

Testimony of Ben Ross

Operating Budget Hearing
April 7, 2025

The Ride-On bus system grew in 25 years from its founding in 1975 to one of the nation's largest and most effective suburban bus systems. Today it is in decline.

Leaders like David Bone and Caroline Biggins built Ride-On's success by giving priority to serving riders. They delivered what riders care about most – buses that come frequently and reliably and go where they want to go. Every bus route ran at least once every half hour. Relief buses were kept ready to fill in when a bus broke down or was excessively delayed. When new routes failed to attract ridership, resources were redeployed to improve frequency on heavily traveled routes elsewhere.

In more recent years, Ride-On has lost its focus on the rider. This can be seen in many ways, large and small:

- Many Ride-On routes now run on headways of 35 minutes, 40 minutes, or even longer.
- BRT and local buses stop at different places. Most bus riders want to take whichever bus comes first, but this makes it impossible. The extra wait for the next bus far exceeds the time saved by the BRT bus, especially outside rush hour when most bus rides occur.
- The high costs of battery-electric buses are paid for in part by providing inadequate bus service.
- The county, unlike Prince George's and other neighboring jurisdictions, did not join in WMATA's Better Bus program to jointly develop an optimal Ride-On/Metrobus route network. Instead, it did its own study, aimed at the distant future and based on demographic assumptions inconsistent with the recently adopted Thrive 2050 Master Plan. As a result, when Metrobus routes change this summer, the ad hoc and underfunded realignment of Ride-On routes will leave gaps in the frequent bus network.
- Bus logos are pasted over the window, obstructing riders' view.
- Bus stop flags are painted on only one side, so potential riders can't find the stop.
- Bus stops are far from intersections, so riders lose time crossing the street.

The consequence of these policies has been an ongoing loss of ridership. Riders took 29,249,000 trips in 2007; ridership for the current year is estimated at 19,040,000. This is a decline of 35%, lagging well behind other bus systems in the region.

The proposed Ride-On budget for FY26 continues the decline in Ride-On service. There is no increase in staffing (except for extension of the Flash bus on US 29 into Howard County, which will be paid for by Howard County). Future years are also flat-staffed, except for increased service on bus route in FY27 and one bus route in FY29. This equates to fewer bus trips, because increasing traffic congestion makes trips take longer and because electric buses need frequent recharging and break down more often than the buses they replace.

Solving these problems requires both increased funding and increased attention to the needs of bus riders. The county's transit revenues, including the transit tax, state aid to Ride-On, and bus advertising, total \$261,000,000, but only \$211,000,000 is spent on transit. All bus routes should run at least once every half-hour, with relief buses standing ready to fill in after breakdowns. Bus frequencies should be upgraded immediately on routes slated for "BRT"; there's no reason for riders to wait for good service until the county can come up with millions of dollars to rebrand the bus line.

Equally important is a change in priorities. The needs of the riders must come ahead of PR and branding. Flash and Ride-On logos should not cover windows. We can surely find the money to paint bus stop signs on both sides. Limited-stop and local buses must use the same stops so that riders can board the one that comes first – even if that makes it harder for the county to boast about how different its "BRT" is from regular buses.

Priorities will be especially important given the Trump administration's likely effect on county revenues. Frequent, reliable service must be the top transit priority. Fancy bus shelters on "BRT" lines don't make up for bad service on other routes. Replacing a diesel bus with an electric one doesn't help the climate if reduced service causes some of its riders to switch to cars.

Growing transit ridership is essential for the county to reach its transportation, economic, and environmental goals. I urge you to use this budget to set Ride-On on a better course. Put passengers first, and the bus system will again see growing ridership.