

MEMORANDUM

November 30, 2020

TO: T&E Committee

FROM: Stephanie Bryant, Legislative Analyst
Office of Legislative Oversight

SUBJECT: **Worksession on OLO Report 2020-10: *Ride On Bus Routes and Services***

On December 2nd, the T&E Committee will discuss OLO Report 2020-10, which was released on October 16th. This report responds to Council's request to better understand (1) who uses Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) Ride On bus services, (2) how MCDOT makes changes to Ride On services, and (3) how similar jurisdictions evaluate their transit networks. The Executive Summary for Report 2020-10 appears on ©1.

The following Executive Branch staff will be available at the worksession to provide comments and answer questions:

- Emil Wolanin, Deputy Director, MCDOT
- Dan Hibbert, Division Chief, Division of Transit Services, MCDOT
- Phil McLaughlin, Ride On Chief for Planning and Implementation, MCDOT

COUNCILMEMBERS PREVIOUSLY RECEIVED COPIES OF REPORT 2020-10 AND SHOULD BRING A COPY OF THE REPORT TO THE WORKSESSION.

REPORT SUMMARY

This section summarizes key findings from Report 2020-10. Comments on these findings from Chief Administrative Officer Richard Madaleno are attached at ©4.

In this report, OLO analyzed MCDOT Ride On reports, conducted interviews with County Government staff and community stakeholders, and researched transit decision processes in ten jurisdictions. This report also provides information about Ride On data collection and reporting. In sum, OLO found that MCDOT routinely collects and reports transit data and engages in a regular process to review bus routes and services; however, opportunities exist to define Ride On goals, strengthen performance metrics, and increase transparency of MCDOT's transit decision processes. OLO's major findings are summarized below:

- Best practices in transit management recommend that transit agencies reassess their overarching goals and objectives at least every five years. The Montgomery County Department of Transportation last updated the goals and objectives for the County's Ride On service in 2008.
- Several transit agencies around the Country have recently undertaken multi-year, system-wide reviews and revisions of their transit services. As part of network redesigns, jurisdictions review existing bus service, define long-term goals, set performance metrics, realign routes, and document processes for service adjustments. MCDOT has not conducted a system-wide review or redesign of the Ride On network in over 20 years.

- Ride On’s publicly-reported data and performance measures are limited as compared to the performance measures reported regularly by many peer transit agencies that have recently redesigned their transit networks. Ride On performance measures reported by MCDOT are attached at ©6.
- MCDOT formally reviews Ride On services three times a year – reviewing approximately 30 services each time. Every Ride On service is reviewed at least once every two years.
- MCDOT makes changes to Ride On services based on ridership, operational considerations, finances, equity, changing demographic and employment patterns, customer complaints, and resident requests, among other factors. MCDOT does not publish guidelines for how it revises Ride On routes and services or how it evaluates proposed changes to those services.

OLO RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of Report 2020-10, OLO had three recommendations:

- 1. Continue planning for a comprehensive review and update of the Ride On system and evaluate when County resources could allow for funding of a Ride On Bus Route Restructuring Study. In the interim, update the County’s goals and objectives for Ride On.**
 - Using TRB’s five-year standard, Ride On is due for a comprehensive update to its goals and objectives.
 - The new FLASH service and the Purple Line represent significant changes to the transportation network that warrant examining Ride On’s optimal role in that network.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic poses substantial operational challenges for transit and may permanently alter employment patterns.

In light of these changes to the context in which Ride On operates, a comprehensive review would assure the relevancy of the current goals and could offer new strategies for how the buses serve residents.

- 2. Publish written guidelines for how the County modifies Ride On services, including factors MCDOT considers and prioritization of those factors in MCDOT Ride On service decisions.**
- 3. To improve transparency, make Ride On reports and data readily available on the County website.** MCDOT staff promptly provided OLO staff with all requested reports and documents, but not all of these documents are readily available on the MCDOT website. Further, examine feasibility of incorporating data and performance measures collected to meet Federal and State reporting requirements. Incorporating into one document the results of all the transit performance measures that MCDOT tracks might offer decision makers a more complete picture of the Ride On program, as well as reporting historical data to trends over time.

Ride On Bus Routes and Services

This Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) report responds to Council’s request to better understand (1) who uses Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) Ride On bus services, (2) how MCDOT makes changes to Ride On services, and (3) how similar jurisdictions evaluate their transit networks. This report also provides information about Ride On data collection and reporting. OLO analyzed MCDOT Ride On reports, conducted interviews with County Government staff and community stakeholders, and researched transit decision processes in ten jurisdictions. In sum, OLO found that MCDOT routinely collects and reports transit data and engages in a regular process to review bus routes and services; however, opportunities exist to define Ride On goals, strengthen performance metrics, and increase transparency of MCDOT’s transit decision processes.

Demographics of Ride On Riders. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the federal government requires the County to survey Ride On customers at least every five years. MCDOT’s 2018 Title VI on-board surveys reported the following demographics of Ride On customers:

- **Residence:** About 89% of Ride On customers were County residents.
- **Race/Ethnicity:** 78% of customers were categorized as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC); 36% of customers were African American.
- **Language:** 42% of customers spoke a language other than English at home. Of those speaking a language other than English, the primary language spoken was Spanish (50.9%) followed by French (16.6%).
- **Income:** 47% of customers reported an annual household income of less than \$30,000.
- **Education:** 69% of customers had a Bachelor’s degree, a post-graduate degree, or some college education.
- **Age:** 29% of Ride On customers were between 35 and 54 years old.

Ride On Routes and Services

MCDOT’s Transit Services Division manages and operates the Ride On bus system, which as of 2018 was being used by 38,070 people on an average weekday. The Division also evaluates and develops the routes, plans, and schedules service, and reviews all the routes and services at least once every two years.

MCDOT provides Ride On bus services across 495 miles in the County. In 2018, the Ride On program consisted of 79 fixed routes that provided about 22 million unlinked passenger trips. Ride On operates mainly in neighborhoods as a collector and distributor to major transfer points and transit centers in the County. In 2018, 61% of customers reported using Ride On services daily (5-7 times per week).

Ride On Goals and Objectives. The County last updated Ride On’s goals in the 2008 Strategic Transit Plan, restating them in the *Bus Fleet Management Plan for 2013 to 2020*, published in 2014. The 2008 recession delayed many of the stated goals provided below. OLO found Ride On’s goals and objectives have not been updated to reflect recent County priorities and Ride On’s place within the County’s changing transit network.

- Double transit ridership by 2020
- Provide transit service to all areas that have an average of 3+ households or 4+ jobs per acre
- Increase peak hour frequency to every 10 minutes or better
- Increase span of service for local buses to 19-24 hours of service per day
- Target pockets of low-income areas with non-traditional services
- 25+ Park & Ride lots in the County
- 100% customer service satisfaction
- 5,500 bus stops American with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant
- Capacity for 600 buses
- Fleet reliability: 100%
- 95% on-time performance
- Keep pace with latest technology
- Operate 100% environmentally friendly buses

For a complete copy of OLO-Report 2020-10, go to:
<http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OLO/Reports/CurrentOLOReports.html>

MCDOT Ride On Data Collection and Reporting. MCDOT collects data about Ride On vehicles, ridership, and customer satisfaction. The data enable MCDOT to monitor day-to-day operations, assess performance, and revise routes and services as needed over both the short- and long-term. MCDOT is currently improving its ability to collect, in an automated manner, real-time data on both vehicles and passenger counts and to integrate this data into its daily operations and its triannual (3X/year) service evaluations. MCDOT expects these new capabilities to improve the integrity of data collected, the speed with which MCDOT can use and share the data, and the spatial and temporal granularity of potential analysis. Improved data collection capabilities open up new opportunities for performance measures to evaluate Ride On services and to publicly report information, such as vehicle crowding.

Data Reporting. MCDOT must report certain transit data and performance measures to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) under regulations set by those entities. FTA requires regular reporting to the National Transit Database, as well as regular reporting on the demographic profile of bus customers under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. OLO found that these federal and state reporting requirements can sometimes, but do not always, link to the County’s goals for Ride On, but MCDOT cannot modify federal and state requirements.

MCDOT reports certain transit data and performance measures to CountyStat and in the annual Ride On route profile, and MCDOT can modify the information reported for these purposes. OLO found that Ride On’s publicly-reported data and performance measures are limited as compared to the performance measures reported regularly by other jurisdictions that recently redesigned their bus systems. Further, while MCDOT staff promptly provided OLO staff with all the reports and documents requested, not all the documents are readily available on the MCDOT website. To improve transparency, OLO recommends that MCDOT make all prior and future reports available on its website in a searchable and easily accessible format.

How Ride On Makes Service Changes. Ride On’s 79 routes encompass 159 distinct services – counting weekday, Saturday, and Sunday service on routes separately. MCDOT formally reviews Ride On services three times per year - reviewing approximately 30 services at a time. Every Ride On service is reviewed at least once every two years. MCDOT also reviews additional services during the year based on factors like new housing, customer requests, poor performance, and requests from elected officials. Occasionally, a factor affects an interconnected group of Ride On services, such as the new FLASH bus service along Route 29. In these cases, MCDOT staff initiate a larger review of multiple routes that considers the inter-related implications across services.

MCDOT staff report that Ride On service changes are based on ridership, operational considerations, finances, equity and service coverage considerations, changing demographic and employment patterns, customer complaints, and resident requests, among other factors. MCDOT staff evaluate proposed changes on a case-by-case basis considering all these factors. The department, however, does not have a written guide outlining its decision-making process for making changes or describing how it prioritizes these factors.

Network Redesign

MCDOT has not conducted a comprehensive redesign of the Ride On bus network in over 20 years.

The County Executive’s FY21 budget request included \$1.5 million for a Ride On Bus Route Restructuring Study. Bus ridership has declined nationally, and Ride On has experienced similar challenges. The current route structure has grown over the past four decades and will benefit from a comprehensive reevaluation to maximize service delivery. As a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, however, the County Council adopted a same-services budget for FY21 that could not include new spending.

Best Practices and Transit Decision Processes in Other Jurisdictions. OLO found that many transit agencies monitor and improve their bus system using a systematic process of performance measurement. Key findings include:

- **Goal Reassessment and Performance Monitoring.** The Transportation Research Board (TRB) found that transit agencies typically reassess their goals and objectives at least every five years. Additional best practices for monitoring and improving transit performance include defining service types and service guidelines; collecting robust data; and selecting performance metrics.
- **Established Service Guidelines.** Most case study jurisdictions explicitly define how they use goals, service guidelines, and performance measures to evaluate system and route performance. Jurisdictions use these guidelines to identify areas of high and low performance, where investment is needed, and where resources are not being used effectively. Service guidelines are updated routinely, often in combination with strategic plan updates.
- **Report Publication.** Jurisdictions regularly publish reports that provide data on performance measures, service guidelines, and decision processes. Jurisdictions set established timelines to update and review documents to ensure traceability from strategic priorities to service guidelines, and project prioritization. These practices can help ensure service decisions are objective, transparent, and align with transit goals at the system, route, and segment levels.
- **Bus Network Redesign.** The majority of transit agencies reviewed have recently undertaken multi-year revisions of their bus networks. As part of network designs, jurisdictions review existing bus service, define long-term goals, set performance metrics, realign routes, and document processes for ongoing service adjustments. Most jurisdictions hired outside consultants to lead the efforts and included community stakeholders in the multi-year process.

Case Study Jurisdictions

Anchorage, AK
Arlington, VA
Houston, TX
Indianapolis, IN
Jacksonville, FL
King County, WA
Los Angeles County, CA
Miami-Dade County, FL
Portland, OR
Richmond, VA

OLO Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Continue planning for a comprehensive review and update of the Ride On system and evaluate when County resources could allow for funding of a Ride On Bus Route Restructuring Study. In the interim, update the County’s goals and objectives for Ride On.

- Using TRB’s five-year standard, Ride On is due for a comprehensive update to its goals and objectives.
- The new FLASH service and the Purple Line represent significant changes to the transportation network that warrant examining Ride On’s optimal role in that network.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has posed substantial operational challenges for transit and may permanently alter employment patterns.

In light of these changes to the context in which Ride On operates, a comprehensive review would assure the relevancy of the current goals and could offer new strategies for how the buses serve residents.

Recommendation #2: Publish written guidelines for how the County modifies Ride On services, including factors MCDOT considers and prioritization of those factors in MCDOT Ride On service decisions.

Recommendation #3: To improve transparency, make readily available Ride On reports and data on the County website.

- Request the feasibility of augmenting the annual Ride On route profile with the performance measures that MCDOT reports to FTA, MTA, and CountyStat. Explore possibilities to include historic data to compare trends over time.



OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Marc Elrich
County Executive

Richard S. Madaleno
Acting Chief Administrative Officer

MEMORANDUM

September 22, 2020

TO: Chris Cihlar, Director
Office of Legislative Oversight

FROM: Richard S. Madaleno, Acting Chief Administrative Officer *RSM*

SUBJECT: Draft OLO Report 2020-X: Ride on Bus Routes and Services

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Office of Legislative Oversight's (OLO) Draft Report – 2020-X “Ride On Bus Routes and Services”. The draft report included the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1: The Council should ask the County Executive and the Department of Transportation to continue planning for a comprehensive review and update of the Ride On system and evaluate when County resources could allow for funding of a Ride On Bus Route Restructuring Study. In the interim, the Council should ask the County Executive and the Department of Transportation to update the County's goals and objectives for Ride On.

CAO Response:

The County Executive is committed to improving transit services in the county.

We agree with the recommendation and will work towards developing a comprehensive review and update of the Ride On system. In the interim MCDOT will update the County Council on the efforts to provide transits services in the county.

Recommendation #2: The Council should ask the County Executive to direct the Department of Transportation to publish written guidelines for how it makes changes to the Ride On system, including the factors it considers and how it prioritizes those factors.

CAO Response:

We concur with the recommendation. The Department of Transportation and will publish the written guidelines on how it makes changes to the system on its website.

Recommendation #3: The Council should ask the County Executive to make Ride On reports and data publicly available on the County website.

CAO Response:

We concur with the recommendation. The Department of Transportation will make Ride On reports and data publicly available on the MCDOT website.

We look forward to discussing the recommendations at the Council session and working together to ensure our Ride On transit system provide safe, secure and reliable transit services to our residents.

cc: Fariba Kassiri, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer
Adriana Hochberg, Assistant Chief Administrative Officer
Chris Conklin, Director, Department of Transportation
Dan Hibbert, Division Chief Transit Operations, Department of Transportation

Table 8-5. Summary of Ride On Data and Performance Measures Reported by MCDOT

National Transit Database

Transit Services Consumed

- Passenger Miles Traveled
- Unlinked Passenger Trips (UPT) / boardings
- Average Weekday UPT
- Average Saturday UPT
- Average Sunday UPT
- Average Trip Length

Transit Services Supplied

- Vehicle Revenue Miles
- Vehicle Revenue Hours
- Vehicles Operated in Maximum Service
- Vehicles Available for Maximum Services (VAMS).

Transit Service Resources

- Operating Expenses
- Fare Revenues
- Average Fleet Age in Years

Transit Service Resources

- Operating Expenses
- Fare Revenues
- Percent Spare Vehicles
- Average Fleet Age in Years

Performance Measures of Efficiency and Effectiveness:

Service Efficiency

- Operating Expenses per Vehicle Revenue Mile
- Operating Expenses per Vehicle Revenue Hour

Service Effectiveness

- Operating Expenses per Passenger Mile
- Operating Expenses per UPT
- UPT per Vehicle Revenue Mile
- UPT per Vehicle Revenue Hour

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

- Routes meeting standard for Vehicle Load Factor (measures crowding)
- Routes meeting standard for Vehicle Headway (measures # of minutes between vehicles on a route)
- Routes meeting standard for On-Time Performance
- Service Accessibility

Maryland Transit Administration

- Platform hours = total scheduled time bus spends from pull-out to pull-in at the division
- Ridership
- Boardings per day
- Boardings per revenue vehicle hour
- Platform hours per capita (based on census data)

CountyStat

- Passengers transported (millions)
- Scheduled Ride On roundtrip circuits missed, in whole or in part, per 1,000 roundtrip circuits
- On-Time Performance for Ride On buses

Ride On Route Profiles

- Average daily riders (by service type)
- Annual riders (millions)
- Annual platform hours (millions)
- Riders per platform hour (annual riders/annual platform hours)