

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Seven ways to design a better bus system

BY LAURA ROSSI
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The Biden administration has put infrastructure at the heart of its plan to rebuild our economy. This provides an opportunity to increase awareness and involvement in Westchester County's Mobility and Transit Plan.

For the past year, the county has been analyzing mobility needs for Westchester's residents, workers and visitors. The county's goal is clear: "To design a plan that meets community needs today while being agile and responsive to changing future and emergency mobility needs."

This is a laudable goal. Westchester County controls the Bee-Line Bus System and many of the arterials the buses operate on. Investing in our Bee-Line is critical to our economic growth, and the county should think boldly. Successful bus systems in Houston, Seattle, Richmond and other cities have shown that ridership growth requires bus service that runs at frequent intervals (15 minutes), 18 hours a day, 7 days a week.

As we look to the future of the Bee-Line and the priorities of our community, we offer the following seven suggestions for a bus network redesign:

Reflect the demands of our era, and plan for a future that prioritizes connectivity. Most of Bee-Line's routes were drawn decades ago and don't reflect the patterns and needs of people who are riding the bus currently. The map of fixed routes should be redrawn to improve equitable access for those who depend on buses today, not the travel patterns of half a century ago.

It's no longer just about 9 to 5: Bee-Line's schedules and frequency are built on an outdated assumption that the primary market is the conventional 9-to-5 commutation. Yet ridership is not the same. Many jobs held by transit riders are shift-oriented, like health care or food service. Working parents must make multiple stops, first to day care and then to work. And riders want to take trips that are not work-related at all: to the doctor, shopping, movies, and places of worship.

Connections are important: Bee-Line will be more successful when it connects better with other modes, rather than operating in isolation. Current connections with Metro-North trains are haphazard and require separate fares. A

network redesign must take into account smoother connectivity with our regional rail network and fare parity with Metro-North.

Improve the experience: For bus ridership to increase, the overall experience needs improvement. Many bus stops lack sidewalks that would allow residents to reach them safely. Too many stops lack shelter, seating, and real-time information on bus arrivals. While some features, such as the placement of bus stops, are not in the county's control, it must show leadership by working with local municipalities to improve all facets of the ridership experience.

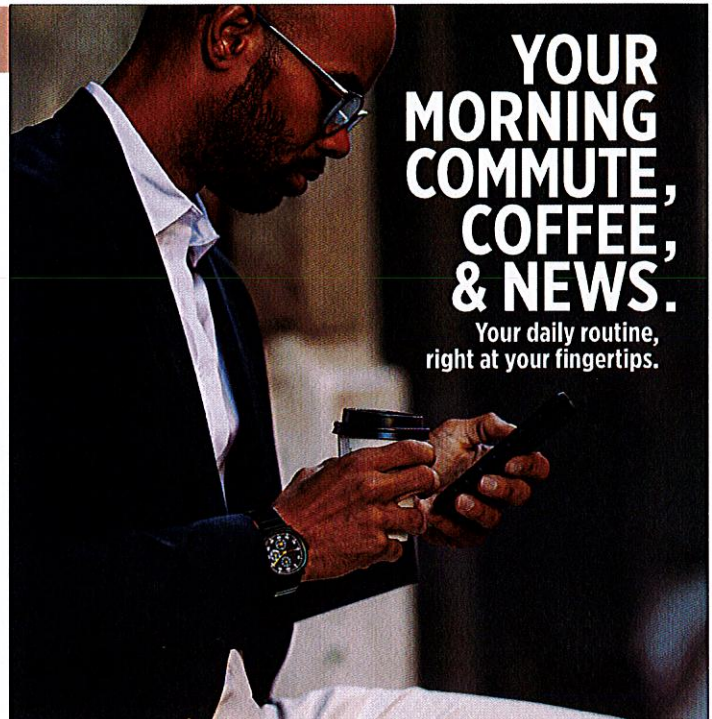
Fares should be simple, equitable, and affordable: Fares should be restructured to reward frequent users and provide discounts to low-income riders. Common tickets should be integrated so that riders can connect a Bee-Line trip to a Metro North trip with the same card.

Speed it up: We need an ambitious plan for bus lanes and signal priority to let buses move through traffic with efficiency. We need to acknowledge that a bus with 40 people on it deserves the advantage of speed.

Put equity at the heart of planning: The county says it wants a more equitable and socially just network. This can only be accomplished by listening to the stories of transit riders. By putting the lived experience of seniors, students, working parents, home health attendants, job-seekers and other riders at the heart of its planning, the county will create a truly successful system.

Laura Rossi is executive director of the Westchester Community Foundation, which works to improve the quality of life in the county by addressing community issues, promoting responsible philanthropy and connecting donors to critical, local needs. The Foundation holds assets of \$72 million and in 2020 distributed \$3 million in grants to local nonprofits. She can be reached at lrossi@wcf-ny.org

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