



Identification of Barriers and Recommendations

Transit Access
Barriers Study

December 2025

Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority

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Introduction

For many, transit is an essential service that provides access to employment, healthcare, groceries, and other daily needs. Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA) continues to see an increase in ridership on both bus and rail, emphasizing the importance of transit access across Cuyahoga County. To better understand the relationship between access to transit and household income, specifically federally designated Areas of Persistent Poverty, GCRTA partnered with the community, local nonprofits, and stakeholders to learn and discover fundamental barriers to transit. Areas of persistent poverty were engaged and researched to determine the extent and needs regarding transportation access within these neighborhoods. From the combination of engagement and research, transit barriers became evident for residents in Cuyahoga County.

This Identification of Transit Barriers and Recommendations builds on the insights learned from the Existing Conditions report to identify specific barriers that may deter underserved communities from choosing transit and identify recommendations to minimize transportation barriers. Transit needs are evident in Cuyahoga County, where 26% of census tracts experience persistent poverty. In the City of Cleveland, it is even more pronounced, with 57% of census tracts experiencing persistent poverty. Findings from the existing conditions, analysis of areas of high poverty, GCRTA's community surveys, and project focus group discussions revealed specific themes, challenges, and potential areas where transit barriers are most evident.



Barriers to Access: Analysis of Areas of High Poverty

Purpose

Cleveland's transit network, like many older industrial cities, has seen changes over the decades as population, employment, and development patterns have shifted. As the region's economy and land use have transformed from a high-density urban center to dispersed suburban neighborhoods and office parks, the ability for residents to easily access essential destinations has become difficult.

This analysis examines how transportation access shapes daily life for residents in high poverty areas (HPAs), which are census tracts where 40% or more of the population live below the poverty level. This analysis specifically focuses on the spatial mismatch between where those in HPAs live and where jobs and core community services are located including healthcare grocery stores.

Background

Cuyahoga County is home to over one-million residents with a county-wide poverty rate slightly above 16%. Social and economic factors have created a landscape where poverty is more concentrated in older, central urban neighborhoods, while newer, less dense suburban neighborhoods have experienced fewer impacts. Figure 1 illustrates a countywide view of poverty rates by census tract and Figure 2 compares tracts below and above the 40% poverty rate.

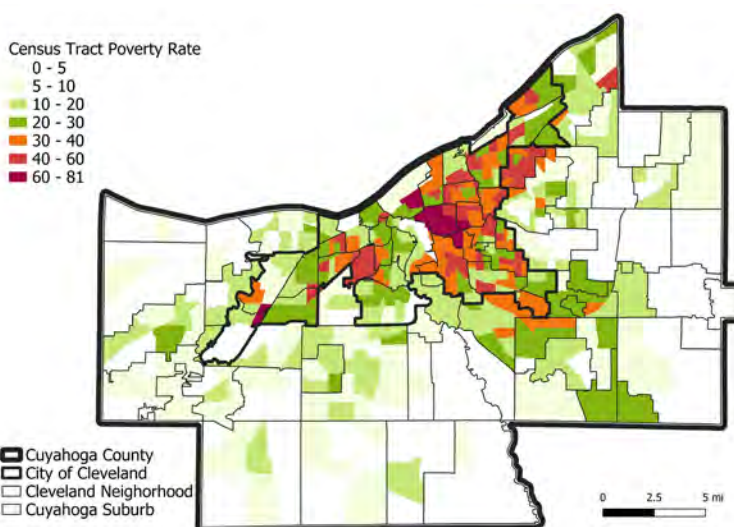
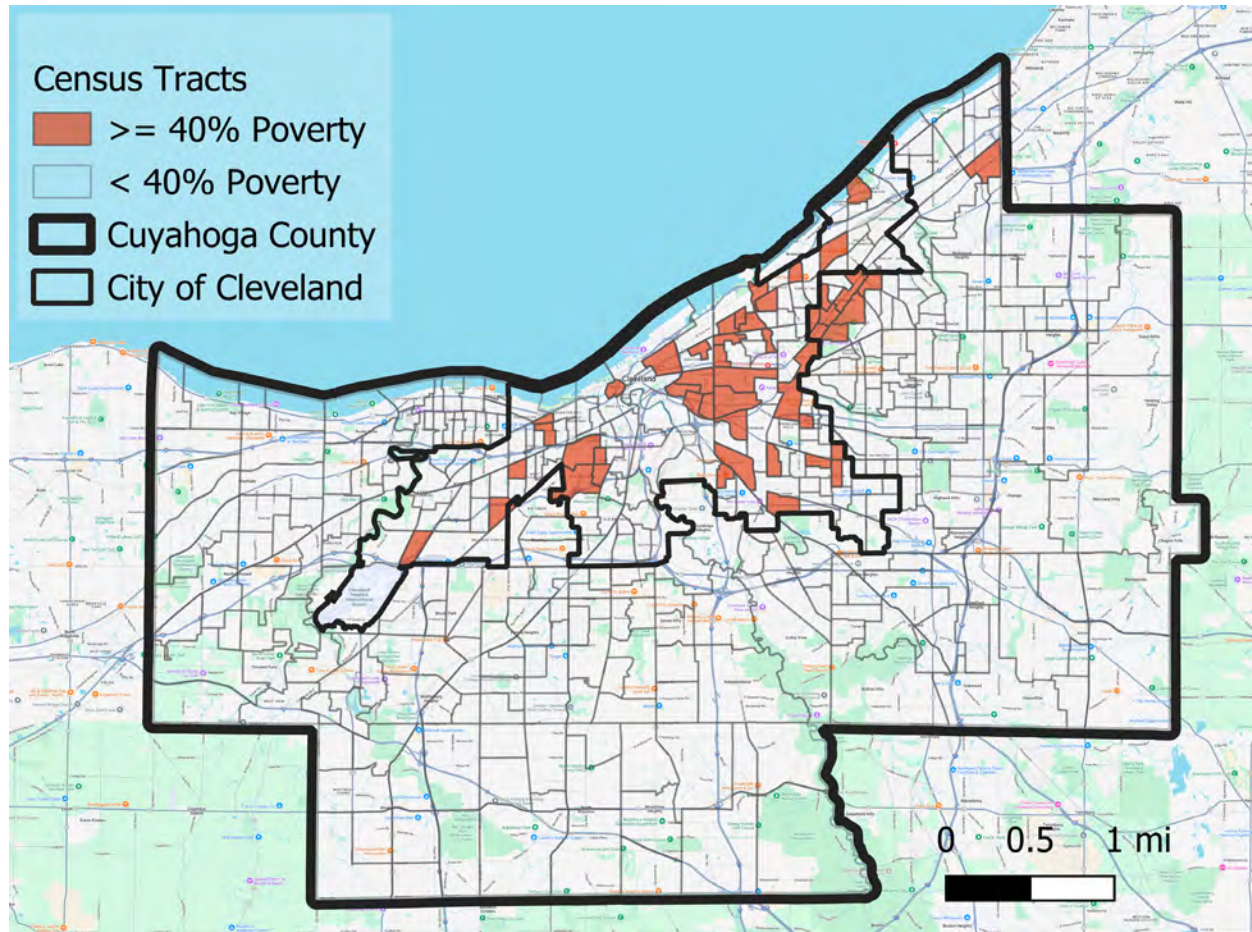


Figure 1: Poverty Rate by Census Tract, Cuyahoga County, Ohio

Source: 2023 American Community Survey 5-year

Figure 2: High Poverty Areas in Cuyahoga County



Source: 2023 American Community Survey 5-year

Transit serves as a vital way for residents in these neighborhoods to reach these core destinations; however, route reach, trip frequency, operating hours, safety and the overall accessibility of and distance to a stop affect a rider's ability to reach these destinations in a convenient and timely manner.

Employment Access

Employment is one of the most powerful engines of opportunity, and public transit plays a critical role in shaping whether residents can realistically access available jobs. In Cuyahoga County, this relationship is complicated by development patterns that have occurred since the rise of the automobile.

Over recent decades, many higher wage and stable jobs have relocated away from the city core, often alongside new residential development. These shifts impose significant barriers, including longer commutes, lost wages, and diminished economic mobility. As demand has dispersed outward, employment, services, and amenities have concentrated in areas with strong highway connections but limited transit coverage.

Retail and service industries have followed this trend, leading to population decline and reduced household incomes. This has caused longstanding commercial sites near the city center to relocate or close altogether. These patterns have put additional strain on the public transportation system's ability to adapt.

Wages in HPAs fall short of Countywide averages. Table 1 shows that nearly half of county jobs (47.2%) and more than two-thirds of jobs in HPAs (68.1%) pay less than \$3,333 per month. For a family of four, these wages fall below what is needed to meet basic living needs.

Table 1. Jobs by Income Category, Countywide and in High Poverty Areas

	Count	Rate
Cuyahoga County		
Less than \$1,250 month	112,399	19.80%
\$1,250 up to \$3,333 month	155,293	27.40%
\$3,333+ month	299,504	52.80%
Total jobs held	9,922	
High Poverty Areas		
Less than \$1,250 month	9,922	28.90%
\$1,250 up to \$3,333 month	13,434	39.20%
\$3,333+ month	10,935	31.90%
Total jobs held	34,291	

For context, the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in 2023 was \$2,500 a month for a family of four. A four-person household earning 130% of the FPL (approximately \$3,250 a month) meets the income cutoff for many federal assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Considered a more realistic measure of economic stability is the 200% limit of the FPL (\$5,000 a month). This threshold represents families struggling to meet the costs of housing, transportation, childcare and more. As a result, those who live in HPAs are generally surrounded by low wage employment while those higher paying jobs are farther out and logistically harder to reach by transit.

Healthcare Access

Healthcare is an essential service that can rarely be accessed outside of designated facilities. Transit access in part can determine the ease at which a resident can receive the care they need. Proximity alone does not determine access as insurance rules, eligibility criteria, institutional policies, and regulations dictate which providers can be used, under what conditions, and at what cost.

The closure of many medical centers both in the urban core and outer suburbs in recent years, including St. Vincent's Medical Center in the Central neighborhood, have increased the distance Cuyahoga County residents must travel. Medicaid in some respects has helped, however, it only covers some forms of medical transportation. Additionally, there are differing rules depending on the plan type and medical condition as well as limitations on use. To help bridge the gap, non-profit and community health resources have come together, offering a local resource in lower income areas.

Grocery Access

Access to healthy food options is not easily accessible in HPAs, with many neighborhoods considered food deserts. Residents in HPAs often must rely on corner markets and smaller discount stores that do not offer the same wide range of whole food options.

Travel times remain a major barrier. Unevenly distributed across the county, the median travel time to a grocery store is 51 minutes by transit. Furthermore, these transit travel times do not factor in the waiting time for the bus or train. These long trips make it difficult for riders to buy perishable foods, compare prices, and take multiple trips as needed for their economic and health outcomes.

Summary

Poverty in Cleveland is not only defined by income but limited access to economic opportunity and community services. Across employment, healthcare, and grocery shopping, residents in HPAs experience longer trips and fewer direct routes that often require a transfer. Compounding over time, these barriers can limit career progression and income advancement.

Addressing barriers to access requires more than transportation planning; it requires redressing the policies that produced inequitable landscapes in the first place. Strategies to enhance the reach and efficiency and ease of use of public transit for those living in HPAs could offer tangible benefits to the community's most disadvantaged members.



Identification of Barriers

Engaging the Community

Overall Engagement Approach

Engagement was intentionally focused on reaching communities and individuals within Cuyahoga County that may be experiencing poverty. Bridging Possibilities is a transformative initiative aimed to expand opportunities and enhance the transit network to improve the quality of life for all Clevelanders. To develop clear, consistent, and transparent communication, five engagement principles were used, including:



Inform and Educate the Public

Create a comprehensive, equitable, and inclusive engagement plan that includes a wide variety of techniques for interested parties to become involved.



Make and Build Connections

Identify opportunities and facilitate two-way conversations to build relationships between GCRTA and stakeholders.



Engage the Public and Encourage Continued Participation

Engage interested persons in local transportation issues by removing barriers to participation, and communicating in clear, compelling language and visuals.



Use Input to Shape Planning Efforts

Communicate how the public's contribution will influence decisions. Ensure that the public's contribution will influence decision-making.



Create Support for Implementation

Identify opportunities for GCRTA to leverage and build public acceptance and ownership

Transit barriers were identified through qualitative and quantitative approaches. Identifying barriers was based on intentionally focused engagement that included internal and external outreach, on-board survey data, transit data, and peer research.

Engagement Process

Between Summer 2024 and Fall 2025, a comprehensive public engagement initiative was undertaken, encompassing over 25 events involving direct interaction with more than 350 community members. The objective was to assess transit accessibility and identify potential barriers to public transportation usage.

**Over 25 events
involving direct
interaction with more
than 350 community
members.**



Bridging Possibilities Engagement Methods and Tools



Community Engagement

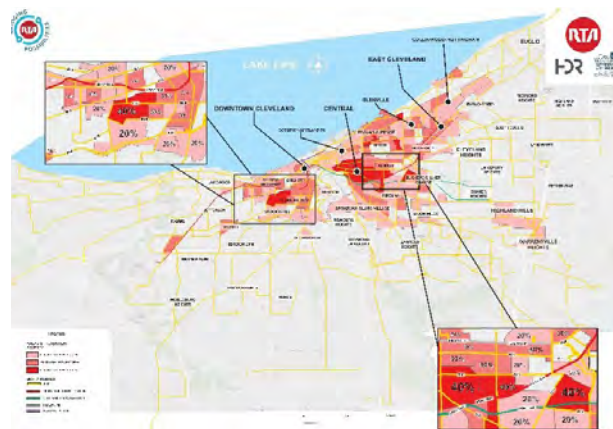
Stakeholder Focus Group

The Stakeholder Focus Group was created to better understand how the project's vision aligned with existing community efforts and to learn how these efforts can be leveraged. This group met three times during the project and included governmental agencies and non-profit organizations that support individuals and families that may be living in poverty. Nineteen stakeholders participated in at least one of the three stakeholder meetings, and included:

- City of Cleveland Heights
- City of Euclid
- City of Garfield Heights
- City of Maple Heights
- City of Warrensville Heights
- Cleveland Neighborhood Progress
- Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C)
- Cuyahoga County Planning Commission
- Cuyahoga County
- Cuyahoga County Board of Health
- First Year Cleveland
- Food Strong
- Greater Cleveland Food Bank
- Habitat for Humanity of Greater Cleveland
- Midtown Cleveland
- Stella Maris
- Towards Employment
- United Way
- Young Latino Network



Stakeholder Focus Group, August 27th, 2025



Stakeholder Activity Exercise, August 28th, 2024

Community Focus Groups

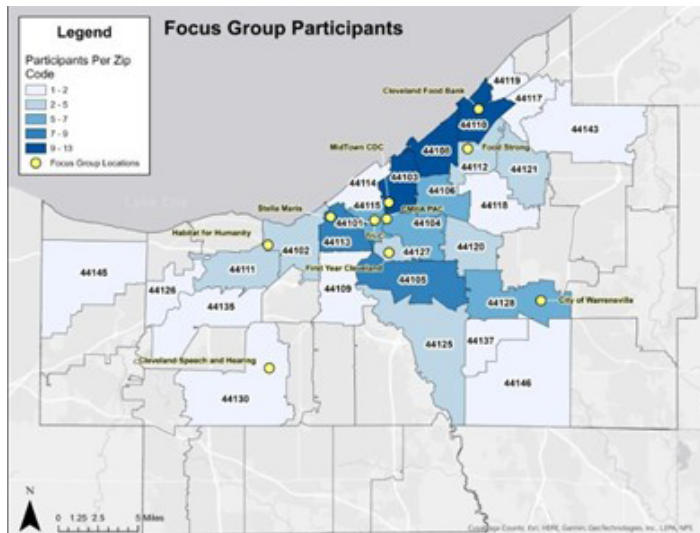
Community focus groups were held during November 2024 by stakeholder organizations. This outreach gave community residents a safe space to discuss the transportation challenges that many face daily. Through this process, GCRTA engaged with over 250 residents that may be experiencing poverty or living in an area identified as persistent poverty. These focus group conversations highlighted challenges, specific transit routes and locations, and showcased potential transit barrier locations within the system.

Table 2. Focus Groups

Organization	Date	# of Attendees
Cleveland Speech and Hearing	11/7/2024	12
City of Warrensville	11/11/2024	5
Midtown Community Development Corporation	11/12/2024	31
Food Strong	11/12/2024	11
Stella Maris Cleveland	11/13/2024	13
Cleveland Food Bank #1	11/13/2024	9
Cleveland Food Bank #2	11/14/2024	15
First Year Cleveland	11/14/2024	9
Habitat for Humanity	11/14/2024	12
Cuyahoga Community College	11/15/2024	12
Cleveland Food Bank #3	11/15/2024	13
CMHA Progressive Action Council	11/22/2024	100

A total of 12 focus groups were convened across Cuyahoga County at local stakeholder organizations. Participants received a \$25 Visa Giftcard and a meal in appreciation for giving their thoughts, feedback, and time to this initiative. This engagement effort provided GCRTA with a unique way to communicate with its transit users, and develop new relationships with stakeholder organizations.

Figure 3: Focus Group Participants Home Zipcode



The focus groups offered meaningful insight into how transit access impacts certain demographics and communities. Participant demographics such as age, race, and gender were also recorded to better understand the diverse perspectives represented. As shown in Map 1, participants came from a broad range of ZIP codes across the region, reflecting the geographic diversity of input.

More detailed information regarding the focus group approach and outcomes can be found in Appendix D.

Through the 12 different focus groups, the project team developed personas to articulate specific situations and hardships that might be experienced, while protecting the identification of those that expressed these issues. These personas were referenced and provided narrative while developing recommendations for identified transit barriers.





David, 32

David works night shift as security for the Cleveland Clinic.

Making transfers can be a real hassle. You often run like crazy to catch the connecting bus, and sometimes it just drives right past you. And figuring out how long your transfer ticket is good for is super confusing.



Bella, 22

Bella is a full-time student at Cuyahoga Community College. RTA is her primary source of transportation.

I think cameras and emergency buttons should be installed at bus and rapid stops. Some areas are really sketchy, no matter the time of day. It makes me nervous to ride because I don't want to be in a bad situation.



Linda, 56

Linda has found a job on the other side of town with the help of her case worker. She only uses RTA Paratransit due to a disability.

Some drivers lack respect and seem indifferent to passengers' needs. There is never an explanation for why they are late, and I've lost many jobs because of tardiness.



Brandon, 27

Brandon has a 3-year-old son. The two of them ride RTA weekly.

Many of the bus stops are not clean. I choose to stand outside of the shelters with my son because of the trash or smell inside.



Ashley, 39

Ashely no longer rides RTA due to now having a personal vehicle.

I would not recommend family or friends visiting Cleveland to ride RTA. It is just not convenient.



Jessica, 48

Jessica uses RTA every day to go to and from work.

I try to avoid riding the bus when school lets out because it gets super crowded with kids, and they can be very disruptive and disrespectful. They don't listen to the driver.



Katie, 29

Katie is a young mother. She uses RTA to get around with her baby.

The front seats of the bus for wheelchairs and strollers can be an issue. Sometimes they make us take our babies out of their strollers, even though it's much safer for them to stay in. I will leave the bus before taking my baby out.



John, 66

John, who is uniquely able, uses an electric wheelchair and travels with a service animal. He relies on RTA for transportation to and from his medical appointments.

Bus stops are not accessible in the winter when the ground is covered in snow. RTA needs to clear them off so individuals like me can get onto the bus.

Summer Community Markets

During the Summer of 2025, GCRTA worked with Stakeholders to meet their constituents at various hosted events. This included working with The Centers, which provides health, family, and employment services to residents throughout Northeast Ohio. Their monthly Centered Market events offered an opportunity to engage with over 40 individuals that utilize public transit or may have transportation challenges. At two events on both the east and west side, the project team hosted a table and engaged with attendees to discuss key barriers access transit and to share their ideas for improving mobility within Cuyahoga County.



Centered Markets, Gordon Square and Uptown Campus

GCRTA Bridging Possibilities

GCRTA is currently identifying challenges in public transit and will provide recommendations to reduce these challenges.

Please provide your input by placing stickers next to your priorities.

What do you see as major challenges to transit?

(Place red stickers on your top 3 priorities)

Communication &
Service Information

Bus/ Rapid Transfers

Safety & Security

Cleanliness & Maintenance

Service

What improvements do you recommend?

GCRTA Bridging Possibilities
For more information or to provide
feedback scan the QR Code



Bus Stop Canvassing

Engagement at bus stops within areas of persistent poverty allowed GCRTA to speak directly with transit riders in the places where they live, work, or patronage. These stop locations were chosen based on high ridership, location, and high transfer potential. These factors were prioritized given other engagement efforts and highlighted challenges within these communities. The border of the City of Cleveland and the City of Euclid along Euclid Avenue and East 191st and East 193rd was chosen due to the high level of ridership and transfers. At this location, the project team engaged with residents who use these bus stops to mainly access the Louis Stokes Windermere Rapid Station and then transfer there to either the Red Line or other buses. On the west side, the transit area within the City of Cleveland on Lorain Avenue and West 65th were selected given the transfers with the nearby Rapid Station and connections with other bus lines and community center. Together, approximately 50 riders were engaged and provided insights to improve the transit system.



City of Euclid, Bus Stop Canvassing



Internal Engagement

GCRTA Executive Committee

GCRTA leadership formed the Executive Committee to support the project and offer insights regarding the purpose, vision, and overall goals. The Committee included the General Manager and Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Deputy General Manager of Engineering and Project Management, Deputy General Manager of External Affairs and Administration, Director of Service Management, Senior Director of Customer Experience and Performance Management, and the Programming and Planning Department. This group met throughout the study to discuss approach, engagement techniques, to overall barriers and potential processes for recommendations to overcome these barriers. This group helped to narrow the focus of transit barriers and provide insight into existing processes and procedures.

Service Management Meeting

The Service Management Team provided valuable insight into processes and procedures based on barriers and conversations from our community engagement. These processes and procedures led to the foundation of potential improvements to help alleviate concerns heard from the community.

Operator Engagement

Understanding barriers from an operator's point of view is important to understand the framework behind potential barriers and issues the community is facing with public transit. Operators are the eyes and ears of the transit agency, and many policies and procedures begin and end with them. Understanding the concerns and issues they face can assist in creating recommendations that might mitigate transit barriers for both the operator and customer.

Project Questionnaire

A transit access project questionnaire was conducted throughout the span of the project. This survey provided an opportunity for customers and residents to provide feedback on transit access regardless of whether they attended an event or if they preferred a more virtual component of sharing feedback. This survey data was used to understand the population better and express priorities throughout the project.

Existing Data and Information

The Existing Conditions report as part of the Transit Access Study highlighted specific data that was also used to identify and evaluate transit barriers. This includes travel demand and patterns, system transfers, and origin-destination data from the on-board survey. It also incorporates best practices and innovative programs from peer transit agencies. This information was key in creating metrics and solutions to address transit barriers, ensuring that practical solutions are identified to improve transit access to areas in need.

Top Five Themes of Engagement and Identified Transit Barriers

Engagement and data insights revealed the vital role transit plays within communities. Transit is not just a means of transportation, but a critical link to various aspects of daily life. While many positive transit experiences were shared throughout the 14 months of internal and external engagement, customers identified numerous challenges that they routinely face that affect their ability to utilize and rely on transit.

These identified challenges cover a range of topics that can be categorized into five main ideas:



Cleanliness & Maintenance

Riders feel that various aspects of the transit system are unclean.



Transfers & Connection Issues

Riders find fare and transfer options confusing, or limiting, resulting in increased fare payments, alternative methods of transportation, or missed trips.



Safety

Riders feel unsafe at transit stations, bus stops, and on vehicles.



Service Availability

Riders feel that the coverage and frequency of transit services within the system, particularly on nights and weekends is not meeting their needs.



Communication & Information

The physical communication materials are difficult to access, as well as understand when there are service updates and other notifications through all forms of information sharing.

These main ideas are key themes that call attention to the specific barriers customers in persistent poverty experience while riding transit. While these themes can overlap and intersect, they provide a thorough examination of how individuals felt and were affected by the quality of transit.

These key themes represent an opportunity for GCRTA to respond to customer feedback by enhancing services, optimizing the rider experience, and potentially attracting new users in areas of persistent poverty. The comments heard make up a formal list of barriers that are summarized in Table 10 on the following page.

Table 3. Identified Barriers to GCRTA Services and Amenities

Theme	Specific Barrier	Impacts on Users
Cleanliness & Maintenance	Strong odors in shelters.	Riders choose to wait outside, rather than use the amenity.
	Dirt, grime & trash.	Riders choose other boarding/alighting locations and discourages use of the system
	Snow and ice not cleared or not done promptly.	Creates unsafe access to stops.
	Stained or worn cloth seats.	Riders avoid using transit service due to the unclean look of the seating.
Transfers & Connection Issues	Unclear transfer policies.	Riders overpay or miss connections while trying to navigate transfers.
	Inconsistent transfer practices between operators.	This leads to incomplete trips and rider frustration.
	Inconvenient transfer locations.	Requires additional walking or use of another mode.
	Bus operators skipping waiting passengers.	Creates frustration and causes riders to be late for their destinations.
	Late Buses	Increases the likelihood of missing connections, longer commutes, and gives the impression of unreliable service.
Safety	Rapid stations feel empty and lack safety personnel, especially at night.	Customers feel unsafe and forgo riding.
	Lack of snow removal near shelters and bus stops.	Makes access hazardous, especially for those with mobility challenges.
	Violence & criminal activity.	Riders feel unsafe using transit services and forgo riding.
	Lack of security cameras.	Increases the perceived and actual risk at transit stops.
	Broken elevators.	This can force mobility-impaired riders to rely on the help of strangers or a missed connection.
	Absence of emergency call buttons.	Perceived vulnerability and unclear why certain areas receive call buttons and others do not.
	Felt a lack of physical security presence.	Increased concerns about personal safety both on and off the vehicle.

Table 3. Identified Barriers to GCRTA Services and Amenities Continued

Theme	Specific Barrier	Impacts on Users
Safety	Stroller restrictions.	Unclear why babies need to be removed from their stroller. There is a potential for missed trips.
	Sidewalk conditions & access to stops.	Poor pedestrian infrastructure creates unsafe travel. Lack of sidewalks, safe crossings, and safe areas deter potential riders.
	Unhoused individuals sleeping in shelters.	Riders avoid using the shelters.
	Broken handicapped seats.	Riders with disabilities are not able to be secured.
	Sidewalk is too close to the curb & the shelters are too small.	Mobility devices cannot fit or safely pass through shelter and curbs.
	Vandalized shelters and transit centers.	Creates a neglected appearance and makes the environment unwelcoming and feel unsafe.
Service Availability	Limited to no service to certain employment centers.	Restricts access to employment and economic opportunity.
	Lack of service in certain cities/localities.	Limit travel options and access in certain areas of Cuyahoga County.
	Limited hours of operation.	Shift workers and those with nontraditional schedules struggle to rely on transit.
	Paratransit is often late with frequent trip cancellations.	Riders miss appointments or are late for work.
Communication & Information Barriers	Disability Pass program is complex and time consuming to get approved for.	Riders take multiple trips to GCRTA to get a disability pass.
	Unclear reroute & detour information.	Riders miss trips or arrive late at destinations.
	Difficulty reading schedules.	Impedes trip planning, especially for seniors and riders with low vision.
	Unclear complaint process and follow up procedures.	Riders feel their concerns go unheard or unresolved. Some riders do not report issues as they believe it won't help.

The following sections provide additional details for each theme using information gathered from focus groups, community outreach, and surveys.

Cleanliness & Maintenance



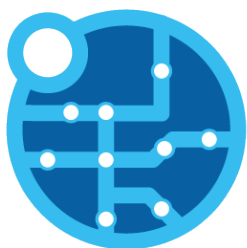
Cleanliness of transit vehicles, shelters, transit centers, and facilities was identified as a transit barrier key theme. GCRTA served more than 24.9 million passengers annually in 2024 and maintains 18 red line stations and 34 light rail stations, with 1,184 shelters throughout Cuyahoga County. Upkeep on these amenities and services continues to be a big endeavor.

During the focus group engagement, cleanliness concerns centered on bus shelters and rapid stations. The issues raised were with garbage, odors, and vandalism, with more concerns being prevalent on the east side of Cleveland. Customers shared that when cleanliness and maintenance are lacking, it makes them feel as though their ridership and travel experience are less valued. Table 11 shows specific locations where cleanliness and maintenance of amenities were reported. GCRTA maintains a large inventory of shelters, varying in design across their routes and service areas.

Table 4. Cleanliness & Maintenance Concerns by Station and/or Area Location from Focus Groups

Station/Area Location	Problem/Situation
Bus Stops on Kinsman Ave (Route #14)	Consistent dirt, grime & overflowing trash.
Bus Shelters on E. 55th Street	Individuals vandalize the bus shelters.
Superior Rapid Station	Windows are consistently shattered.

Transfers & Connections



The community focus groups highlighted issues with the GCRTA's transfer policy. Many customers were unaware of the actual policy and received conflicting information from operators and fellow passengers, which would lead to hostile interactions and potentially additional fares. Concerns were also raised about the adequacy of the transfer time, especially on the weekends when frequency is more limited and can cause passengers to wait beyond the allotted 2.5-hour transfer window time due to delays or missed trips. These issues are crucial when discussing barriers, as those earning below the poverty threshold are more likely to rely on transfers within the system.

Table 12 highlights specific locations within the system that were identified through engagement that had concerns with either connections or transfer points. On busier routes, some buses would pass stops without verifying if passengers may be waiting, particularly if another bus is currently stopped at the designated stop. This was more likely to occur downtown, where bus stops pick up passengers for more than just one route. This situation can impact riders' ability to complete their journey if they are trying to transfer to a specific line.

Table 5. Transfer and Connection Concerns by Station and/or Area Location from Focus Groups

Station/Area Location	Problem/Situation
Route #55 (Cleveland State University BRT)	The bus seems consistently late.
E. 3rd and Rockwell Avenue	Operators may not allow customers to board during layover.
E. 140th and Nell Avenue	No bus stop signs or shelter and is frequently skipped by operators.
Southgate Transit Center	Akron METRO vehicles do not stop near the transit center, increasing the walk time between transfers from GCRTA and METRO.
Bus Stops that serve multiple bus lines	Not all buses clear stops before passing, potentially leaving passengers stranded.

Safety



During engagement many transit users noted that they did not feel safe waiting for the bus, and about half of customers felt it was unsafe either waiting for or riding the Rapid. Discussions about perceived and physical safety, as well as the accessibility of the transit system were routinely mentioned as safety remains the top concern for riders.

Participants across focus groups expressed the need for security improvements, wanting additional cameras and emergency buttons at bus shelters to offer more security and a sense of reassurance.

Perception of safety

Maintenance of transit shelters and rapid stops impacts the general perception of safety. Customers felt that graffiti, broken glass, or other forms of property damage reduce their sense of security and safety, particularly at rapid stations where you are further from the street and potentially isolated while waiting on the rail platform. Ensuring the upkeep of areas is essential to fostering a sense of security and comfort for all passengers.

Physical Safety

Transit Police, Transit Ambassadors, and Crisis Intervention Specialists provide physical safety and security to the GCRTA transit system. Transit Police's mission is to provide a safe and orderly environment within the transit system, while Transit Ambassadors provide progressive policing and community engagement by integrating unarmed professionals to handle non-criminal issues. The Crisis Intervention Specialists are licensed social workers that work with both Transit Police and Transit Ambassadors to address mental health, crisis, and substance abuse issues on the transit system. Focus group attendees were appreciative of what these three groups provide and generally feel safer with them on-board. Community members pointed out that transit ambassadors bring an additional physical presence but are only on selective lines and may not be accessible when needed. Similarly, Crisis Intervention Specialists and Transit Police are not always present when a situation unfolds. The expansion of these programs was well regarded among focus group attendees that spoke on this topic.

Accessibility and Safety

Women, seniors, and individuals with disabilities stated that waiting for fixed route buses, particularly in the evening, is a safety concern. Riders who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices described challenges accessing transit shelters and bus stops due to narrow sidewalks and shelters placed too close to curbs or buildings. There were also concerns over elevator access at rapid stations and frequent closures, limiting accessibility and creating unsafe conditions. Seating near the front of the vehicle are reserved for seniors and disabled individuals. However, some passengers refuse to vacate these seats, creating tension on board and leading to conflicts and unsafe riding conditions.

Passengers traveling with infants or young children expressed frustration with the policy requiring the child to be removed from the stroller while on the bus. They felt it is both unsafe and inefficient, as they can keep the stroller out of the aisles without endangering or disturbing their child. These issues have resulted in altercations with operators or other passengers, and in some cases, passengers with children have missed their trips or choose not to utilize transit because of these concerns.

Table 13 highlights specific locations within the system that were identified through engagement that were noted to have highlighted safety and access concerns in the system.

Table 6. Safety Concerns by Station and/or Area Location from Focus Groups

Station/Area Location	Problem/Situation
HealthLine Vehicles	Consistently broken handicapped seats.
E. 79th St and Cedar Bus Shelter	Described as an unsafe area that some riders avoid.
E. 79th Street Shelters (Route #2)	More interior shelter lighting is needed for security.
E. 71st and Harvard Ave Bus Shelter	Described as an unsafe area that some riders avoid.
Shaker and Chargin Bus Shelter	Loitering.
E. 55th Street Rapid Station	The station elevator is consistently out of service.
Tower Rapid Station	High step off train.
Triskett Rapid Station	Unhoused individuals.
West Park Rapid Station	Unhoused individuals.
Downtown Public Square/Tower City Rapid Station	Loitering
City of Maple Heights	Shelters are too small and close to the curb, limiting wheelchair access.
City of Garfield Heights	Additional shelters are needed in Garfield Heights.

Service Availability



Throughout our community engagement, most customers felt that GCRTA gets them to their final destination. Several focus group participants expressed interest in wanting to access locations on the outskirts of the current service area, including Solon, Twinsburg, Macedonia, Lorain, Brunswick, and Medina. These areas are growing and have many job opportunities.

During the community focus groups, participants urged GCRTA to increase operating hours, particularly for later in the night for additional workforce shifts and to continue to monitor new workforce destinations, such as Amazon facilities that are located in hard to access areas.

Table 14 indicates specific locations or transit services that were mentioned in engagement that could be further evaluated for an increase in service availability.

Table 7. Service Availability Concerns by Station and/or Area Location

Station/Area Location	Problem/Situation
Route #2	Expand hours of operation for Steelyard Commons access.
Route #7-7A	Add 24-hour service to access Taylor Road.
Route #41	Overcrowding.
HealthLine	Overcrowding.
E. 55th Street	Additional service on E. 55th Street to Steelyard Commons, particularly near the Hyacinth Neighborhood.
IX Center	There is no access to the IX center.
Lorain, Macedonia, & Twinsburg Areas	GCRTA does not serve these job centers.
City of Solon	Limited bus service to Solon.

Communication & Service Information



GCRTA connects customers both in-person and digitally. There are currently three ways to directly connect, through an online form, the GCRTA Community Connection Line via telephone, or the Customer Service Center located in Downtown at the Tower City Rapid Station. In addition, customers can find schedules and other printed materials available on transit vehicles and online. The agency also communicates digitally via the Transit App, social media pages, and through service announcements on vehicles.

Customer Service

GCRTA's Community Connection Line is a resource that provides riders with multiple ways to submit feedback, including an online form, via email, or in-person at the Tower City Rapid Station Customer Service Center and GCRTA's main office in Downtown Cleveland. At the community focus groups, many passengers did not feel the need to voice any of their complaints or concerns because they felt that it would not make a difference. Many expressed that follow-through is lacking in all ways of communication. Through bus stops and community events engagement, some customers expressed appreciation that GCRTA met them in their community and had the opportunity to discuss their concerns.

Service Communications

Through engagement efforts, customers felt that routes and schedules could be better explained and in larger font, especially for those with vision impairments. Detours, particularly in the downtown vicinity, should be standardized so riders can anticipate changes and be communicated with more effectively. Passengers felt that detours were announced at the last minute, despite events being known and advertised in advance, and that detours consistently change and are not standardized to the customer. This leads to confusion and missed trips.

Summary of Identified Barriers

These key themes and supporting data help understand the complexity and overall situation of the identified transit barriers. Through engagement and research, these themes limit individuals and families in persistent poverty from using public transit which can potentially lead to more expensive forms of transportation or missed opportunities due to the lack of transportation access.

From Barriers to Solutions: Learning from Peer Agencies

Recognizing that these challenges are not unique to Cuyahoga County, the following section highlights how peer transit agencies have bridged similar gaps through innovative programs and policy changes in communities across the nation.

As part of this research, the following peer transit agencies were examined:

- Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT)
- Cincinnati Metro
- Los Angeles (LA) Metro
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)
- San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA)
- Metro Transit (Minneapolis–St. Paul)
- New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)

These agencies were selected for their innovative practices in addressing transit barriers similar to those identified through the Bridging Possibilities engagement process. While several of these agencies operate at a significantly larger scale than Cleveland, their approaches to partnership development, research, and issue identification offer valuable insights that align with the findings of this initiative.

Table 8. Peer Review Highlights for Fare Structures and Policies

Transit Agency	Highlights
Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT)	• Extended transfer windows to 3 hours. • Reduced and standardized fees for paper tickets.
Cincinnati Metro	• Launch of Fare Capping. • Children Ride Free Program.
Los Angeles (LA) Metro	• Universal Basic Mobility Program in collaboration with LA Department of Transportation (LADOT) for all mobility types. • Station Evaluation Program with a special focus on equity communities. • Develops an annual Customer Experience Plan to highlight improvements and accountability for customers.
Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)	• Zero Fare Program for residents living near or below poverty line. • Piloting a Stroller Spot Program on select routes.

Table 8. Peer Review Highlights for Fare Structures and Policies Continued

Transit Agency	Highlights
San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA)	- Utilizes an external vendor to assist in shelter cleaning program. - Provides multiple ways for customer feedback, including 311 and App-based programs.
Metro Transit (Minneapolis–St. Paul)	Better Bus Stop Program to guide eligibility for shelter improvements and incentives for organizational involvement.
New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)	Provide designated Open Stroller areas on buses, separate from wheelchair securement areas at the front of the bus.

Adjustments to Fare Structures and Policies

Fare media is a common challenge that many transit agencies have faced, particularly in a post-COVID and ever-changing technology centric world. Several agencies have made changes to standardize policies, including fare capping, transfer timing, or payment structure. The following transit agencies recently changed their fare structure and payment system based on public feedback and their agencies strategic goals.

Pittsburgh Regional Transit

The PRT Title VI Fare Equity Analysis found that minority riders and low-income riders are more likely to transfer to complete a trip, with 31% of minority riders and 35% of low-income riders. To alleviate these potential hardships, PRT sought to create a more equitable system, while maintaining satisfactory farebox recovery levels based on a review of their fare structure and policies. From 2019 to 2022, the agency made several changes that benefited both minority and low-income populations. This included:

- Removed added fees for paper tickets.
- Changed the transfer policy to include unlimited rides in a three-hour transfer window.
- Shifted weekly and monthly passes to activate on first use rather than a specific week or month.

Cincinnati Metro

In July 2025, Cincinnati Metro launched several initiatives to change their fare structure to benefit transit users and their families, including an Account Based Ticketing (ABT) Tap & Save program and a Children Ride Free policy. Tap and Save allows riders to use the Transit App or their EZfare Smartcards to participate in fare capping, charging no more than a day or monthly pass on Local and Express routes. This allows customers to make transit decisions based on their trip, and not the financial implications.

The new Children Ride Free policy allows up to two children under 55 inches to ride for free with a fare paying adult. Height indicators were installed on buses to help operators and customers determine who is eligible quickly and to promote the program on vehicles. This was integrated within their fare policies based on their Title VI Analysis and what they heard as priorities from their customers.

Cincinnati Metro started a strong marketing campaign, which included a website, press releases, and monthly newsletter to subscribers. The agency utilized its social media platforms and integrated YouTube videos to increase awareness of the new policies. Transit App and EZfare also promoted Tap & Save's benefits on their devices and appeared in local media to emphasize how the changes improved affordability and equity.

LA Metro and LA Department of Transportation (LADOT)

To reduce the cost of transportation, LADOT created the Universal Basic Mobility (UBM) pilot program. This initiative focused on a specific region of South LA where 29% of households live below the poverty line. A central feature of the UBM program is the Mobility Wallet pilot, jointly administered by LA Metro and LADOT.

The Mobility Wallet provided \$1,800 on a pre-paid card to each eligible participant over a 12-month period to support their transportation needs. The card can be used across a wide range of modes, including:

- Metro Bus, rail and Microtransit, as well as city bus services
- Bikeshare, e-scooters, and e-bikes
- Metrolink commuter rail
- Taxi and regional transportation (Greyhound, Amtrak and FlixBus)
- Transportation network companies (Uber and Lyft)
- Purchases at local bike shops

LADOT and LA Metro determined eligibility based on address and either household income or participation in an existing assistance program such as EBT, SNAP, social security, as well as others.

Similar to the requirements to apply for Mobility Wallet, LA Metro's Low-Income Fare Easy (LIFE) program provides county residents within a certain income bracket of 90 days of free transit rides at the first issuance of the TAP card. From then on participants in the program receive 20 free regional rides each month with the added benefit of purchasing discounted fare products and ride free after a certain number of rides. The Life Programs application is simple, straightforward, and allows you to self-certify your income should you not be able to provide documentation. Providing these fare benefits have also aided in the distribution of TAP cards within neighborhoods of persistent poverty.

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

The Zero Fare program is a two-year pilot program launched by the City of Philadelphia in partnership with SEPTA that began in Summer 2023. The program provides free transit services to more than 25,000 residents living near or below the poverty line.

Unlike similar programs, participants do not apply. Instead, pre-activated Zero Fare Key cards are mailed directly to eligible Philadelphia residents. Approximately 90% of participants are randomly selected through a lottery system based on income, age, and residency criteria. The remaining 10% are enrolled through community-based organizations, which help connect individuals who are not eligible for automatic enrollment. These participants receive their Key cards directly through the organization or via mail upon request.

Transit Infrastructure, Cleanliness, and Maintenance

Maintaining a robust shelter and transit center cleaning program is a large endeavor for most transit agencies. While cleaning protocols are in place, balancing available resources has proven difficult with limited staff, inclement weather, and constant use and can lead to trash accumulation, dirt and grime buildup, as well as odors.

LA Metro

As part of Metro's commitment to customer experience, in 2020 they launched a Station Evaluation Program, which performs inspections on 143 busway and rail stations to ensure they are clean, safe, and functional. This is in addition to the routine cleaning of facilities to ensure these major stations remain in a state of good repair. In addition, Metro tracks stations that serve Equity Focus Communities separately. This verifies the same standard inspection criteria that is used and allows staff to maintain close communication and conduct in-person spot checks to ensure issues are found, addressed, and resolved in a timely manner.

San Francisco Municipal Transit Authority

SFMTA provides shelter cleaning through a vendor, Clear Channel Outdoor. In 2023, this vendor completed roughly 15,000 baseline cleanings per month. Approximately half of the more than 1,200 shelters were cleaned 12 or more times a month based on feedback from the transit agency. This vendor is also responsible for maintenance, including repairing shelter lighting, glass replacements, and seat work orders.

SFMTA also provides multiple ways for customers to report a dirty shelter, including its own MuniMobile App, and the 311 San Francisco Customer Service Center. These two ways include options to provide a precise address or intersection, description of the problem, and attach photos of the report to help illustrate the issue.

Metro Transit

Serving the Twin Cities region, Metro Transit's Better Bus Stops program enhances the customers experience by installing boarding pads, improving pedestrian connections, and adding or replacing shelters. Many shelters are also upgraded with lighting and/or radiant heat, alongside regular cleaning and maintenance.

Improvements are guided by clear criteria. A bus shelter is eligible to be installed at stops with 20 or more daily boardings, with priority given to locations that involve transfers, advance equity, and serve important community destinations. Site feasibility is based on available space, slope, and obstructions. Lighting is added to stops with documented safety concerns and high evening ridership, while heating is reserved for shelters with at least 70 average daily boardings. The agency provides an interactive map showing each planned improvement with details on when the work is expected to be completed by.

Metro's Adopt-A-Stop program provides individuals or organizations to assist them by visiting a stop routinely and alerting Metro of any maintenance needs and reporting vandalism or suspicious activity. Any stop is available to adopt including bus rapid transit (BRT) stations, light rail stations, Northstar stations, transit centers, and Park & Rides. Each adopted stop has a sign displaying the person or organization's name or short slogan. Additionally, 10 free rides are provided monthly as a thank you.

Empowering Community Voices

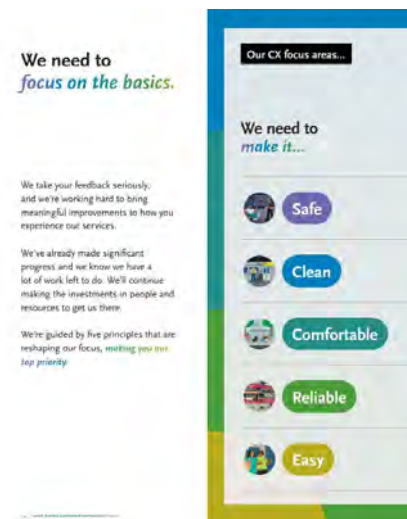
LA Metro

LA Metro has created a customer experience annual plan to openly share with customers how they are listening, what they are learning, and where they are improving. This external facing, highly graphic and data heavy report is a way to highlight everyday Metro employees that work to improve a customer's trip and quantifies the changes that the agency has made to make each trip better. Metro knows that the experience continues to evolve and uses this annual plan to showcase improvements that have already been made and how they can continue to shape their work in the future.

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

SEPTA surveyed nearly 3,000 riders to better understand the challenges of traveling with children on public transit. In response they launched a pilot program called "Stroller Spots", which designates a dedicated space on select vehicles for passengers with children and strollers. According to SEPTA officials, the cost of implementing this program was minimal, as they used existing vehicles and removed two seats towards the center of the vehicle to create the space on select routes.

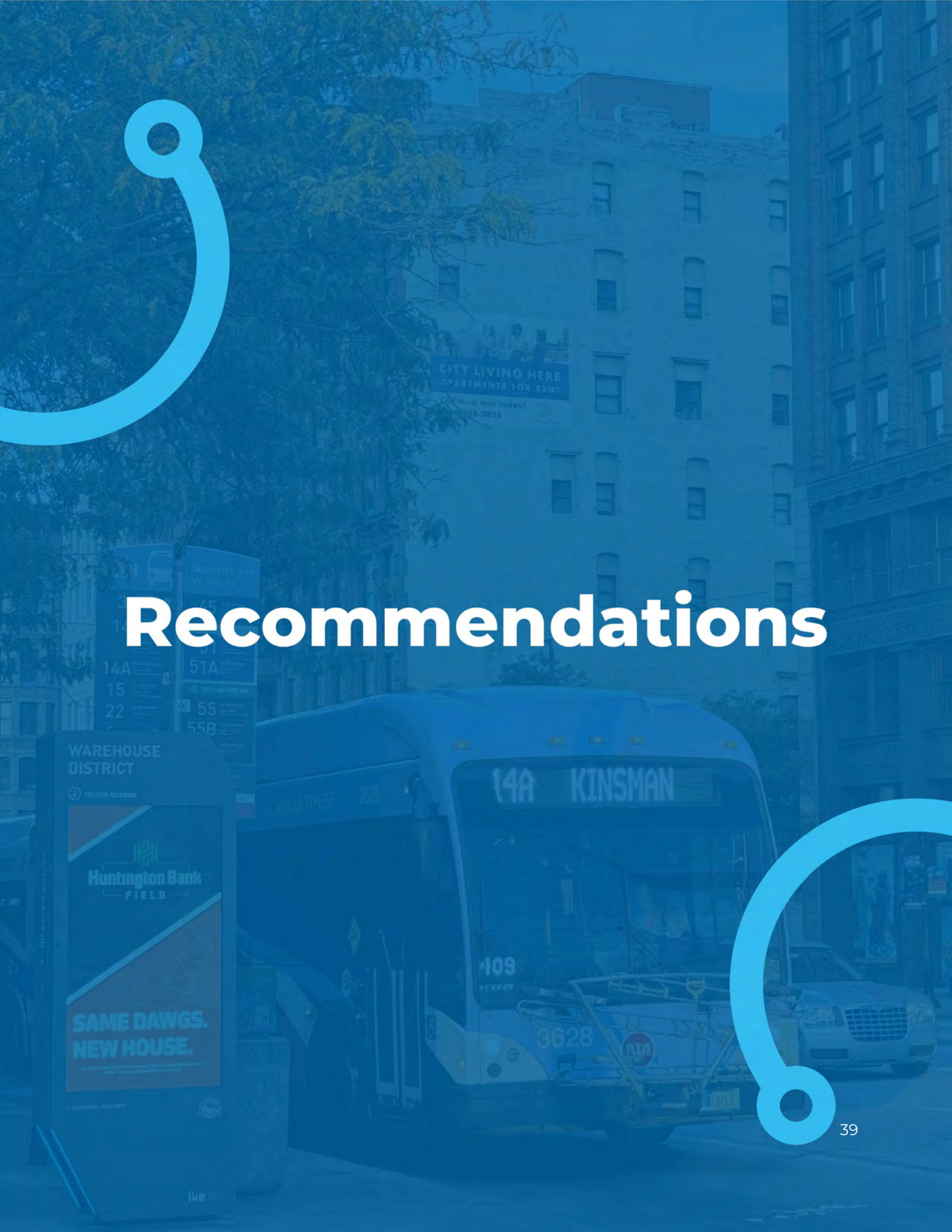
This initiative stems from the SEPTA 2023 Micromobility Playbook, which outlined recommendations to improve accommodations for micromobility devices frequently used by riders. In addition to the Stroller Spots program, SEPTA is exploring enhancements to its trip planner to include features that estimate availability of space for bicycles and strollers to help families plan their journeys more effectively.



Source: LA Metro CX Plan 2022

New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority

As the largest transit agency in the country, New York City's MTA operates the most extensive dedicated stroller parking pilot program. Launched in 2022, the initiative was developed through an advisory group of bus operators, disability advocates, and caregivers who regularly travel with strollers. The pilot began with 142 buses across seven lines and expanded in 2023 to over 1,000 buses on 57 routes, representing approximately 15% of MTA's bus fleet. The MTA clearly marks designated stroller areas with decals and creates them by utilizing two side-by-side seats that can flip up. On some vehicles, the space is located near the rear door. To help riders identify participating vehicles, a stroller decal is placed on the bus exterior. This program did not reduce the number of wheelchair spaces in the front of the vehicle. Since the program rollout, MTA has received over 200 public comments on its stroller policy via an online feedback form, with 80% of responses expressing support. During the first phase, bus operators recorded more than 4,000 stroller boardings with no reported safety incidents or conflicts, highlighting the program's success in improving accessibility for families.



Recommendations

Transit Barrier Framework

The identified transit barriers highlight a range of challenges that those in persistent poverty face when using public transit. Each barrier represents a factor that can negatively impact the rider experience and reduce the likelihood of using transit as a reliable means to access opportunities and improve economic mobility. While some of these challenges may be easily addressed, others are more complex and need to be evaluated based on feasibility and impact on the overall transit network. In addition, some barriers will require extensive stakeholder collaboration and resources, which may need further evaluation for successful implementation.

The identified barriers were analyzed by determining the feasibility and impact of each barrier to GCRTA and the overall transit network. This analysis revealed actionable barriers which also offered high value to those in persistent poverty. Each barrier was evaluated based on:

- Authority and autonomy for implementation
- Customer Satisfaction
- Resources
- Service Improvement
- Implementation Complexity
- Ridership Potential

These measures are based on the information obtained through community engagement, internal engagement, and evaluated research and data. The goal of this evaluation was to identify barriers that represent high feasibility and high impact for both the transit agency and customers. Barriers with high feasibility and impact are strong candidates for future investment. Barriers that excel in either feasibility or impact may also be considered, as they aligned with the GCRTA Strategic Plan and are important based on public feedback.



Barrier Feasibility

Barrier Feasibility assesses and evaluates implementing a solution is realistically achievable for both GCRTA and its transit users. It includes three factors:

- Authority and Autonomy for implementation
- Resources
- Implementation Complexity

Barrier Feasibility

Barrier Feasibility assesses and evaluates implementing a solution is realistically achievable for both GCRTA and its transit users. It includes three factors:

Authority and Autonomy for Implementation

Changes can be implemented independently or coordination is needed.

Resources

Assess financial costs and investments that are required.

Implementation Complexity

Can changes be easily made or is policy and operational shifts required.

Barrier Impact

Barrier Impact measures how effectively a solution addresses the barrier and improves rider experience. Impact can be more qualitative than quantitative when determining its outcomes. Its three factors include:

- Customer Satisfaction
- Service Improvement
- Ridership Potential

Barrier Impact

Barrier Impact measures how effectively a solution addresses the barrier and improves rider experience. Impact can be more qualitative than quantitative when determining its outcomes. Its three factors include:

Customer Satisfaction

Overall customer experience while utilizing transit services.

Service Improvement

Operational benefits of service quality, reliability, and overall transit efficiency.

Ridership Potential

Increase in ridership from barrier impacts and changes.

Recommendations

There are opportunities within the transit network that could alleviate financial and social hardships while potentially increasing transit usage and change the narrative of transit in communities. These opportunities could provide economic relief for customers through fare media enhancements, investing and beautifying neighborhood transit stops to create a safe and inviting place for residents, and to connect with the community and listen to families who ride transit to continue to improve their transit experience.

Economic Relief

Poverty throughout Cuyahoga County illustrates the need for economic relief, with more than one in four census tracts in the County and over half in the City of Cleveland experiencing persistent poverty.

Overview & Key Challenges

GCRTA provides a variety of fare media options to accommodate different rider needs, including digital app-based fares, paper tickets, and cash payments. Depending on the fare type, available passes may include single-ride, single-ride with transfer, 5-ride, All-Day, 7-day and monthly passes. Each fare media platform also varies in how it manages transfers. The intent behind offering multiple-fare formats is to give riders flexible choices that best suit their transit needs. However, to access the most cost-effective fare for each trip, riders must adhere to a fixed schedule or have funds to purchase a monthly pass in advance, limiting flexibility throughout the day and creating additional hardships to transit users.

GCRTA is in the process of introducing changes in its fare collection system to minimize costs and improve customer experience by simplifying the fare media options. Elements of the improved fare system include:

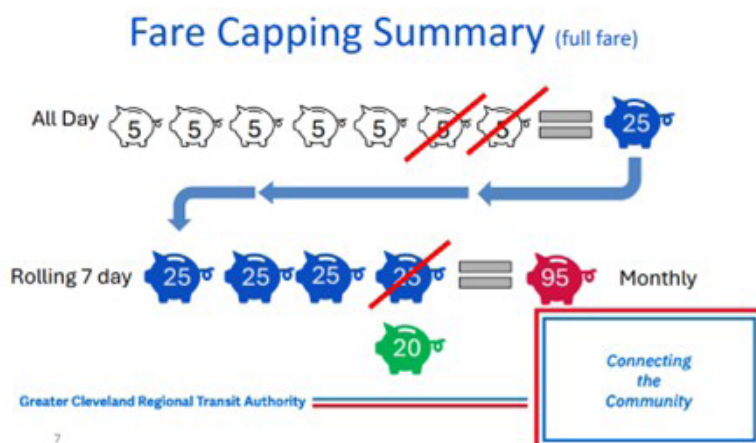
- Implementation of ABT
- Fare capping
- Updates to fare media

The 2019 Fare Equity Study recommended implementation of ABT and fare capping, showing that riders were paying more daily and/or weekly, and not taking advantage of the savings that a 7-day day or monthly pass would enable. This ABT process allows customers to be linked to an account and tap to ride. Fares do not exceed the daily, weekly, or monthly maximum set by GCRTA. This would also allow for fare capping, enabling customers to benefit from paying for transit trips as needed, but not needing to pay in advance for an all-day, 7-day, or monthly pass. Fare capping improves equity by allowing riders who typically pay per-trip or per-day to never pay more than the price of an all-day, 7-day, or monthly pass in those dedicated pass time frames.

In addition to financially benefiting customers, ABT provides valuable benefits for the transit agency, including:

- Faster boarding times
- Collaboration with other partnerships
- Lower operational costs by reduced cash handling
- Data that can be used to optimize transit services
- Additional flexibility for future fare products

Transit is an essential service. However, as ABT continues to be deployed through a variety of transit agencies, discussions persist if this is still an equitable approach. According to the 2023 FDIC Household Survey, 4.2% of U.S. households were unbanked, meaning no one in the household had a checking or savings account at a bank or credit union. Despite this number falling over the years, unbanked rates among Black, Hispanic, and American Indian or Alaska Native households remain several times higher than the unbanked rate among White households.



Source: Fare Modernization Presentation to Committee of the Whole, 02/04/2025

Travel patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic showed who depends on public transit the most, essential workers in industries that require in-person interaction and riders from historically disadvantaged communities. In addition to concerns over banking access, the current political climate could present challenges when registering transit customers. Given transit agencies' affiliation with government entities, some riders – particularly those with uncertain documentation status – may feel hesitant or distrustful about sharing personal information.

Strategic Recommendations

GCRTA's current fare media provides a range of options that meet the needs of most riders. However, peer agencies have demonstrated how refining fare structures, transfer policies, and outreach can better serve their customers. While GCRTA's existing policies are effective for many, there are opportunities for improvement.

1. Maintain the Value of Transit

To preserve this value, it is recommended that GCRTA maintain fare consistency and continue investing in the transit system. Throughout the engagement process, the existing fare structure for transit in Cleveland was consistently recognized as fair relative to the value of services provided.

2. Standardize Transfer Policy with all Fare Media

GCRTA should standardize the fare policy to allow all fare media to have the same opportunity to transfer within the standard transfer window. Any fare media or transfer policies changes should have a robust communications campaign to inform the public of the changes or benefits of alternative fare media.

The 2024 Operator Manual states that customers using one-, two-, and five-trip farecards receive one free transfer within 2.5 hours of boarding the original trip. However, further investigation of fare media shows that one-trip cards do not include a transfer, but rather one-ride cards do. In addition, if paying via the EZfare app, individuals purchasing mobile passes have an opportunity to transfer, creating an unequitable opportunity for those that are unbanked or do not use a mobile device.

Due to this inconsistency and confusion surrounding the multiple-fare types, operators and customers do not have a clear understanding of transfers. Currently, the only fare types that do not accept a free transfer are cash one-way fares and a one-trip paper ticket, giving preference to those who use mobile one-way fare media or customers who can pay for more than one-trip at a time.



Operator Manual

Section 510: Fare Collection

510.11.8.4 One-, Two-, and Five-trip farecards:

- a. Customers may transfer to another RTA route for 2 ½ hours after boarding the first vehicle without additional charge.
- b. After the 2 ½ hour period, an additional ride will be deducted for the card.
- c. If all of the rides on the card have been used, the card will read "Transfer Only". Allow the passenger to board if it is before the time indicated on the farecard.
- d. If all the rides on the card have been used, the farecard will have "NO RIDES" printed down the side of the card after it has been inserted into the farebox. Do not allow the passenger to board without a payment of fare.

3. Increase Transfer Window from 2.5 hours to 3 Hours

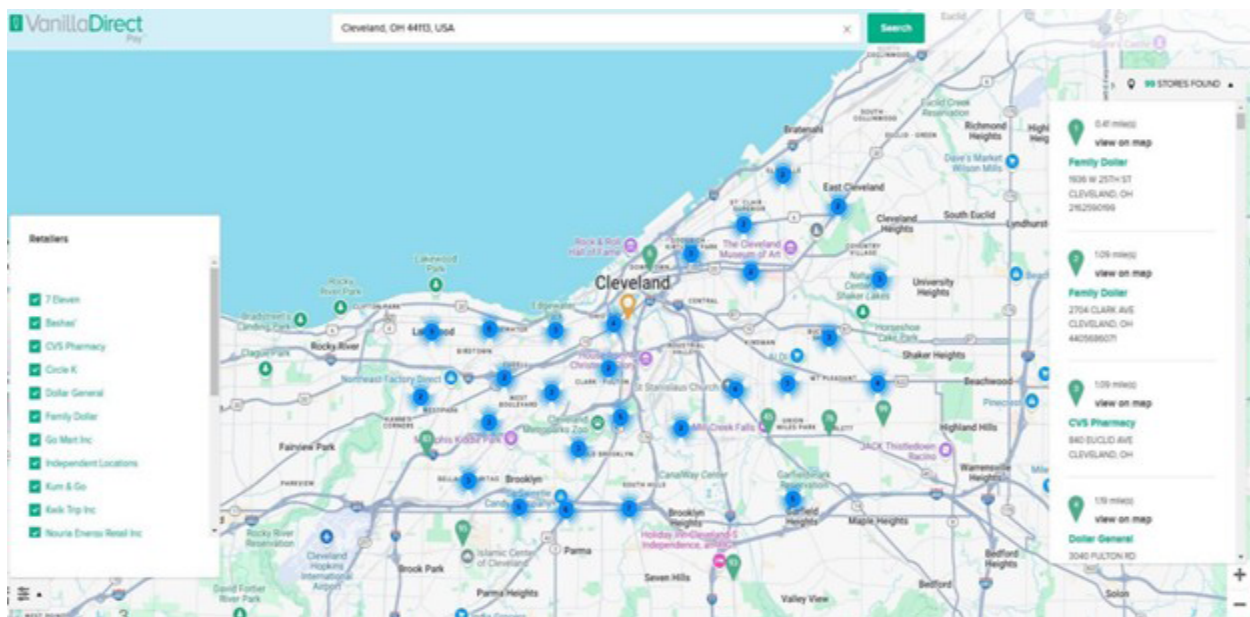
GCRTA should consider adjusting the transfer window from 2.5 hours to 3 hours to allow transit customers to accommodate transfers during all time points throughout the system. Currently, a transfer provides riders two and a half hours to transfer, depending on fare media type. The transfer time was found to be a barrier due to varying transit schedules and service frequencies, particularly during weekday evening hours and weekends for shift workers and reroutes due to special events.

4. Develop an Approach for Account Based Ticketing Implementation

GCRTA should develop an equitable approach to use ABT as a tool to improve equity by creating a working taskforce of stakeholders and riders prior to ABT and fare capping system roll-out. The objective of this taskforce is to reduce the potential of ABT as a barrier but instead be used as tool to improve equity and connect with communities who need transit the most. Through engagement, it was found that customers who may live in areas of persistent poverty were less likely to utilize the transit app or digital fare media due to the lack of understanding and knowledge. This recommendation is to increase the likeliness and understanding of the benefits of moving from a cash fare payment to utilizing digital fares.

This approach should focus and highlight existing partnerships to connect with employers and community institutions to better serve customers. This study has continued to improve and build relationships within the community that can be leveraged for ABT. GCRTA currently sells fare media through a variety of retail networks and VanillaDirect. However, a substantial portion of the central east side of City of Cleveland does not have active retailers that provide options for fare media. With ABT, expanding this network to include community centers and stakeholder institutions, particularly in areas where VanillaDirect is not available, can expand transit access and availability.

In addition to expanding partnerships, GCRTA can explore cost-effective strategies to encourage adoption of ABT. These could include offering discounted physical smartcards or providing fare discounts based on rider entitlements or concessions tailored to specific groups. For customers who are unwilling to register, an alternative option could be a pre-paid smartcard. This approach would reduce onboard cash handling, enable fare capping, and still deliver operational and financial benefits to the transit agency.



Source: Fare Modernization Presentation to Committee of the Whole, 02/04/2025
(<https://www.riderta.com/sites/default/files/events/2025-02-04FareCappingPresentation.pdf>)

5. Develop a Cuyahoga Mobility Wallet Pilot Program

GCRTA should develop a pilot program to provide low- and no-income residents with seamless, subsidized access to multiple modes of transportation, such as public transit, bikeshare, and regional transit systems through a unified digital platform. This pilot program can target residents below a certain income threshold to provide transportation, economic relief, and potentially subsidize access with governmental partnerships, such as the City of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County.

Economic Relief Recommendations:



1. Preserve the value of transit.
2. Standardize and clearly communicate transfer policies.
3. Evaluate and adjust transfer windows for equity and ease.
4. Implement fare capping through an equitable outreach strategy to improve affordability.
5. Develop and launch a Mobility Wallet Pilot Program.



Timeframe

Short
2026 - 2028

- Improve fare communication across platforms.
- Partner with stakeholders to distribute fare media in underserved areas.
- Promote use of EZFare and Transit App for fare access and updates in underserved areas.
- Form a taskforce to guide equity-focused fare capping implementation.

Medium
2029 - 2031

- Launch fare capping system

Long
2032 - 2034

- Continuously evaluate and adjust the service network based on community needs.
- Mobility Wallet Pilot Program



Responsibilities

Champion: GRCTA

- Programming and Planning
- Customer Experience
- Service Management
- Office of Management and Budget
- Revenue

Supporting Partners:

- Community Stakeholders
- City of Cleveland
- Municipalities
- Cuyahoga County

Community Investment and Beautification

The City of Cleveland consists of 34 distinct neighborhood communities and is part of Cuyahoga County, which includes 59 municipalities. Many of these areas are served by transit routes and feature physical transit infrastructure such as shelters, stations, and transit centers within their communities. Providing amenities at transit waiting areas helps ensure customers have a safe and comfortable place to wait. Features such as shelters, seating, lighting, trash receptacles, and concrete pads are highly valued. Transit customers consistently express a desire for these amenities at all transit locations.

Overview and Key Challenges

GCRTA has over 8,000 bus stops and 1,000 shelters throughout the county. The responsibility of the infrastructure upkeep needs to be considered to continue these community investments and provide a safe place for customers. Currently, GCRTA is responsible for maintaining the physical shelter, bus stop pole, and signage throughout the system. The municipality is responsible for general maintenance surrounding the shelter, including trash removal if a receptacle is provided. In the winter, municipalities pass the responsibility of maintenance during and after snowfall to landowners of adjacent parcels. With over 59 communities within the county, developing relationships and monitoring this policy has been challenging and directly impacting the quality of bus stop amenities to riders.

GCRTA Facility Maintenance team cleans shelters daily, depending on the routine schedule and specific customer complaints. Certain shelter and transit amenities, such as the HealthLine Stations and some rapid stations, are cleaned daily due to property ownership and high ridership. Other shelter cleanings occur either weekly or bi-weekly, with the goal of reaching every shelter within the system quarterly. Facility Maintenance staff also maintains a spreadsheet of shelters that are cleaned consistently. Staff update this list based on their experience and customer service and partnership requests. Regardless of the shelter cleaning schedule, if a customer reports an unclean shelter to the RTA Community Connection Line, that specific shelter is cleaned within 24 hours.

Strategic Recommendations

Facility Maintenance should continue to provide frequent cleaning of shelters and continue to prioritize shelters based on customer data. The recommendations below highlight ways to improve communication with municipalities and customers and provide accountability to customers.

1. Municipal Coordination and 311 Integration

The City of Cleveland recently relaunched their 311 system – giving City residents a way to communicate within their ward. This system could offer an additional way for transit riders to report community shelters and provide community support to encourage bus stop cleanliness. Developing a streamlined approach to customer service feedback, specifically for cleanliness and maintenance, could encourage riders to report issues. This feature would be in addition to the online customer complaint form and RTA Community Connection Line.

The cleanliness of the transit system is important to customers and GCRTA. GCRTA is relying on customers and municipalities to report unclean shelters via the RTA Community Connection Line or using an online complaint form. However, it is important to also increase coordination between municipalities to continue to maintain safe and clean transit environments within communities. Municipalities are relied on for garbage and general maintenance around a bus shelter. This coordination and partnership needs to be reestablished through a memorandum of understanding and promoted within Customer Experience and External Affairs to better understand roles and responsibilities. Increasing coordination with municipalities is key to ensuring a transit stop continues to be a safe place for transit passengers.

2. Enhanced Neighborhood Transit Stops with Community Partnership

Customers, stakeholders, and communities all want continued investment of transit amenities. GCRTA should work with identified stakeholders and community partners to improve the right of way within highly used transit areas to create a safe accessibility and improved waiting environments. Prioritizing investments can be challenging. GCRTA has two community programs that help alleviate demand and improve transit waiting environments for their customers. This includes:

Adopt-a-Shelter

- Available for an individual or community group that is interested in helping GCRTA maintain a pre-existing shelter, from debris cleaning to removing snow.

Community Partner Investment Program

- Allow individuals, businesses, or organizations to provide funds to GCRTA for the purchase of a new shelter at a bus stop of their choosing. GCRTA will order the shelter, install it, and maintain it in accordance with their standards.

Currently the GCRTA shelter policy supports investment at stops with an average daily boarding of more than 30 passengers. However, findings from engagement and research highlight that transfers and route connections are critical components of the transit experience – especially for individuals experiencing poverty. To promote equity in decision-making, GCRTA should expand its criteria beyond average boardings to also include stops and routes with high transfer activity, multiple route connections, and locations identified as areas of persistent poverty.

Four locations have been identified that can use community support to aid up to 80 transit users a day per stop, in addition to transfers, as they utilize transit to access their destinations.

3. West 65th Street and Lorain Avenue Transit Waiting Environments

The intersection of West 65th Street and Lorain Avenue is located on Cleveland's near west side. It is a standard four-way intersection featuring a dedicated left-turn lane, two through lanes, and bicycle sharrows. Recently rehabilitated over the past two years, the intersection includes a southbound bus stop on West 65th Street that averages 85 daily boardings. This stop serves Routes 25 and 71 and is located within a quarter mile of the Red Line West 65th Rapid Station.

This intersection can be further improved for the community and safety of transit riders by including the following elements:

- **Install additional benches** outside of existing shelters where space and site conditions are allowed.
- **Construct a concrete landing pad** at the northbound West 65th Street bus stop to enhance accessibility.
- **Upgrade existing shelters** and incorporate community-inspired artwork to reflect neighborhood identity.
- **Add more City of Cleveland-branded trash receptacles** to enhance cleanliness and visual consistency.

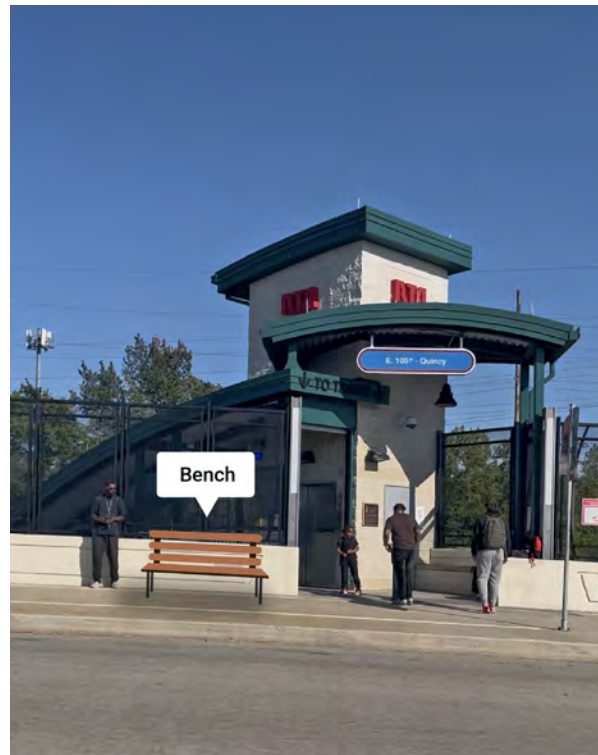


4. East 105th Street and Quincy Avenue Transit Waiting Environments

The intersection of East 105th Street and Quincy Avenue is located on Cleveland's east side, along the newly constructed Opportunity Corridor near the Cleveland Innovation District. This four-way intersection includes two travel lanes and a dedicated turn lane on East 105th Street, while Quincy Avenue features three lanes, including a dedicated turn lane onto East 105th. Due to its location on a bridge over a rail right-of-way, the area presents topographical and curvature challenges that can limit visibility for pedestrians crossing the street. Bus stop facilities are located on three corners of the intersection, including the northbound East 105th Street stop, which averages 82 daily boardings. This stop serves Routes 8, 10, and 11 and is situated directly adjacent to the Red Line East 105th Rapid Station.

This intersection can be further improved for the community and safety of transit riders by including some of the following elements:

- **Install seating amenities** at the northbound East 105th Street bus stop adjacent to the East 105th Street Rapid Station.
- **Add additional City of Cleveland-branded trash receptacles** to enhance cleanliness and visual consistency of responsibility.
- **Collaborate with the City of Cleveland and adjacent property owners** to improve lighting at the eastbound Quincy Avenue bus stop near the rail bridge overpass.
- **Partner with the City of Cleveland and nearby landowners** to clear overgrown shrubs and weeds that obstruct sightlines at the eastbound Quincy Avenue bus stop near the bridge overpass.



5. Lakeshore Boulevard and East 152nd Street Transit Waiting Environments

The intersection at Lakeshore Boulevard and East 152nd Street is a unique intersection where Lakeshore Boulevard curves and continues in another direction. East 152nd Street, Macauley Avenue, and Huntmere Avenue all intersect Lakeshore within a quarter mile of this curve. This intersection has limited pedestrian crossings due to site design and curvature of the roadway, potentially creating unsafe crossings for this transit stop. Currently, the Lakeshore Southbound/Westbound stop serves two routes, Route 10 and 39 and has 74 daily boardings.



This intersection can be further improved for the community and safety of transit riders by including some of the following elements:

- **Coordination with the City of Cleveland** to develop safety improvements for pedestrians, transit vehicles, and vehicles that provide safe crossings.
- **Add additional City of Cleveland-branded trash receptacles** to enhance cleanliness and visual consistency.
- **Install additional seating amenities and other transit amenities** at all bus stops at this location.



6. Euclid Avenue and Noble Road Transit Waiting Environments

The intersection at Euclid Avenue and Noble Road is a typical 4-way signalized intersection with 5 lanes of traffic on Euclid Avenue, and 4 lanes of traffic on Noble Road. There are two routes, Route 28 and Route 41, that serve the southwest and northwest corners and have an average of 98 boardings daily. Bus stop facilities include an existing shelter on the southwest and northwest corner of the intersection.

This intersection can be further improved for the community and safety of transit riders by including some of the following elements:

- **Coordination with the City of East Cleveland** to develop safety improvements for pedestrians, including high visible crossings at signalized intersections.
- **Add city-branded trash receptacles** to enhance cleanliness and visual consistency.
- **Install additional seating amenities and other transit amenities** at these two stops to allow alternative seating.



7. Shelter Cleaning Program and Application for Shelter Cleaning Accountability

Shelter cleaning is a collaborative effort that requires coordination across multiple departments within a transit agency. The Programming and Planning Department implements Adopt-A-Shelter, Community Partner Investment Program, and the annual Transit Waiting Environment (TWE) funding program to improve bus stops. In addition to this work, this department is well-positioned to develop a service-based cleaning plan informed by ridership levels, community impact, and GCRTA investments. Facility Maintenance and Operations should be responsible for executing this plan and providing regular feedback to support ongoing refinement and ensure shelters remain clean.

To enhance transparency and public trust, GCRTA should consider implementing a tracking tool or app that shows recent cleaning activity by neighborhood or route. This would promote accountability and help riders and residents see where and how cleaning efforts are being made across the transit network.



Community Investment & Beautification Recommendations:



1. Coordinate with municipalities to improve pedestrian access and streetscapes.
2. Strengthen partnerships with municipalities to clarify roles in transit infrastructure.
3. Integrate with the 311 system for simplified reporting.
4. Enhance transit waiting environments with additional infrastructure.
5. Refine internal roles to support a robust shelter cleaning program.
6. Implement a tracking tool to improve accountability and transparency.



Timeframe

Short 2026 - 2028

- Improve shelter cleaning processes with a focus on equity and rider feedback.
- Strengthen municipal relationships to define roles and responsibilities.
- Prioritize shelter upgrades based on ridership, location, and transfer points

Medium 2029 - 2031

- Launch a shelter tracking system with a customer feedback interface.

Long 2032 - 2034

- Continue leveraging streetscape enhancements to improve safety in high-ridership corridors.



Responsibilities

Champion: GRCTA

- Programming and Planning
- Service Management
- Facility Management
- Operations
- Customer Experience
- Information Technology

Supporting Partners:

- NOACA
- City of Cleveland
- Municipalities
- Cuyahoga County
- Utility Providers
- Neighborhood Groups

Empowering Community Voices

Overview & Key Challenges

GCRTA mission is “Connecting the Community” and creating meaningful opportunities for public feedback is essential to fulfilling that mission. Listening to riders helps identify ways to improve transit accessibility and service quality for all. GCRTA currently offers three primary channels for collecting and tracking customer feedback:

- 1) Online – Customer Feedback Form
- 2) By Phone – RTA Community Connection Line
- 3) In Person – Tower City Customer Service Center

These feedback mechanisms enable GCRTA to route concerns to the appropriate departments, establish workflows, and address customer issues. This system supports a responsive approach to service improvement. Through ongoing engagement with the public and stakeholders, customers are seeking more consistent and meaningful communication from GCRTA. Riders have expressed interest in more qualitative feedback opportunities, such as rider focus groups, pop-up engagements at bus stops, and regularly scheduled stakeholder and community meetings to put a face with who GCRTA is. Stakeholders and customers value being heard – not only when raising concerns, but also as part of a continuous dialogue to shape public transit for Clevelanders.

Families and caregivers have raised concerns about policies affecting travel with children on GCRTA. Currently, the stroller policy requires that children and infants be removed from their strollers, which must then be collapsed and stored away from the aisles. While this policy is intended to maintain clear walkways and ensure the safety of all passengers, many caregivers find it challenging to comply, especially when managing fussy children and carrying personal items. As a result, this policy can unintentionally create barriers to using public transit for those traveling with young children.

Strategic Recommendations

The following recommendations outline ways for GCRTA to strengthen communication, enhance rider inclusion, and ensure that community feedback shapes family-friendly and accessible transit policies.

1. Strategic Training and Education for Current Connections

GCRTA should develop creative ways to reach customers by using existing approaches, whether using Transit App messaging, bus cards, public address system, or social media to provide additional details on rules and regulations. Customers and stakeholders have expressed a desire to continue focus groups to address any questions or concerns. Making these focus groups regular allows more feedback and communication to the public and provides education to riders.

The GCRTA system currently has policies and procedures aimed at ensuring passenger safety and creating a positive transit experience for all riders. However, some of these rules do not include clear explanations, leaving riders uncertain about their purpose or intent. Through the engagement process, customers have expressed a desire to better understand the rationale behind certain regulations and to be actively involved in shaping solutions that improve the system. Some of these policies and procedures include:

- How to ride with children
- Transfers using Fare Media
- Where, why, and when to reach out to GCRTA
- Stroller rules and regulations
- E-Bikes and mobility carts on transit

2. Create a Taskforce to Consider Family Policy Changes

GCRTA should consider enhancing its stroller policy by providing clearer explanations of the rules and the rationale behind them. Offering rider best practices or guidance could help families better prepare for their transit trips and reduce potential hardships. The Stroller Policy directly impacts families with young children. According to the American Community Survey 2023 5-year, 7.07% of families in Cuyahoga County are single caregivers with one or more related children under age 5. This percentage is even more pronounced among families living below the poverty line. Single caregivers represent 28.07% of families in poverty, with single female households accounting 25.39%. In areas of persistent poverty where poverty rates are considerably high, changes to this policy can directly impact families within our community who rely on public transit the most. GCRTA could benefit

from forming an internal and external task force that includes representatives from safety, legal, operations, and families who use strollers. This collaborative group would be well-positioned to explore solutions and develop a policy that balances the needs of all stakeholders. Feedback from recent engagement efforts shows that riders feel valued when given the opportunity to share their experiences and suggestions. Establishing a task force would reinforce that sense of inclusion and could lead to outcomes that improve accessibility and rider satisfaction across the system.

3. Develop Additional Customer Feedback Channels

GCRTA should update the online customer feedback form to be simplified and potentially provide additional comments for improvements that are not just service and trip related. This form could encourage commendations and positive feedback and create accountability for GCRTA to respond and follow-up. The current online feedback form consists of required information geared towards service issues and missed trips. This complaint form requires several details, including incident location, time of day, and scheduled trip. The form also asks for very detailed information, such as block numbers and directional information that may not be explicit for every customer's comment.

The GCRTA Transit Police launched a system that allows riders to discreetly ask for help from their mobile phone. When the dispatchers receive notifications of a text message, they can begin a "LiveChat" via text. Dispatchers are then able to forward messages to responding officers for action. This type of technology could potentially be explored through other types of customer feedback, through the existing RTA Community Connection Line to enable text messaging.

Bridging Possibilities defined a network of Stakeholders throughout the community that want to stay involved in GCRTA and support their mission of connecting the community. Developing targeted focus groups with customers and stakeholders and being involved in community events can continue engagement and improve transit for areas that may experience persistent poverty. This type of engagement can be refined in an annual customer experience plan, creating a strategic approach to target communities and stakeholders that were key in several planning projects.

Empowering Community Voices Recommendations:



1. Provide rider education through onboard and waiting area tips.
2. Identify and promote family-friendly transit policies.
3. Establish multiple communication channels for riders and stakeholders.



Timeframe

Short 2026 - 2028

- Establish a taskforce of internal and external stakeholders focused on family-friendly transit improvements.
- Expand the online feedback form to capture broader rider input beyond service complaints.
- Launch a stakeholder advisory committee with biannual meetings to address transit access issues.

Medium 2029 - 2031

- Develop a text-based customer service tool for real-time issue reporting.
- Introduce annual Customer Experience Plans to monitor and enhance rider satisfaction.
- Implement policies that support family-friendly transit practices.

Long 2032 - 2034

- Refine strategies based on feedback from Customer Experience Plans.
- Continue upgrading vehicle infrastructure to better accommodate strollers and mobility devices.



Responsibilities

Champion: GRCTA

- Programming and Planning
- External Affairs and Administration
- Customer Experience
- Information Technology
- Legal

Supporting Partners:

- City of Cleveland
- Municipalities
- Cuyahoga County
- Neighborhood Groups
- Customers

Conclusion

Bridging Possibilities brought to light the challenges individuals with varying household incomes face and outlined strategies to overcome these barriers, reinforcing GCRTA's role in connecting customers to the resources, services, and jobs they depend on. Challenges related to cleanliness, service availability, safety, and communication require GCRTA to not only focus on improving transit operations but also on supporting economic mobility and advancing equity.

Developed to be both attainable and impactful, some recommendations can be achieved through clearer communication, stronger community partnerships, and refining processes already in place such as shelter cleaning, developing family-friendly policies, and expanding customer communication channels to create a more inclusive rider experience. Other recommendations will require long-term planning and investment yet remain both attainable and impactful, including the adoption of fare capping and ABT as well as expanding the shelter and neighborhood improvements at bus stops. Together, these targeted strategies combined with clearer communication and collaboration will improve the transit system for those who rely on it most.

Looking ahead, successful implementation will require ongoing engagement with riders, operators, and stakeholders as well as accountability and investment. By keeping equity and the needs of those in persistent poverty at the forefront, GCRTA and its partners can transform today's barriers into tomorrow's opportunities.