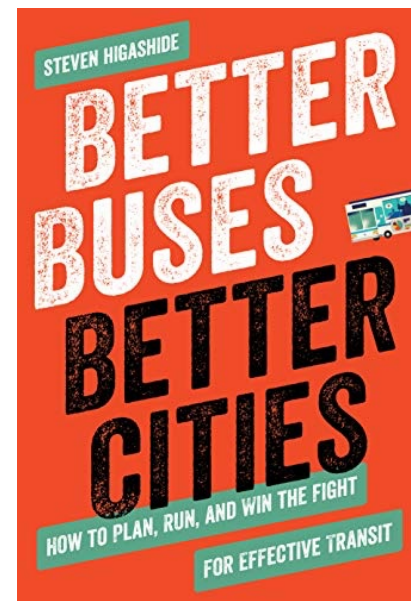
Along the way, Higashide:

- Tells us that many of the things we think about buses, who rides them, and who *might* ride them if they were improved, are wrong.
- Gives us four principles that successful bus transit should follow if it wants to attract large numbers of riders.
- Offers examples of cities that have rethought and redrawn their bus systems—with impressive increases in ridership.

Five Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are five “big ideas” drawn from *Better Buses, Better Cities* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. There is an opportunity for expanding transit ridership in Urban Atlanta because people here want to use transit, particularly in those parts of the region that are growing in density. What we may need is a pilot project or two; places where we can try out new forms of bus transit.



2. In these pilots, bus lines must follow four principles outlined in the book: 1) going where people want to go, 2) offering frequent service, 3) making the ride fast and reliable, and 4) making the walk to bus stops and the wait easy and comfortable.
3. The last of those principles, which means improving bus stops and the walk to them, will require new partners among local governments and community improvement districts.
4. None of these things will work if attitudes about buses as second-class forms of transportation do not improve. We need public officials, transit agencies and transit advocates to work together in changing these beliefs.
5. And few improvements to transit will take place unless we get better financial support. This must involve the state legislature finding ways of investing in transit.

Why Do These Things?

Higashide makes the case that improving bus transit is a great opportunity for all cities, and he points out cities that have made these improvements. But should Urban Atlanta follow their lead? Here's why we think it should:

- It would improve mobility and economic opportunity. This would be good for the region's economy.
- We've spent a fortune on infrastructure, including the region's highways, roads, sidewalks and trails like Atlanta's Beltline. Improving bus transit is a smart way of leveraging these investments.
- We can improve bus transit significantly in a fraction of the time it takes to build rail transit and at a fraction of the cost.
- We have a growing problem with affordability in Urban Atlanta. One of the best ways of making our region more affordable is to allow people to live with one car—or no cars—because transit can take them comfortably and affordably to the places they want to go. Buses are critical to this.
- Improving bus service, especially if we can make it more reliable, would have its greatest impact with disadvantaged riders.
- Getting more people out of cars and into transit is one of the best things we can do locally to address climate change.
- Transit makes cities better. It builds density, reduces parking, makes better use of existing streets and, in general, improves land use. This makes for better urban neighborhoods. Buses are just as important to this as rail transit.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile changes generate opposition. That's true even for something as desirable improving public transit. So our members discussed the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Improving bus systems in Urban Atlanta will require governments, transit systems and others to make major commitments and change some practices. Organizations do not accept change easily.
- It will require us to find new and better ways of funding transit. And this must involve the state legislature. This is a major political challenge.
- There are institutional changes that will be needed. For instance, we need it easier for customers to move among local transit systems (MARTA, Gwinnett, Cobb, etc.). We've made some efforts in the past to make the passage from one system to the other, but we need to make it seamless, perhaps with one payment system and a single fare. Again, institutions do not accept change easily.
- People in the Atlanta area have their minds made up about transit in general and buses in particular. If bus transit is to be successful, it will require that potential riders of these changes be willing to try something new. This persuasion effort will not be easy and cannot be done by transit agencies alone. Others must add their voices.
- There will be tradeoffs. As we move, as the book suggests, from a "coverage" approach to bus services to a "ridership" approach, some people will lose a long-standing bus line. And while many more will be benefited, it opens the door for the "heckler's veto," as the author calls those with the loudest voices.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers:

- We have transit agencies with knowledgeable and well-motivated staff. But they cannot do everything needed to improve mobility by themselves.
- One of the things they need—and the region needs—is an effective transit advocacy organization that supports improvements to bus transit.
- We need these advocates to speak directly to the public about the importance of transit and how it improves Urban Atlanta. And we need them to help MARTA and other transit agencies communicate more clearly about their plans.
- At the same time, advocates must challenge transit agencies to adapt to how demand for transit has changed since Covid and “work from home”—and to speak directly to the public about these changes. Even before Covid, transit was concentrating too much on commuters and not enough on the majority of trips, which are taken to shop, for entertainment or to visit friends. As the book suggests, buses can serve these other reasons for travel very well.
- Finally, we need pilot projects for better buses. The planned bus rapid transit line along the Campbellton Corridor could be a good pilot if MARTA works with Atlanta city government and business interests to improve the “last mile”—the walk to the BRT stations and the comfort of the stations themselves. There may be additional planning along the corridor that would improve transit ridership and the community. And there may be other places in Urban Atlanta where a dramatically better forms of bus service could be demonstrated.

A Synopsis of *Better Buses, Better Cities*

Better Buses, Better Cities is 142 pages, not including notes, preface and acknowledgments. It has eight chapters plus an introduction and conclusions.

Higashide is an urban planner and former director of research at the TransitCenter, a New York-based foundation that seeks to build support for public transit.

This is a book about how cities could build ridership for their public transit systems if they concentrated more on improving bus services than rail extensions.

In making his case, Higashide offers three arguments:

- We misunderstand who rides buses today and who *might* ride them if bus services improved.
- Four principles should guide transit systems in improving bus service.
- Nothing will happen unless effective advocates step forward.

Why should advocates get involved in improving bus service? Transit in all its forms, Higashide says, makes cities more affordable, livelier and more economically viable. But, he argues, buses offer the swiftest and surest way of getting large numbers of people to switch from cars to transit. That’s because bus services can be dramatically improved in years or even months, while rail extensions take decades.

Early on, Higashide addresses what he says are fundamental misunderstandings about bus transit. One is that transit riders are divided between “choice” and “captive” riders. Choice riders, a common belief goes, own cars and may sometimes take trains but will not ride buses. Captive riders are low-income people with no alternatives to transit. They are believed to be the only ones who will ride buses.

This isn’t true on two counts, Higashide writes. First, low-income people have many alternatives to transit. This explains why in places with poor service so few low-income workers use transit in any form.

(In Los Angeles, only 6 percent of workers from poor families use trains or buses to get to work.)
Second, places that *have* improved bus offerings have seen major ridership increases among so-called choice riders. In Seattle, a third of bus riders make \$100,000 or more a year.

Another myth: The only place people will take buses or trains to is work. Not so, Higashide says. Two-thirds of transit trips today are to places other than work, such as entertainment venues and shopping. And there's room for growth here because four-fifths of all trips, including walking, biking and cars as well as transit, are non-commuting trips. Run bus lines to entertainment and shopping venues, and you'll have more bus riders.

If a city wanted to improve bus service and get more people on transit, what should it do? Higashide offers four guiding principles:

- Go where people want to go.
- Do so frequently.
- Make the bus ride fast and reliable.
- Make the walk from home to bus stop and bus stop to destination easy and appealing.

Each of the principles demands that many interests work together. Making bus rides faster and more reliable, for instance, requires dedicated bus lanes. This involves transit systems working with the transportation departments that manage streets and highways. Making the walk from home to bus stops and from bus stops to destinations more appealing requires everyone from city planners to commercial property interests working together.

But, believe it or not, that is the easy part of improving bus transit. Harder: Motivating elected officials and city and state departments to take on the effort and convincing citizens that better bus service is worth the effort. And for that, Higashide says, activists are essential.

Eventually, he writes, better buses requires "three kinds of champion": informed and committed pro-transit advocates outside government, government officials inside local agencies who are convinced that buses can work, and elected officials willing to support the effort. This, he says, is "the hamburger of reform." Take any of these elements away, and the results are bound to be disappointing.

What's encouraging is that many cities have created this formula and succeeded. The poster child is Houston which completely rethought its bus system in 2015 thanks to a strong-willed mayor and a transit board convinced of the need for change. Other cities have done something similar: Miami, Baltimore, Indianapolis, Austin, Texas and Columbus, Ohio,.

Of the four principles for improving bus services that Higashide cites, the most important is frequency. And that comes down to how often buses arrive at any given bus stop. If you want people to leave their cars and get aboard, Higashide's advice: "Every 15 minutes is good; every 10 is better; every eight or 5 is fantastic."

To achieve frequency and speed, transit systems will be forced to concentrate on ridership, not coverage. This means, at least initially, fewer bus routes. So instead of walking two blocks to catch a bus, some may have to walk four. The payoff: They'll get to their destinations faster. And by concentrating on the most high-volume routes AND increasing the frequency and speed of buses, ridership will grow. Once that happens, coverage can expand.

Final note: Does improving bus service actually result in higher ridership? This is not covered in the book, so the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group looked at [ridership reports on the Houston Metro system](#). In December 2019, before the pandemic, three and a half times as many people rode buses in Houston as the light rail system (4.8 million a month vs. 1.9 million). And bus ridership was growing faster then; year over year, 4.2 percent growth in ridership on buses and 3.5 percent on trains.

The pandemic caused transit ridership to plummet, but the latest ridership figures in Houston (March 2023) indicate that bus ridership is once again growing faster than light rail and is closer to reaching its pre-pandemic levels.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.