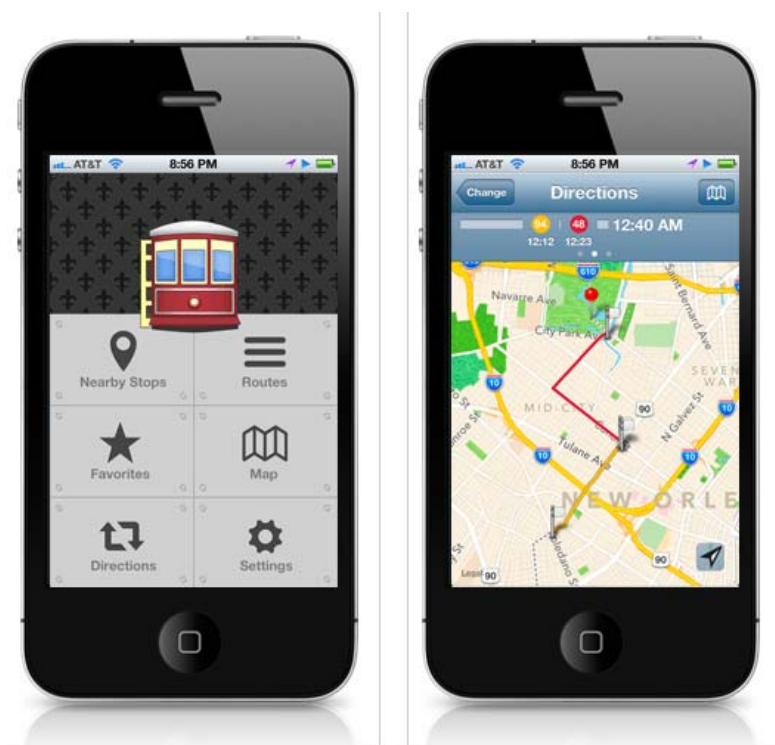




Greater New Orlea

In the Uber era, New Orleans transit users still don't know when the bus is coming



Screenshots of NOLA Transit, a mobile phone app that is built to allow transit riders to know exactly when their buses are scheduled to arrive. The app functions well, but the information it shows is often wrong or incomplete because of the data it receives from the Regional Transit Authority, according to transportation advocates.



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The image of a bus blinks onto the map, but something is wrong.

It's supposed to be on the 51 line, St. Bernard Avenue, and it's supposed to be moving, headed toward Broad Street, where passengers await their ride. Instead, the image of the bus is stationary, sitting in what appears to be the middle of a lot on Canal Street.

The line is in service; it's the Regional Transit Authority's "real time" transit tracking app that is on the fritz, much as it has been for the past three years of "beta testing."

The case of the missing bus, observed earlier this month, shows the gulf between the transportation experiences of the haves and the have nots.

Ride New Orleans

[Ride New Orleans report notes lack of transit planning](#)

report notes lack of transit planning

For the wealthy, a bustling concierge economy supplies all manner of services on demand including ride-hailing apps like Uber, which uses mobile apps to show customers exactly where their drivers are and how long they can expect to wait. No need to wait on the curb in the heat or the rain. You know when the driver is arriving.

For public transit riders, who are overwhelmingly poor and working class, there's just a bench and a hit-or-miss bus schedule.

[RTA](#) says it is trying to change that. It is in the process of buying a new tracking and dispatch system, but it's unclear when that system would be put in place. "RTA remains committed to constantly improving to better serve the needs of the riding public," said Patrice Bell Mercadel, a spokeswoman.

Bad Data

Joel Carranza ought to be the poster-child for the kind of Silicon Bayou narrative that Mayor Mitch Landrieu and other boosters are fond of touting at trendy think tank conferences and in interviews with the national press.

After living in Los Angeles for years, Carranza moved to New Orleans, where he works as a software developer in the energy sector. Like many young, educated professionals, he's not fond of the cost or hassle associated with commuting by car, so he often rides the bus to work.

The service in New Orleans, he said, was not what he was used to elsewhere. Buses were infrequent and often late.

"The problem has always been that New Orleans buses are never on time," he said. "If they were on schedule, I could just walk up to the stop at the right time, but that's not how it is. With the real-time data, the idea is, yeah, they don't run on schedule, but at least you know where they are, so you don't have to waste time standing around for them."

In 2012, Carranza got a chance put his ideas into practice. RTA, prodded by transportation advocates at Ride New Orleans, decided to [open its schedules and bus tracking data](#) to third-party developers. Armed with the data, Carranza built NOLA Transit, an app that would show riders not only when the next bus was scheduled to stop, but how far away it actually was.

Other developers followed suit, putting out apps of their own.



New Orleans public transit update: 5 projects

For someone with experience mapping data, the process was pretty simple once the data were released, Carranza said. The RTA staff was great about helping integrate the information, and the data feed was reliable, easy to use, he said.

The only problem, Carranza said, was that the data were wrong. "It's consistent, but it's consistently bad," Carranza said.

The buses don't actually have dedicated GPS tracking units in them, at least not the kind meant to keep tabs on a fleet of vehicles in real time. What the buses do have are security systems that integrate location data into the feeds they transmit back to the dispatch office.

Since the data was never meant to be used to map buses on specific routes, someone with a clipboard has to go out each morning, write down the dozens of bus-route assignments and then input them manually into a computer, said Rachel Heiligman, founding director of Ride New Orleans. That's why some buses show up on tracking maps in strange places, she said. They aren't lost. Someone just made a typo. "There's a lot of opportunity for human error," she said.

Over time, the data has only gotten worse as equipment failed and was not repaired, Carranza said. At any given time, a significant percentage of the buses in service will not be shown because their equipment is not reporting data, he said. Whole

routes appear not to have any buses running.

Carranza said he gets emails from angry customers who don't understand why they keep missing buses. "I sort of stopped developing the app because the data is so poor," he said.

A missed opportunity

The failure of the real-time tracking system has been compounded by RTA's struggle to return the bus system to its pre-Hurricane Katrina size, Heiligman said. A Ride New Orleans report found that, in 2005, there were 17 lines running buses every 15 minutes or less during peak hours. In 2015, there were only two. More than half the lines ran buses no more than twice an hour.

"When you are operating a transport system that has long waits, knowing when your bus is off schedule is critical," Heiligman said. "That's 20 minutes you could use at to be at home with your family, or shopping or doing whatever you need to do."

There's also evidence that real-time tracking systems can increase the number of people who ride the bus. Researchers studied changes in ridership in New York City after it implemented a tracking system, dubbed Bus Time, between 2011 and 2014. After controlling for other variables, the researchers found that the ability of users to see when their buses would arrive was responsible for a 1.7 percent increase in ridership.

Although that doesn't sound like much, 1.7 percent is tremendous given the penetration of New York's transit system, the researchers said. During the study period, New Yorkers made an average of 2 million bus trips a day. The system already attracts most likely transit riders, so new riders are difficult to come by, said Kari Watkins, a professor at Georgia Tech University and one of the study's authors.

The tracking system was also relatively new during the study period. As more people become aware of the system and begin to use it, the gains will likely increase, said Watkins and her research partner, Candace Brakewood, a professor at City University of New York. "It takes a lot to overcome a habit and your daily mode choice is very habitual," Watkins said. "People tend to adopt new modes when they make another lifestyle change – their car breaks down, they move, they get a new job. So if transit looks more attractive when that change happens in their life, they may try it."

A functional bus tracking system could have more dramatic effects in a smaller market like New Orleans, where ridership density is lower, but the city probably won't be able to maximize ridership gains unless it increases the frequency of its buses, the researchers said. Still, said Brakewood, research has shown that being able to see when your bus is coming, makes waiting not quite so miserable.

"In Tampa," Brakewood said, "we found that the primary benefit associated with providing real-time information to bus riders was that it improved the passenger experience of waiting for the bus, which is notoriously one of the most disliked elements of transit trips."

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