

# atx transit report

## transit rider needs and visions in the Texas state capital

November 2022 (version 1.1)



## About this Report

The ATX Transit Report captures feedback from current transit riders in Austin about how well Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (CapMetro) current service meets their needs, what could be improved, and how they feel about Project Connect. It was produced as part of Dr. Alex Karner's course on *Transportation and Mobility Justice Perspectives and Methods* at The University of Texas at Austin during spring semester 2022. The most recent version will always be available [here](#). Lead report authors are:

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

**ACC:** Austin Community College

**AMI:** area median income

**ATP:** Austin Transit Partnership

**ATX:** Austin, Texas

**BART:** Bay Area Rapid Transit

**BIPOC:** Black, Indigenous, People of Color

**CapMetro:** Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority

**ETOD:** equitable transit-oriented development

**GPS:** global positioning system

**TOD:** transit-oriented development

**TXDOT:** Texas Department of Transportation

**UT:** The University of Texas at Austin

## Executive Summary

Project Connect—our region’s \$10+ billion, 13-year public transit expansion plan—provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape our regional transportation system. If properly executed, Project Connect will help ensure that Austinites have many convenient and affordable options to get where they need to go in a timely manner, especially residents with low incomes and those who cannot or choose not to drive.

But many barriers stand in the way of Project Connect’s successful implementation. Most importantly, it is unclear whether new service will meet the needs of people who ride transit today. The ATX Transit Report discusses these needs as well as issues with Project Connect and recommendations for ensuring just and equitable implementation. Our goal is to ensure that Project Connect’s benefits are distributed fairly, current transit riders are not left behind, public engagement is meaningful and used to shape key decisions, and design and policy decisions are driven by the needs of those who need public transit most.

We used a variety of methods to engage with current transit riders, hear their views, and reflect what we heard about current transit service in Austin as well as opinions about Project Connect and how well it will serve current riders. These methods included social media outreach, focus group discussions, and in-person conversations at bus stops and on bus routes during spring 2022.

Based on our focus groups and in-person conversations, we identified a range of operational, logistical, and experiential needs that should be addressed to improve Austin transit users’ experience with CapMetro. We organized these into five themes: 1) reliability, 2) information, 3) affordability and fares, 4) dignity and respect, and 5) safety and street conditions. To be sure, some riders reflected positively on their experiences with CapMetro, but much of their feedback centered on difficulties and frustrations. Service reliability was a commonly mentioned topic. One rider shared that, “Folks that can’t drive and have to take the bus—they’re going to be late to places, and that can present challenges in an employment context.”<sup>1</sup> Another summarized their concerns about safety, describing their experiences riding CapMetro in the late evenings when “safety is a very, very genuine concern.”<sup>2</sup>

We also identified multiple outstanding issues that need to be addressed for Project Connect to reach its full potential. These issues emerged from conversations with community members and current transit riders, presentations by current and former CapMetro and City of Austin employees, and our reading of academic literature

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<sup>1</sup> Focus Group, April 6, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Focus Group, April 11, 2022.

regarding theories of justice and community engagement. The outstanding issues are housing affordability, displacement, and gentrification; integrating the existing bus network into Project Connect; limited community engagement; policing; and transit affordability.

While Project Connect includes \$300 million in anti-displacement funding and is requiring that the distribution of those funds be guided by various equity-focused considerations, broader economic forces are driving gentrification and displacement throughout the region. Seen in this light, \$300 million is a drop in the bucket. Project Connect should not be saddled with full responsibility for addressing this problem, but we run the risk of thinking that we have done enough when what we need most is to dramatically increase the scale and pace of our efforts.

The vast majority of public transit riders in Austin use the local bus. The implementing agencies have not presented a coherent vision for integrating, expanding, or enhancing existing bus service during Project Connect implementation. Current routes will need to change to eliminate redundancy and effectively bring passengers to light rail. We have no sense of which riders will see their routes changed and their ride potentially worsened because it takes longer, is more expensive, involves additional transfers, or costs more.

We close with 10 recommendations for an equitable and just Project Connect. They are:

- 1. Recognize the fundamentally public and essential nature of public transit.**
- 2. Take a comprehensive look at emerging Project Connect equity issues at the level of the entire program, not simply small pieces of it.**
- 3. Enhance general public engagement.**
- 4. Examine bus network integration and explain alternatives.**
- 5. Avoid displacing current residents while preserving existing and providing new affordable housing opportunities.**
- 6. Identify alternatives to traditional law enforcement.**
- 7. Clarify how the ["Racial Equity Anti-Displacement Tool"](#) will be used in non-housing contexts.**
- 8. Improve the pedestrian and cycling networks that provide critical connections to transit.**
- 9. Identify and discuss how program cost increases will affect staging and phasing for different project components.**
- 10. Identify, evaluate, and clarify Project Connect's fare policy.**

## Introduction

Project Connect is Austin's \$10+ billion, 13-year public transit expansion plan.<sup>3</sup> It provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape our regional transportation system. If properly executed, Project Connect will help ensure that Austinites have many convenient and affordable options to get where they need to go in a timely manner, especially residents with low incomes and those who cannot or choose not to drive.

But many barriers stand in the way of Project Connect's successful implementation. Most importantly, it is unclear whether new service will meet the needs of people who ride transit today. Public transit can facilitate travel and access for certain groups and not others. It can connect people to the opportunities they need to lead a meaningful and dignified life, or it can shut them out. It can create a platform for people to rally around shared interests, or it can isolate people from one another.

Major transportation projects in the U.S. continue to benefit white travelers with higher incomes while burdens are concentrated among lower-income people and people of color (2, 3). The desires of businesses, real estate developers, longtime homeowners, and weekday commuters often drive early design choices that are difficult or impossible to reverse later. Further, simply providing more public transit service will not create a successful system if home prices and rents skyrocket along known transit development corridors. Without adequate protections for current residents, the transit system will serve more as an investment vehicle for the wealthy than a helpful transportation solution for the average Austinite.

Different people also experience public transit and public space differently depending on their identities. Women, trans people, people with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, Black people, and brown people have different vulnerabilities and experiences. These groups regularly experience harassment, violence, and neglect in public space and on public transit from law enforcement, operators, and other riders (4–6). For Project Connect to truly include these groups and meet their needs, these concerns need to be front and center rather than considered as afterthoughts.

The ATX Transit Report discusses current rider needs, issues with Project Connect, and recommendations for ensuring just and equitable implementation. Our goal is to ensure that Project Connect's benefits are distributed fairly, current transit riders are not left behind, public engagement is meaningful and used to shape key decisions, and design and policy decisions are driven by the needs of those who need public transit most. Fundamentally, this report aims to help Project Connect live up to its full potential.

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<sup>3</sup> Originally budgeted at \$7.1 billion, the project's revised costs as of April 2022 are now over \$10 billion. These increases are largely driven by changes in the project scope, land costs, inflation, and supply chain issues (1).

Accordingly, this report will be useful for everyone engaged in or affected by Project Connect including public sector employees, private consultants, academics, transit riders, and other impacted communities. The rest of this report includes the following sections:

1. **History:** Summary of how and why Project Connect came to be in its 2020 voter-approved form.
2. **Project Connect Overview:** A brief overview of Project Connect, including descriptions of the involved public agencies.
3. **Data and Methods:** Overview of the interview and focus group data collected to support the remaining parts of the report.
4. **Existing Rider Needs:** Key takeaways from interviews and focus groups conducted with existing CapMetro riders.
5. **Project Connect Outstanding Issues:** Summary of key issues likely to arise in the near-and medium-term that will affect how Project Connect's benefits and burdens are distributed.
6. **Recommendations:** Specific policies and practices that implementing agencies can use to steer the project toward more just outcomes.

## Austin Transit History

Public transportation arrived in Austin in 1874 when mule-drawn streetcars were first used. By 1891, the service transitioned to electric streetcars operated by the Austin Street Railway Company. The service ran until 1940, when lack of profitability forced its closure. At that time, the city transitioned to buses run by the Austin Transit Company (7). In 1985, Austin area residents voted to establish CapMetro with funding from a 1% sales tax. The new agency opened its doors in July 1985.

In 1997, a series of investigations revealed financial irresponsibility, ethical violations, and poor management within the CapMetro board. As a result of the investigation, the Texas Legislature forced the board to shift away from appointee-only positions towards elected positions and enforced new ethics and transparency standards. This governance change led to Austin's first major transit referendum in 2000, known as *Light Rail Now!* The proposal included two rail lines: a red and green line. The green line would run north-south from Ben White Boulevard to the Airport Boulevard-North Lamar intersection and the red line would continue that route north from Airport and Lamar to Howard Lane on the Austin and Northwest Railroad owned by CapMetro (Figure 1). The Federal Transit Administration budgeted the plan at \$1.8 billion and would fund 50% of the project while the other half would come from bonds backed by a one-cent increase in the CapMetro sales tax. The plan failed by around 2,000 votes. Though many voters in Central Austin favored the referendum, voters outside the city limits were largely opposed.



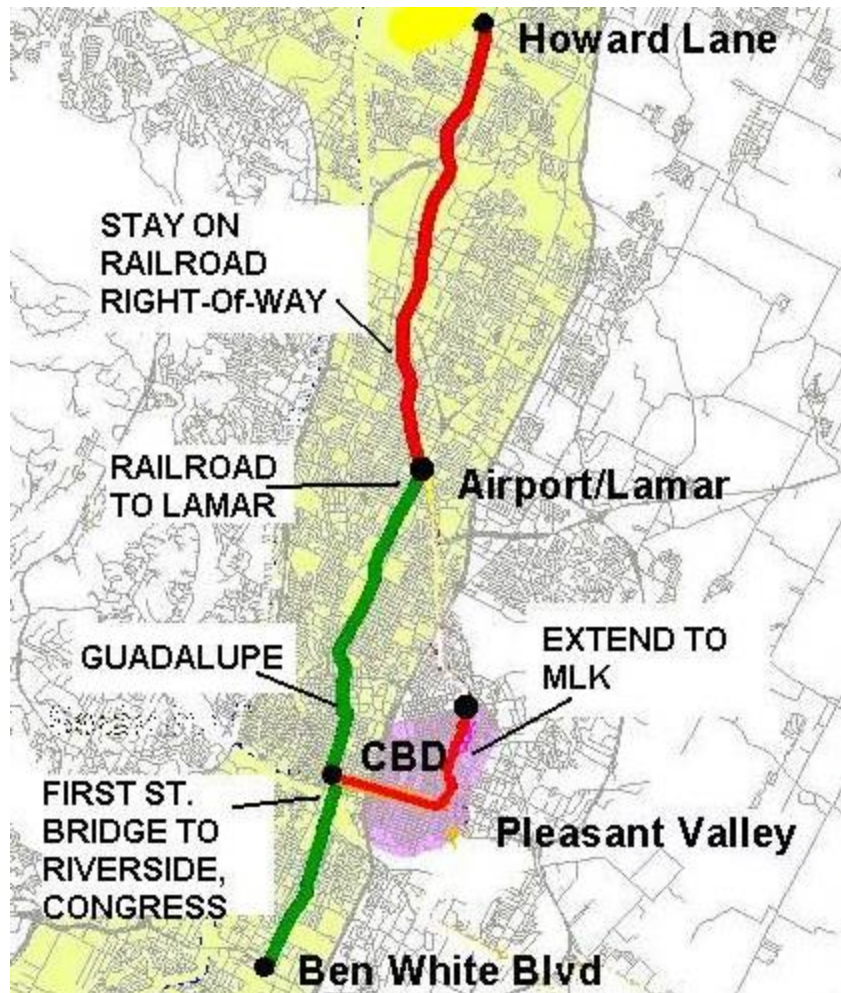


Figure 1: Light Rail Now! proposed map. Source: Henry (8).

In 2004, CapMetro tried again to achieve rail transit with a new plan called the *All Systems Go Long Range Transit Plan*. It proposed expanded local and express bus service and created a commuter-oriented rail line along an existing right of way as a starter line to support a future comprehensive passenger rail system. A scaled-down version of the 2000 initiative, the plan passed with 62% of voters in support. The resulting MetroRail line began operation in 2010 as the Red Line with service between downtown and Leander.

Despite some 'wins' for transit earlier in the decade, the 2008 recession substantially impacted local public transit by reducing sales tax revenue, a major source of operational funding for CapMetro. To offset a decline in revenue, CapMetro drew down its reserves and ultimately cut existing bus service. New rail construction and other capital projects, on the other hand, continued to move forward. At the time, residents voiced their frustrations and public trust in the agency again reached a low point. The MetroRail Red Line ultimately began operating in 2010 with service between downtown Austin and Leander.

In 2014, the city proposed a new light rail plan known as the *Rails and Roads Proposition*. This project planned to build on the existing Red Line with light rail beginning at the Austin airport traveling through Riverside and on to Austin Community College (ACC) Highland via the University of Texas (UT) Austin campus. The proposition did not pass, with 57% of voters opposed. Part of this is attributed to the plan's late addition to the ballot, which limited the time available for outreach and education campaigns. Additionally, voters voiced concerns that the proposed routes did not meet rider needs.

In 2020 Austin voters weighed in on a new comprehensive public transit plan that had been in development since as early as 2014: *Project Connect* (9). The plan included two light rail lines, two commuter lines, expanded bus rapid transit, a transit tunnel in downtown Austin, new neighborhood circulators, and new park-and-ride facilities. Funding was to come from a property tax increase. The plan also included a \$300 million set-aside for anti-displacement efforts. After many failed comprehensive light rail ballot proposals, Austin voters finally said yes to a substantial rail plan—58% of voters supported the ballot initiative in November 2020. A map of the initial system plan is shown in Figure 2.

## Project Connect Overview

Three agencies are charged with various elements of Project Connect's delivery and operations: the Austin Transit Partnership (ATP), CapMetro, and the City of Austin. ATP is an independent agency created to deliver the Project Connect program. The agency oversees all matters related to design, construction, and implementation. In this role, they are engaged in acquiring the rights-of-way and vehicles needed to deliver Project Connect's new transit service (10). As such, ATP has responsibility for constructing all rail lines and related infrastructure, including the Blue Line bridge across Lady Bird Lake and the proposed light rail stations. ATP also manages Project Connect's finances and annual budget, and it approves interlocal agreements between jurisdictions.

CapMetro operates and maintains public transit within its service area. For Project Connect, the agency will improve and coordinate existing services with the new infrastructure and electrify the bus fleet. The agency will gradually take over responsibility for Project Connect's operational elements as they are completed (11). CapMetro is also responsible for preparing an Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD) Study to be completed by spring 2023 (12). It is expected to contain policy recommendations related to station-area development focused on mitigating gentrification and displacement, business and workforce development, housing affordability, first- and last-mile connectivity, land use, urban design, and real estate strategies. The study will be handed off the City of Austin, who will be responsible for implementation.

The City of Austin is responsible for permitting Project Connect construction and all land-use-related items including ETOD near stations and along rail lines, right-of-way management, and other improvements along rail corridors (13). The city established a Project Connect Office to streamline their support of ATP efforts. The city is also managing the \$300 in anti-displacement funds (14).

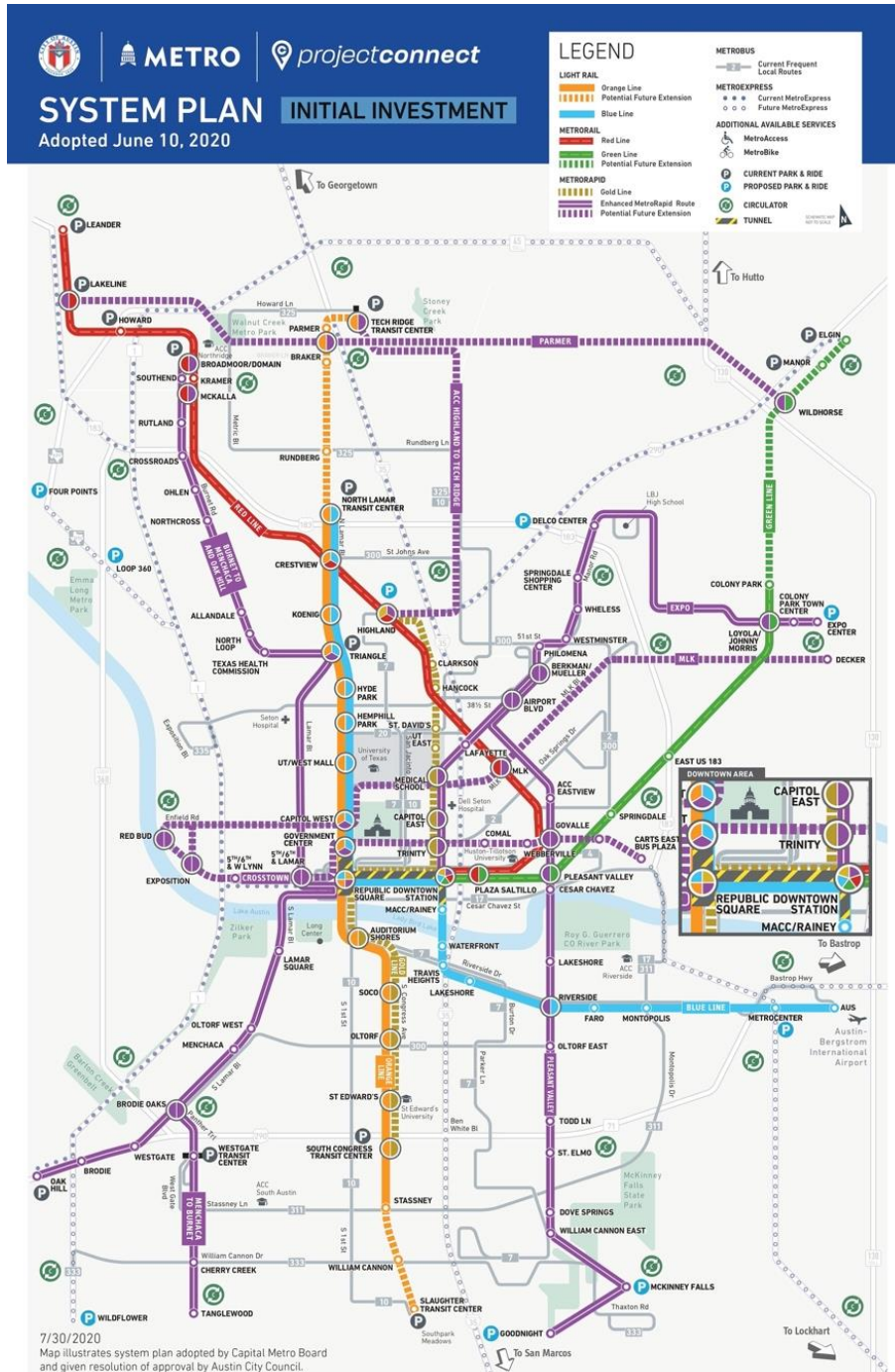


Figure 2: Project Connect initial investment system map. Source: City of Austin et al. (15).

With CapMetro and the City of Austin each administering initiatives and tools to combat displacement and gentrification, coordination among each agency and ATP is paramount. CapMetro meets with city officials at least weekly, with the Project Connect Community Advisory Committee monthly, and attends a monthly interagency meeting which includes all city departments and ATP (16). Table 1 details which agency is responsible for each project and its respective purpose, as explained by CapMetro staff.

<b>Table 1: Affordability, Displacement, and Gentrification Initiatives</b>		
<b>Agency</b>	<b>Tool/Project</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
CapMetro	<a href="#">ETOD Study and Dashboard</a>	Provide policy recommendations, create station area vision plans
City of Austin	<a href="#">Project Connect Anti-Displacement Maps and Dashboard</a>	Measures risk of displacement near Project Connect stations
City of Austin	<a href="#">\$300 Million Anti-Displacement Funding</a>	Invest funds over 13 years to stem displacement near Project Connect stations
City of Austin	<a href="#">Equity Office Grants Dashboard</a>	Platform for applying for Anti-Displacement Funding
City of Austin	<a href="#">Racial Equity Anti-Displacement Tool</a>	Guide the use of Anti-Displacement Funding

## Data and Methods

We used a variety of methods to engage with current transit riders, hear their views, and reflect what we heard about current transit service in Austin as well as opinions about Project Connect and how well it will serve current riders. These methods included social media outreach, focus group discussions, and in-person conversations at bus stops and on bus routes during spring 2022. Short descriptions of each appear below.

### Social Media Outreach

We created Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok accounts to engage with current transit riders and to recruit participants to our focus groups. These accounts directed users to a link to sign up for a focus group session.



## Focus Group Discussions

To understand transit riders' experiences more deeply, we conducted five focus groups over Zoom, engaging with 11 people between April 6 and April 12, 2022.<sup>4</sup> Each focus group lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Two students facilitated each session, and the meetings were recorded with live transcripts. Attendees received a \$50 Amazon gift card for actively participating.

Focus group sessions were advertised on social media, with additional targeted email outreach to select community groups, including the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1091, Austin Justice Coalition, Crestview Neighborhood Association, People United for Mobility Action, Riverside Rising, Tarrytown Alliance, Rethink35, and Walk Austin. Sessions were made available on Calendly, allowing individuals to sign up for one of eight slots in each session. In the sign-up process, registrants were asked to provide demographic and contact information.

Among our 11 active participants, four were Black, two were Hispanic/Latino, and five were white; three were female, seven were male, and one did not answer; all were in their 20s; self-reported annual incomes ranged from below \$15,000 to over \$200,000; and six owned or had access to a vehicle. All active participants had some familiarity with Austin in general and CapMetro service in particular.

## In-Person Conversations

To reach additional transit riders, we rode CapMetro buses to transfer centers with high ridership as well as smaller local neighborhood stops. Groups of two to three students spoke with riders on buses and while waiting at the following locations:

- North Lamar Transit Center
- South Congress Transit Center
- Westgate Transit Center
- Republic Square
- N. Pleasant Valley Rd./E. 5<sup>th</sup> St.
- Riverside/Pleasant Valley

We had the conversations during two afternoon/rush hour periods in April (Thursday, April 7 and Thursday, April 14, 2022). Both afternoons featured sunny, warm weather and normal transit service. One group with bilingual Spanish speakers targeted locations with

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<sup>4</sup> At least 10 additional participants attended the focus group sessions but did not actively participate. These attendees either did not share any sentiments at all or only sent a few sentences to the chat. We suspect that they were primarily motivated by the monetary incentive. A further 19 signed up for the focus group and but ultimately did not attend their sessions. Some of the inactive participants did not seem to be located in or familiar with Austin, displaying another limitation in soliciting incentivized engagement using online channels.

higher concentrations of Spanish-speaking riders. No languages other than English and Spanish were spoken, highlighting a limitation of these in-person conversations.

We approached riders and introduced ourselves and the ATX Transit Report effort before asking if they would be willing to talk. If receptive, we asked riders to share stories about their typical use of CapMetro buses, how transit services could better meet their needs, and how they felt about Project Connect. The [Appendix](#) includes a full list of questions used for these conversations. One person primarily talked with the riders while the other(s) took notes. With permission from riders, we also collected audio recordings of these conversations to aid in notetaking and transcription. Conversations lasted between 30 seconds to 10 minutes, depending on rider interest and ability to talk with us. A few riders had to get on the bus soon after we started talking. We did not collect names of riders and therefore maintain their anonymity in this report.

Altogether, we spoke with 28 riders representing a mix of ages and time spent riding CapMetro, with some very new to the system (e.g., riding for one or two weeks) and others very familiar to the system (e.g., riding for over 20 years). Six conversations were held in Spanish. We made visual demographic assessments of all participants. About 46% were white, 18% were Black, and 25% were Hispanic or Latino. The remaining 10% did not fall into these three categories. Half of the participants were male. Age was distributed almost evenly between those identified as young adults (32%), middle aged (36%), and older adults (32%).

## Existing Rider Needs

Based on our focus groups and in-person interviews, we identified a range of unmet needs that must be addressed to improve the rider experience while using CapMetro's services. We organized these into five themes: 1) reliability, 2) information, 3) affordability and fares, 4) dignity and respect, and 5) safety and street conditions.

To be sure, many riders expressed positive feelings about CapMetro service. Riders enjoyed using buses as a source of cooling and heating, especially during particularly hot or cold weather.<sup>5</sup> While fare affordability remains a concern for many, some riders appreciated CapMetro as a cheaper option to meet daily needs. One rider stated, "Not many people have cars. Not many people can afford it. And just for myself, I can't afford a car right now, so I take the bus to get where I need to go."<sup>6</sup> In addition, riders who have used transit systems in other cities highlighted how the general atmosphere on CapMetro vehicles is typically milder and less hostile compared to other transit systems. Another rider shared that they "never had a problem with the train, as far as

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<sup>5</sup> In-person interviews, Riverside/Pleasant Valley, April 14, 2022; Westgate Transit Center, April 14, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> In-person interview, Westgate Transit Center, April 14, 2022.

respectfulness goes...I mean all I get is like sometimes someone's a bit rude, but nothing like typical big city transit."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, another rider shared that their experience on the bus is "cómodo, agradable" ("comfortable, nice").<sup>8</sup>

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***"Not many people have cars. Not many people can afford it. And just for myself, I can't afford a car right now, so I take the bus to get where I need to go."***

*- Transit Rider at the Westgate Transit Center on April 14, 2022*

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And while bus driver behavior was a source of consternation for some, others appreciated how drivers acted given their full slate of operational responsibilities in addition to dealing with rider behavior. One rider shared that, "The drivers are courteous and everything. They go through a lot, but they still suck it up and... they go with it."<sup>9</sup> Others noted how drivers would commit acts of kindness, such as offering courtesy rides for those who could not pay the fare: "If you ain't got the money or something like that, they'll let you get your courtesy ride."<sup>10</sup>

Some riders also enjoyed the logistical benefits of riding the bus. They appreciated the ability to multitask—doing work/homework, listening to music, reading, or relaxing.<sup>11</sup> One rider mentioned that they don't have to worry about the stress of driving, such as getting into a car accident while still being able to get places, which "save[s] the day for me every time."<sup>12</sup> Others appreciated how they could load their bike onto the bus and extend the reach of their transit trip.<sup>13</sup>

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***"[Taking transit and not having to drive] saves the day for me every time."***

*- Transit Rider at the North Lamar Transit Center on April 7, 2022*

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<sup>7</sup> Focus Group, April 6, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> In-person interview, Riverside/Pleasant Valley, April 14, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> In-person interviews, Republic Square, April 7, 2022; Westgate Transit Center, April 14, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

While riders reflected positively on CapMetro, much of their feedback centered on difficulties, frustrations, and unmet needs. Addressing the issues within the following themes would help CapMetro to provide a more equitable, efficient, and accessible service for current and future riders.

## Reliability

Many riders expressed frustration with CapMetro’s reliability and on-time performance. People who relied on public transportation to travel to time-sensitive events such as classes, medical appointments, and job interviews experienced frequent delays and cancellations that were extremely upsetting. One participant in a focus group pointed out that, “[Unreliability] is an equity issue as well, because folks that can't drive and have to take the bus—they're going to be late to places, and that can present challenges in an employment context.”<sup>14</sup>

Lack of reliability also affects non-‘time-sensitive’ trips. Two riders interviewed at the North Lamar Transit Center were waiting for a bus to go shopping before a night shift, but the bus did not arrive anywhere near its scheduled time.<sup>15</sup> After over an hour of waiting, a CapMetro driver finally told the riders that their bus was not coming. Ad-hoc information from other bus drivers is generally an unreliable way to inform passengers about trip changes. Furthermore, delays and cancellations like this are not communicated through the CapMetro app, which is the primary method that the agency recommends for riders to stay up to date about bus arrival and departure status. Relying on an app for communication clearly excludes transit users who do not own a smartphone. These riders must instead rely on physical timetables that are rarely followed. Some bus stops have digital real-time arrival information, but as riders noted, these are often incorrect or broken.<sup>16</sup>

Because of the ongoing reliability issues, many riders arrived at their bus stops much earlier than needed, just in case the bus arrived at an unexpected time. Moreover, even if a bus arrived on time, there was no guarantee that there would be enough space for everyone to board. One rider, a wheelchair user, shared an experience where a bus driver had simply driven by while he was waiting at a stop.<sup>17</sup> Drivers, he noted, can be fearful of helping wheelchair users get on the bus due to a previous lawsuit (17) and may also simply choose to not to pick up a wheelchair user or other riders with disabilities. Even riders who were not wheelchair users reported similar incidents of drivers passing by

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<sup>14</sup> Focus Group, April 6, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.



stops despite passengers waiting to get on board.<sup>18</sup> Riders should feel confident that a bus will arrive if scheduled, and that drivers will stop if a passenger is waiting.

Beginning during February 2022, UT students living in Austin's Riverside community encountered a number of reliability issues with CapMetro's shuttle services, which offers three routes (the 670, 671, and 672) to and from campus (18). On one Tuesday morning, students woke up to find that the 670 shuttle was cancelled all morning. CapMetro's chief operating officer later explained that this was a mistake attributed to a glitch in the CapMetro app, and that the 670 was still running. However, due to staffing shortages, it was operating on a limited hourly schedule instead of its typical 15 to 20 minutes. These issues led to Riverside students—many of whom are low-income people of color who live in Riverside due to the neighborhood's relative affordability—being penalized by their instructors for arriving late or missing class. Several months later, students organized to create the Rise Riverside Coalition, which is working toward better bus services, among several other demands for commuter students (19).

## Information

Riders highlighted various issues related to the availability of relevant and timely information on transit service. Wayfinding was a primary concern, because information about routes, schedules, and upcoming bus statuses were difficult to access, misleading, or incorrect. Paper maps were deemed unclear or confusing, stops lacked screens with real-time information, and the CapMetro app rarely showed the actual arrival times for the next bus.<sup>19</sup> Some riders we talked to make do without an app or any real-time travel information because they do not own a smartphone. Instead of checking a schedule, one rider mentioned he simply shows up to the bus stop and waits until a bus arrives.<sup>20</sup> Even with access to an app however, accurate information can be difficult to come by. One focus group participant highlighted these difficulties accessing clear, user-friendly information:

One of my greatest frustrations has been with the schedule. Here, there's no app [that provides real-time information] and the city doesn't publish any sort of GPS data for, like, when is the bus going to arrive at the stop near you. So you just have to kind of guess. The closest thing they have are these timetables, where maybe, like the very first stop, and the very last stop, have a fixed time, but nothing else does. And I find that frustrating because it means that I can waste up to 15 minutes each time I arrive at a bus stop, and I don't know what to expect. **The**

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<sup>18</sup> In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> In-person interviews, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022; Westgate Transit Center, April 14, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> In-person interview, Riverside/Pleasant Valley, April 14, 2022.

**number one thing that would really convince me to take the bus a lot more was if I could be sure when it was coming.**<sup>21</sup>

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***“The city doesn't publish any sort of GPS data [telling you] when the bus is going to arrive at the stop near you. So you just have to kind of guess.”***

*– Focus Group Participant on April 6, 2022*

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Another participant also expressed how navigating the system (interpreting maps, understanding connections) can be difficult: “I think sometimes people like struggle with knowing where to go, and I don't really know a solution to fix that.”<sup>22</sup>

These experiences highlight key barriers to using CapMetro services. The inability to access real-time, accurate information leaves riders in a constant state of uncertainty and frustration. The lack of clear navigation tools and information not only hinders existing transit users but deters potential users from trying the service.

## **Affordability and Fares**

Riders commonly noted that they use public transit to reduce their household transportation costs. In general, riders felt that CapMetro's service was affordable. One rider shared they enjoy riding buses because they provide a “relatively cheap way of getting around town.”<sup>23</sup>

Several riders also noted fare affordability as an ongoing concern, with **some suggesting that rides should be free.**<sup>24</sup> A focus group participant expressed positive feedback about the free transit access they receive as a student at the University of Texas stating, “I like that I don't have to spend money because I have a student ID card to be able to go on the bus whenever [I want]...Sometimes I've gone to the mall on the bus. You know, it's really long, but I also like that I don't have to pay.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Focus Group, April 6, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Focus Group, April 7, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Focus group, April 7, 2022. To be clear, the apparently “free” service is paid for by The University of Texas.

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***“[There should be] more buses with phone charging capabilities, especially if [CapMetro] are going to use digital tickets.”***

*– Transit rider at North Lamar Transit Center on April 7, 2022*

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Interviewed transit riders expressed shared concerns about the shift to reliance on digital information and transactions for fare payment. CapMetro’s planned adoption of a contactless fare system also excludes riders without a smartphone. However, some people we engaged with who do have smartphones complained about a lack of charging stations on buses and at bus stops. A contactless system is useless if a rider’s phone is dead. One rider said **“[There should be] more buses with phone charging capabilities, especially if [CapMetro] are going to use digital tickets”** and that **“bus stops should also be able to charge phones.”**<sup>26</sup>

## Dignity and Respect

Transit riders we spoke with talked about wanting a more dignified experience and a significant re-evaluation of the respect demonstrated to riders at every level of CapMetro’s service. For Austin transit riders, a lack of dignity manifests in many issues discussed in this section, including a lack of consideration for their time due to the unreliability of transit, as well as a lack of consideration for their safety and comfort due to poor conditions at and near bus stops.

But a lack of dignity permeated more concerning elements of transit riders’ experiences with CapMetro. These included interactions with drivers, faith in decision-makers to reflect their needs, and trust in decision-making processes to prioritize current riders. **Most notably, eight riders we spoke to at bus stops<sup>27</sup> mentioned that many drivers are rude, with one emphasizing that drivers “da mal respeto a la gente...te gritan” (“disrespect riders and yell at them”).<sup>28</sup>** Many riders were sure to note that “a decent amount of the drivers are pretty amiable”<sup>29</sup> and the nice drivers, while rare, “deserve recognition.”<sup>30</sup> But it is disconcerting to hear riders describe drivers as “cruel”<sup>31</sup> and as frequently passing riders who are waiting at the bus stop – a sentiment expressed by many riders both during the focus groups and in-person conversations. The literature on

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26 In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

27 In-person interviews, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022 and Riverside/Pleasant Valley, April 14, 2022.

28 In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

29 Focus group, April 11, 2022.

30 In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

31 In-person interview, Riverside/Pleasant Valley, April 14, 2022.

this dynamic revealed similar concerns about driver/transit staff treatment of riders, and thus called for “trauma-informed and cultural-sensitivity training for transit employees” (20). Nevertheless, one rider in Austin noted that drivers may be overworked and transit generally understaffed, but this does not excuse consistently rude attitudes.<sup>32</sup>

Despite these complaints, some riders commented on the difficulty in having them heard, saying there is “no good, easy way to voice opinion[s] and provide feedback.”<sup>33</sup> During two of the in-person conversations at Riverside/Pleasant Valley on April 14, 2022, we asked riders if anyone from CapMetro had ever talked to them about the bus service; both said no. While a small sample size, riders generally shared a sense of inability to influence decisions regarding bus service. In particular, riders expressed frustration with the decision-making process and perceived that the decision-makers are not riders themselves and therefore should not be making decisions about the bus system. One rider noted that not only is CapMetro “run by a committee of people who are above any kind of contact” and “do not ride the bus,” but meetings about the transit system are held in places “you can’t get to because the buses don’t go there. What good is that?”<sup>34</sup>

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***“[CapMetro is] run by a committee of people who are above any kind of contact [with riders], [they] don’t ride the bus;” meetings are held in places “you can’t get to because the buses don’t go there. What good is that?”***

*- Transit Rider at North Lamar Transit Center on April 7, 2022*

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## Safety and Street Conditions

Transit riders regularly cite safety and security issues related to harassment (from passengers, passersby, and staff), threats, or experiences of violence. Harassment and violence on transit take a physical, mental, and emotional toll on riders, but can also present logistical issues that make taking the bus difficult. Efforts to maintain safety when a violent situation arises require transit staff to stop driving and serve as mediators, causing the bus to fall behind schedule. One rider discussed this in a focus group:

There’ve been many occasions where there’s been great delays because they’ve needed to resolve situations involving aggravated individuals. I don’t hold it too much against them. It’s kind of a tricky issue that doesn’t have a super great

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32 In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

33 In-person interview, Republic Square, April 7, 2022.

34 In-person interview, North Lamar Transit Center, April 7, 2022.

solution, but it definitely is a very real issue. Especially on some of the later buses, safety is a very, very genuine concern.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to these issues of harassment, there are also concerns surrounding riders' physical safety. Riders expressed concern about safety at bus stops, where a lack of lighting made waiting an unnerving experience. For riders without access to a smartphone, waiting at a dark bus stop is especially intimidating given that they cannot easily access information about where their bus is and how long it will take to arrive. Additionally, the vehicle conditions were noted as a safety concern. Some riders called for the vehicles to have better shocks and suspension to make for a smoother and less bumpy ride. Bumpy bus rides can cause riders to be thrown around if they are unable to sit.

In terms of physical aspects and connectivity, riders lamented poor sidewalk conditions to and from stops, inhibiting comfort and ease of access for many riders and complete inaccessibility for riders with limited mobility. Riders also reported a lack of adequate seating or shade at many stops throughout the city. One rider shared the following:

[S]ome of the [bus stops] are literally just a pole with no sidewalk. So they do feel a little bit unsafe and I usually tend to walk to the next one that has at least a little bit of a cut out. I feel okay we're standing there, but some people may not. And also I wouldn't stand there at night versus during the day. You know, just for safety reasons.<sup>36</sup>

Intimidating surroundings and poor conditions in the physical environment can make riders vulnerable to dangerous situations, and as such, they may have to choose between being safe and taking transit. Riders will experience varying levels of danger based on their appearance and perceived identity. Danger is generally heightened for those who do not present as white or a man (4). Those not fitting into these groups are forced to make decisions between riding transit and their safety that others do not.

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<sup>35</sup> Focus Group, April 11, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Focus Group, April 7, 2022.

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***“Some of the [bus stops] are literally just a pole with no sidewalk. So they do feel a little bit unsafe and I usually tend to walk to the next one that has at least a little bit of a cut out.”***

*- Focus Group Participant on April 7, 2022*

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These issues demonstrate the need for substantial improvements to riding conditions and the riding experience that address interactions between riders as well as between riders and bus drivers. The lived experience of waiting for the bus and riding the bus must also be improved.

## **Project Connect Outstanding Issues**

In this section, we identify and discuss a number of outstanding issues that need to be addressed for Project Connect to reach its full potential: a transit system that is reliable, affordable, convenient, and safe for all users. And one that minimizes negative effects on existing CapMetro riders and other Austin residents.

These issues were identified through conversations with community members and current transit riders, presentations by current and former CapMetro and City of Austin employees, and academic literature regarding theories of justice and community engagement. The specific issues we identify are:

- Worsening housing affordability, gentrification, and displacement
- Integration between Project Connect and the existing bus network
- Confusing community engagement
- Barriers to riding rail related to policing and affordability

At the outset, it is important to note that not all of these issues were created by actions undertaken by the implementing agencies. As creations of the state, cities and counties in Texas are subject to oversight and control by the Texas Legislature. That body has proposed or enacted laws and policies that prohibit municipalities from advancing affordable housing production and preservation, environmental protection, labor rights, civil rights, and anti-displacement initiatives. Accordingly, CapMetro, the City of Austin, and ATP are limited in terms of their possible policy and planning responses. Still, calling attention to these outstanding issues can help to create public support for their

resolution and can push the relevant agencies to engage with elected officials and residents with the goal of identifying and implementing creative solutions.

## Housing Affordability, Displacement, and Gentrification

Providing services and amenities without dramatically increasing housing prices is a key challenge for contemporary urban planning across the country. Parks, libraries, schools, restaurants, and other amenities have the potential to increase land value, and thus housing prices, property taxes, and rents. Increasing values can prevent newcomers from moving in and rising rents and taxes can force existing residents out. New residents who can afford higher prices are often whiter, wealthier, and more highly educated than existing residents. Even residents who stay might see their friends, neighbors, businesses, and places of worship and celebration move or close down. These related processes are referred to as gentrification (changing neighborhood demographics) and displacement (forcing residents out, preventing new ones from moving in, or having the cultural environment shift around one's home shift substantially).

Transportation infrastructure like bike lanes, light rail stations, and urban trails can contribute to gentrification and displacement. Zuk et al. (21) found that **growth and property value increases follow transit development, and that in gentrifying areas, in-movers tend to be whiter and wealthier than existing residents**. Multiple studies have been undertaken across the country to document gentrification and displacement pressures due to light rail station siting.

### **Evidence on Light-Rail-Induced Gentrification**

*Two case studies, one conducted in Seattle and one in Denver, illustrate the gentrification that can come with light rail investment. In Seattle, the percentage of Black residents decreased near light-rail stations while the percentage of white residents increased. Light-rail stations can serve as anchors for gentrification: land use mix near stations creates amenities in addition to improved transit. The gentrification caused by stations works against the goal of creating transit for existing residents (22). In Denver, a study showed that private investment follows public investment in transit but also that gentrification occurs before and after transit service changes. Neighborhoods close to light-rail stations saw changes in median household incomes and housing values because of light-rail investments (23).*

CapMetro and the City of Austin have firsthand experience with investment-induced displacement during Red Line and associated transit-oriented development (TOD) construction. Traditional TOD involves siting mixed-use residential and commercial development around a transit station, but the combination of transit access and amenities can create displacement pressures through property value increases.

The Plaza Saltillo TOD provides a prime example of gentrification in Austin. Located in a formerly primary Latinx neighborhood just east of Downtown, the area is now home to a Whole Foods, luxury apartments, and a wine bar. Affordable housing near the station was not produced quickly, and a lack of support for existing homeowners and renters near the station have resulted in gentrification and displacement.

According to the *Uprooted Report*, created by professors at the University of Texas at Austin, the census tract where Plaza Saltillo is located and the nearby census tract containing the Holly neighborhood have gentrified substantially in the past 25 years. Between 2000 and 2016, the percentage of white people in both tracts increased by over 20 percentage points. In Saltillo, median incomes increased by over 25%; in Holly, it was over 50% (24). Using 2019 and 2020 data, CapMetro tracked the people in Austin vulnerable to displacement by Project Connect with the Project Connect Anti-Displacement Dashboard. The Dashboard indicates that **approximately 302,000 people (135,000 households) are vulnerable to displacement by Project Connect. Of those people, approximately two-thirds are people of color** (25).

To combat forces of gentrification that lead to displacement, \$300 million of the Project Connect funds are dedicated to anti-displacement projects and policies. To help decide how to spend this money, the city assembled a group of ‘catalysts’ to develop a *Racial Equity Anti-Displacement Tool* whose goal is to “evaluate and shape \$7.1 billion in transit investments for more equitable outcomes [and] direct \$300 million toward community-identified projects that redress past displacement harm and prevent future displacement” (26).

The equity tool catalyst group includes 30 citizens who represent people most likely to be affected by rising property values from transit implementation: 88% are current or former residents of the Eastern Crescent,<sup>37</sup> 100% earn less than the median Austin income, 50% have no personal vehicle, and 90% are people of color (27). The economic and demographic make-up of the catalyst group seeks to incorporate traditionally marginalized voices into the planning process *and* back up the engagement with the power to direct funds to combat potentially discriminatory free market real-estate practices.

The tool is contained in the catalyst group’s final report. It is intended to be used by private developers and public officials to score their projects and policies to see if they further equity. The report identifies six overall goals that it would like to see projects advance. They are to: (1) to prevent residential, commercial, and community displacement, (2) advance economic mobility and opportunity, (3) build on local cultural aspects, (4) promote transport mobility and connectivity, (5) develop healthy and safe

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<sup>37</sup> The area in east Austin roughly bounded by Highway 183, Highway 71, and Interstate 35.



neighborhoods, and (6) create equitable access to all neighborhoods. To accomplish these goals, the tool is designed to be used to evaluate each development and policy, which will be scored in some or all of five categories, outlined below:

1. **Community Driven:** Does this proposal advance the community’s vision of racially equitable development and is it accountable to them?
2. **Community Priorities:** Does this proposal meaningfully decrease displacement pressures for those populations, businesses, and cultural anchors most at risk?
3. **Community Guardrails:** Does this proposal include guardrails against increased displacement or economic harm to businesses, community organizations, and residents who identify as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)?
4. **Reasonableness:** Is this proposal likely to be successfully implemented?
5. **Balanced Portfolio:** Does this proposal reflect a balance of priority populations, places, and purposes?

Each category includes between three and nine questions, on which the proposed project is scored on a scale of zero to five. Policy, planning, and program decisions and Anti-Displacement Fund capacity-building proposals are required to complete sections 1-3; Anti-Displacement Fund projects are required to complete sections 1-4; and Section 5 should be used before each round of Anti-Displacement Fund award decisions is finalized.

**The tool also recognizes that creating equity is a continuous process, not something that is fixed once and then complete.** The ‘guardrails’ part of the tool seeks to address the one-and-done nature of many equity processes, but the catalyst group also recognizes that community needs as well as external social and economic conditions can change, and that equity policies must sometimes be revisited and readjusted to continue to provide equitable outcomes.

In addition to the equity tool under the purview of the City of Austin, CapMetro is conducting an ETOD Study, to help guide development around some planned light rail stations. According to CapMetro, TOD becomes ETOD when it not only mitigates displacement and negative potentials of new development but also “create[s] benefits and opportunities for residents of all incomes and backgrounds” (28). The study has six priorities:

1. Enable all residents to benefit from safe, sustainable and accessible transportation
2. Help to close racial health and wealth gaps
3. Preserve and increase housing opportunities that are affordable and attainable
4. Expand access to high-quality jobs and career opportunities

5. Support healthy neighborhoods that allow residents to meet daily needs nearby, and
6. Sustain Austin’s diverse cultural heritage and small businesses

The ETOD study was initially funded by a \$1.65 million grant through the Federal Transit Administration’s Pilot Program for Transit-Oriented Development Planning. CapMetro provided close to \$500,000 in additional funding to expand the scope from 13 stations on the Orange and Blue lines to all 98 stations across the system (16). The ETOD study will provide policy recommendations based on community priorities identified through public engagement, publish station area vision plans for four key stations, update an existing small area plan along the Blue line corridor, and create an online tool listing priorities, typologies, and policies for all 98 stations (16, 28). The City of Austin will take these recommendations and metrics under consideration as they take over implementation of the plans. Despite the breadth of the ETOD program, like the equity tool, it focuses thinking on a single element of Project Connect—the station areas—rather than on broader transit equity issues.

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***“I don’t know what the answer is [to rapidly increasing housing costs].”***

*- Nefertitti Jackmon, City of Austin Community Displacement Prevention Officer*

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Despite the \$300 million dedicated to anti-displacement strategies, the equity tool, and the ETOD program, the City of Austin and CapMetro’s response to future gentrification pressures is likely inadequate. First, **\$300 million is simply not enough to stem the tide of displacement facing the city.** In an interview with KXAN, City of Austin Community Displacement Prevention Officer Nefertitti Jackmon said “No... The \$300 million dollars are insufficient to meet the rapidly increasing housing costs that Austinites are facing, especially low-income households... I don’t know what the answer is.” Other solutions besides the existing funds are necessary, but Jackmon and city officials are struggling to come up with solutions (29) that don’t break Texas state laws, such as an income tax or rent control. Additionally, as the area median income (AMI) for Austin skyrockets due to burgeoning tech jobs, units available at 80% or 60% AMI will remain unaffordable for a significant portion of the population.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> AMI is used as a benchmark for housing affordability to account for differences in cost of living across different regions. Housing units can be defined as affordable for a household earning a percentage of the AMI. For example, if the AMI is \$100,000, a unit defined as being affordable at 80% AMI would be target at a household earning \$80,000.

Another issue with the anti-displacement funds is that they must be used to help residents living within one mile from planned stations. However, as some of those residents are forced to move farther from stations, it will displace people outside of the one-mile radius. Further, gentrification and displacement conversations largely leave out emotional or logistical hardships. Uncertainty associated with a move is extremely stressful, as new transportation routes to work, school, friends, and family must be determined. **Available anti-displacement funds cannot be used directly by residents (i.e., without a partnership with a non-profit), meaning that residents have no direct control over their individual displacement risk.** Additionally, organizations that apply for funding will only be contracted for one to three years. This means that **once the \$300 million is used up or funding goes to another organization, those who relied on anti-displacement money could still be displaced from station areas.** Furthermore, it may be difficult for residents to handle the administrative side of applying for receiving the funds, which may occur differently for each non-profit.

While the power of the equity tool to direct the \$300 million in anti-displacement funds is notable, unique, and meaningful, its process and timing present several issues. Before it was presented to the Project Connect Community Advisory Committee on August 25, 2021, the tool was completed without the opportunity for input and suggestions outside of the 30 community catalyts. Also, the tool was published nearly a year and a half after voters approved Project Connect in November 2020. Once the proposition passed, land around station sites almost immediately increased in value. As shown in the academic literature, investment near station sites occurs before and after the stations are built. The delay between the certainty of Project Connect and the formalization of the equity tool allowed developers and the City of Austin to purchase land and adjust their development strategy without equity considerations.

One of the biggest challenges with the equity tool is that **developers are only required to use it if they are seeking to use some portion of the \$300 million in anti-displacement funds.** Developers who do not want to partner with the city are not required to adhere to any equity requirements. Additionally, the tool has mostly been discussed with reference to allocating anti-displacement funds. But it could also be expanded to other parts of the project, such as station siting and design, as well as on policies regarding policing, fares, train headways, and redesigning bus service. The implementing agencies would need to complete some additional work to identify precisely how the tool could be used in these other program areas.

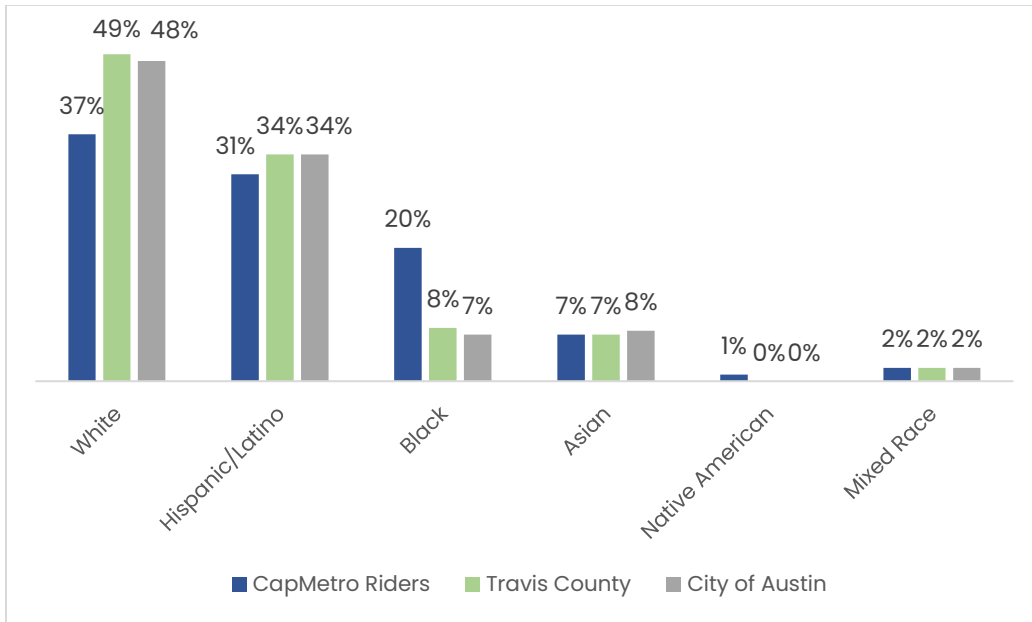
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The notion of affordability here is tied to the concept of rent-burden—where spending 30% of household income is considered to be “affordable.” Returning to the 80% of AMI affordable unit, 30% of \$80,000 is \$24,000. Allocated over 12 months, the household would expect to spend \$2,000 per month for all housing expenses (including rent, fees, insurance, etc.).

Local governments can only do so much to mitigate gentrification and displacement. Ultimately, the private market for housing and the behaviors it incentivizes are major culprits. Choices made by individual property owners, speculators, commercial real-estate firms, and real-estate developers seeking to maximize their profits are ultimately what lead people to be displaced—either directly, when they can no longer afford to live in a particular housing unit or indirectly, when they cannot afford to move to a location in the first place. There are virtually no restrictions on private property owners in Texas in terms of the sale prices they can demand or the rents that they can charge. And landlords will generally find a way to swap out lower-paying for higher-paying tenants. The most promising actions that can be undertaken to prevent gentrification and displacement come not from local governments but from local residents—tenants and non-profits organizing to remove land and housing from the private market and vision new forms of property management, ownership, and rental housing.

## Integrating the Bus into Project Connect

**The vast majority of public transit riders in Austin use local bus, as opposed to MetroRapid and MetroRail.** Local MetroBus has approximately 1.3 million monthly trips, as opposed to 250,000 monthly riders and 45,000 monthly riders for MetroRapid and MetroRail, respectively (30). Additionally, current transit riders are predominantly people of color (31). Figure 3 shows the racial/ethnic make-up of current CapMetro riders with City of Austin and Travis County demographics shown for comparison. Black people in particular are heavily overrepresented among CapMetro riders (20% of riders but only 7% of the City of Austin) and white people are heavily underrepresented (48% of the City of Austin but only 37% of riders).



**Figure 3: Race/ethnicity of CapMetro riders compared to regional demographics.**  
 Source: CapMetro (31); American Community Survey 2015–2019 five-year estimates.

**Project Connect’s implementing agencies have not presented a coherent vision for integrating, expanding, or enhancing the existing MetroBus system.**

Existing bus routes will need to change to eliminate redundancy and effectively bring passengers to the new rail routes. Sound coordination between bus and rail includes considerations of timed transfers between the two modes, an integrated fare policy, shared bus-rail infrastructure, temporary bus rerouting during construction, and permanent bus rerouting once the system is completed.

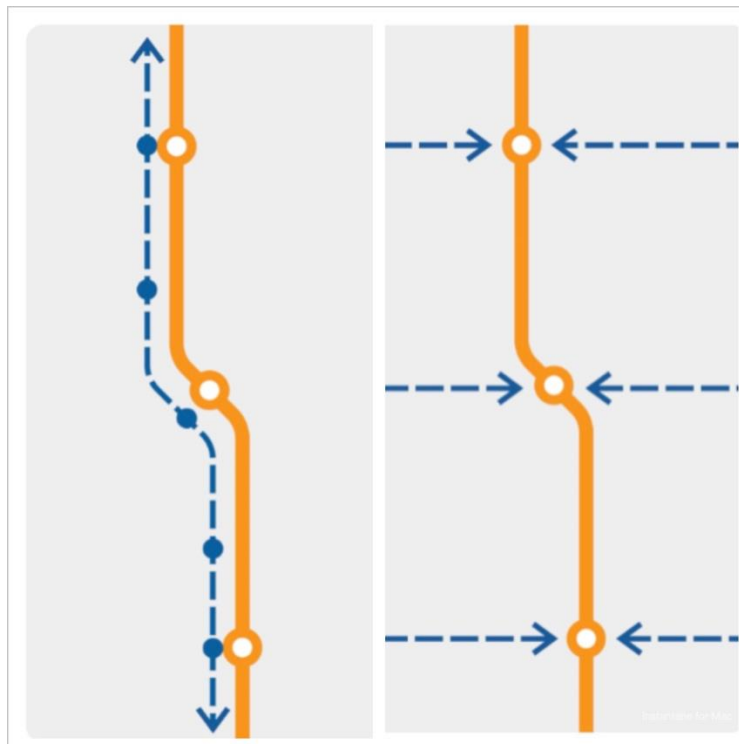
Many CapMetro users have relied on existing bus routes for years, and changes to service could be highly disruptive to their daily routines and schedules. While the Orange and Blue rail lines will certainly benefit some existing bus riders, Project Connect staff must recognize the needs of transit users for whom rail may not be a viable regular option. CapMetro should seek to balance existing and future rider needs and begin to evaluate alternatives that would minimize disruptions to existing trips and travel needs.

Throughout the focus groups and interviews conducted for this report, riders raised concerns about how current and future lines would serve their needs—whether stops and lines were accessible to their home, place of work, and other essential or desirable destinations. In one focus group, a participant expressed that Project Connect is unlikely to improve their mobility since they use a route that is not located near any proposed rail or MetroRapid lines.<sup>39</sup> Many of the current bus riders on CapMetro are those who depend on the bus to reach daily activities. During a one-on-one conversation with a rider about

<sup>39</sup> Focus Group, April 11, 2022.

the upcoming project, the interviewee expressed worry that a new light rail system would impact bus routes.<sup>40</sup>

Currently, Project Connect is envisioning two types of local bus realignments—parallel and perpendicular to the rail, as shown in Figure 4 (32). **Running buses parallel to rail decreases walking distances required to access transit between rail stops. Routing buses toward rail stops makes transfers easier and more convenient.** Agencies often face tradeoffs when integrating a new rail system into an existing bus network. Although parallel service is convenient for reducing walking distance, it is also redundant. Perpendicular bus routes are likely to replace existing routes and cause riders who previously had a one-seat ride to transfer and potentially pay a higher fare. This reality does not mean that these types of system changes should not be pursued, but it does demonstrate that they need to be analyzed and impacts communicated to the public so that everyone can make informed decisions about competing system designs.



**Figure 4: How Bus Routes Will Complement Rail Lines. Source: CapMetro (32).**

In addition to long-term, post implementation impacts, Austin residents have too little information about how the current bus system will be affected by Project Connect during construction. **Available engagement materials are vague regarding how local bus service will be affected along The Drag<sup>41</sup> and in other parts of the city** where

<sup>40</sup> In-person interview, Westgate Transit Center, April 14, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Guadalupe Street approximately between W Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and W 30<sup>th</sup> Street.

construction of rail routes will affect bus service. For example, plans for The Drag as of mid-2022 show existing MetroBus routes being rerouted to San Antonio Street or kept parallel to the rail lines on Guadalupe. However, these reroutes are unlikely to result in improved service to current MetroBus users because buses will have to make more turns in mixed traffic along narrow rights of way. Riders should have a coherent explanation of how the current bus system will be affected and what to expect during Project Connect's construction.

Additionally, Project Connect envisions infrastructure to serve the new rail lines without consideration of future improvements or expansion of MetroBus. Large investments, such as the Blue Line Bridge across Lady Bird Lake, were shown to exclude buses—until initial plans were shared with the public. Many current routes that cross Lady Bird Lake could potentially benefit from dedicated access and greater connectivity, including the 7, 20, UT Shuttles, and E-Bus. After local residents, members of local planning and transportation commissions, and journalists raised concerns, Project Connect's implementing agencies proposed a design for the Blue Line bridge that includes buses. While this change shows a willingness to listen and work with the public, CapMetro and ATP have stated that the decision to allow buses on the proposed bridge will ultimately depend on further analysis in accordance with the Federal Transit Administration's Capital Investment Grant rating guidelines, rather than the will of the community (33). Overall, Project Connect planners need to consider present and near-future issues, and more carefully and critically plan bus and rail integration.

## Community Engagement

Equitable implementation of Project Connect is hindered by the absence of a comprehensive community engagement strategy across the implementing agencies. Examples of engagement strategies implemented so far for Project Connect include:

- Racial equity anti-displacement tool
- Community advisory committee
- Station area working groups
- Community connectors
- Focus groups
- Large scale presentations
- One-on-ones with community representatives
- Presentations to stakeholders
- Online comments/feedback
- Public meetings/open houses – in person and virtual
- Project connect ambassador network
- Design workshops
- Other community meetings

Despite these opportunities, **Austinites did not have an opportunity to shape the most fundamental parts of the proposed system—where the rail will go and where the stations will be.** Rail line and station siting decisions occurred mostly behind closed doors and prior to voter approval of Project Connect in November 2020, although the map was available prior to the approval vote. There has also been almost no discussion of the operations of Project Connect and how they will affect poorer and non-English speaking communities. Of the riders we talked to at bus stops around Austin, **eight of the twenty we talked to about their experiences riding transit in Austin had not heard of Project Connect.**<sup>42</sup> **None of the Spanish-speaking riders we asked about Project Connect knew what it was.** This lack of awareness suggests that community engagement efforts are not reaching enough—much less all—riders.

Most of the community engagement that has occurred since the approval of Project Connect has been heavily design focused. Design workshops, station working groups, and presentations are the bulk of the community engagement work undertaken by agency staff. While feedback on design topics is valuable, it is only a small part of the project, and excludes the public from what are arguably more impactful decisions related to infrastructure location, level, and quality of service. Additionally, Project Connect has a series of working groups on the Blue and Orange Line stations, which allow community members to provide input on design and operations at stations. No working groups have been planned for the Green Line stations. The discrepancies in actual service between east and west Austin are yet to play out, but a lack of transparency and engagement on the decision making that went into fundamental parts of the project such as placing the lines and the stations, as well as construction and implementation timing, does not point toward an equitable outcome.

## **Barriers to Riding Rail: Policing and Affordability**

As noted in the [Existing Rider Needs](#) section of this report, riders have concerns about their immediate safety and the safety of other bus riders. Safety is complex. Some riders might feel unsafe at the presence of other riders who are visibly unhoused or suffering from mental illness. But this is not specifically a public transit problem, rather it is a problem with broader housing, health care, and criminal justice policy. Public transit simply provides a space in which these broader societal issues become visible.

Law enforcement is often seen as the first line of defense against safety issues on public transit. But there is substantial evidence that low-income people and people of color are likely to experience citations, arrests, and violence from law enforcement officers at a higher rate than other passengers. These are also safety issues. **The presence of law enforcement does not make all riders feel safe and secure.** A transit police force

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<sup>42</sup> Of the 28 participants in the in-person conversation, 20 were asked about Project Connect.



increases risk of criminal punishment or physical harm for minor fare or policy infractions. During summer 2021 however, the CapMetro board voted to create a new transit police force. The proposal would also increase security infrastructure such as cameras and allow 'public safety ambassadors' (or civilian employees) to ticket riders (34). These solutions are problematic.

Public transit is largely used by low-income riders who do not own cars or have other access to alternatives. Despite the relatively low cost, paying a fare to use public transit is often prohibitive for riders (35). Many riders we spoke with for this report mentioned that fares are an important consideration when they are thinking about whether Project Connect will allow them to better meet their daily needs.

### ***Evidence on Discriminatory Transit Policing***

*Black people and other people of color in the United States are routinely and disproportionately subjected to harassment, violence, arrest, and death at the hands of law enforcement. This is true of policing on public transit and has resulted in disproportionate rates of citations and deadly outcomes for riders.*

*For example, on the morning of January 1, 2009, Oscar Grant, a 22-year-old Black man returning from an evening of celebrating, was unarmed and lying face down when he was shot and killed by Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police at Oakland's Fruitvale Station (36). In Los Angeles (37), Long Beach, CA (38), and Washington, D.C (39), among many other cities in the United States, Black people are disproportionately stopped, cited, or arrested for fare evasion. In New York City, 92% of people arrested for fare evasion and 71% given summons for fare evasion were Black (40). In their study of Washington D.C., Carter and Johnson (39) found that although Black people comprise 50% of the D.C. population, they account for 91% of passengers receiving fare citation. Furthermore, a study conducted in Los Angeles found that stations in or near gentrifying communities had more of a police presence—resulting in more citations given to Black people—than stations in other neighborhoods (37).*

CapMetro has introduced a new reduced-fare program that they call *Equifare*. To qualify, riders must earn a household income of less than 200% of the federal poverty level or receive various forms of assistance including Medicaid or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (41). This program extends to more people than the current reduced fare option. Those who qualify for both will receive the lower fare rate. CapMetro is also introducing fare capping, which will cap the amount a person pays for their fares so that they never exceed the cost of a day pass per day or monthly pass per month. Fare capping is particularly important for riders who cannot afford the upfront cost of a pass. It will be facilitated by a new contactless fare card (41).

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**“[I] probably would [take the train], if [the cost] is not too high”**

– Transit Rider at the South Congress Transit Center on April 7, 2022

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Little information is available about how and whether fares will change when Project Connect is implemented. There has been no assurance from CapMetro that fares will not increase to cover increasing project costs. And we do not know whether fares will be flat (one price for the entire system) or distance/zone based (prices differ based on the length of a trip). As of mid-2022, a single MetroRail ride costs three times more than bus fare. If rail remains prohibitively more expensive than bus, lower-income riders will be discouraged from riding rail, even when their bus service may have been replaced or adjusted. This will result in higher time or monetary costs for poorer riders. Furthermore, introducing public safety ambassadors that issue citations will also negatively impact low-income riders, who already struggle to pay their fare (42).

Project Connect cannot improve congestion and accessibility issues on its own; public transit is just one part of a larger set of land use and transportation policy and project decisions that will shape Austin's transportation future. However, **the policies and projects being implemented to improve the city's transportation system lack two hugely important aspects: coordination and complementarity**. For example, another major transportation project coming to Austin is the expansion of I-35 through the heart of the city. The project, designed and constructed by the Texas department of transportation (TXDOT), will widen the freeway to up to 20 lanes in some places (43). The project will incentivize more Austinites to drive, directly contradicting one of the main goals of Project Connect.

Additionally, Austin has an antiquated land use code, which has not had a major updated since 1984 (44). The code discourages the density required to make public transportation (rail and bus) a meaningfully viable option for residents living outside of the downtown core. A Texas Appeals Court recently ruled that citizens have a substantial right to protest rezoning, effectively requiring a supermajority on City Council to rezone most of the parcels in the City (45). Additionally, streets designed for speed, off-street parking minimums, and cheap parking continue to encourage residents of Austin to own and use a car as opposed to other modes of transportation. **For Project Connect to achieve its goals and transform how residents and visitors travel, more in the city has to change than just the public transportation landscape.**

## Recommendations

Project Connect will have profound implications for Austin and the broader region in the decades to come. With every decision made, certain parameters of the project become locked in, and other parts become more difficult to change. Accordingly, it is imperative that the relevant agencies implement multiple policy changes as soon as possible to avoid looking back in 10 years and wishing that they had done things differently now, in the project's earliest years. Our 10 priority policy and planning recommendations aim to help Project Connect live up to its full potential and are as follows:

- 1. Recognize the fundamentally public and essential nature of transit.** Like other public services—the fire department, public libraries, and public schools—public transit does not and should not be expected to turn a profit. Evaluating system performance using measures like cost recovery or profitability on specific routes is not appropriate; rather, we should understand that public transit provides a vital and valuable link between people and opportunities including work, education, healthcare, and social contacts. The access that public transit provides is of a shared community investment that generates immeasurable societal value.
- 2. Take a comprehensive look at emerging equity issues.** Each agency has been addressing equity issues in their own way: the ETOD study (CapMetro), anti-displacement measures (City of Austin), and forthcoming performance measures and metrics (ATP). Each agency is also conducting various types of public engagement measures. But no one is looking at the project *as a whole* to ensure that it is identifying and addressing the priority unmet needs of those who rely on transit the most. This is the true definition of an equitable program (46).
- 3. Enhance general public engagement.** The project's existing public engagement efforts have been scattershot and largely focused on design elements. Riders seem largely unaware of the major equity and justice issues that loom on the horizon, if they are aware of Project Connect at all. Rather than holding many splintered public meetings, agencies should help riders understand the key issues and then seek their input at locations where they regularly gather. There are many other best practice recommendations for public engagement that agencies can employ, including providing food and childcare, providing translation services at meetings, sharing accessible meeting materials translated into appropriate languages, and holding meetings at convenient times. At least some of these practices have been implemented during the ETOD study, but they can be applied more broadly.
- 4. Examine bus network integration and explain alternatives.** Layering a new rail system onto an existing bus network always entails winners and losers. Many riders who previously enjoyed a one-seat ride will be forced to transfer from bus

to rail. Others who previously took the bus may be able to make their trips exclusively by rail. How different modes are prioritized in the right of way will also affect travel times. Appropriately analyzing who benefits from and who is burdened by these changes will require high-quality data on existing rider travel patterns and appropriate analytical methods to understand how different types of riders with different travel needs will be affected. These analyses must be completed well in advance of any proposed system changes so that riders can be made aware of them and provide feedback that genuinely shapes the process.

- 5. Avoid displacing current residents while working to preserve existing and provide new affordable housing opportunities in the city.** Project Connect's anti-displacement and general land-use measures lead the nation in terms of considering how transportation and the built environment interact and support one another. But much more still needs to be done to ensure that public transit investments do not lead people to be forced from their homes.
- 6. Identify alternatives to traditional law enforcement.** While the Capital Metro board voted in mid-2021 to create a new police force to provide law enforcement on transit vehicles, presumably the policies and procedures that govern how the future officers will interact with members of the public and the rules that govern their use of force will still be determined. These should be set so that they minimize the likelihood that encounters with officers will escalate into violent situations. To the extent possible, alternatives should still be pursued, including, public safety ambassadors who do not issue fines, transit stops designed for safety, reliable arrival information online and at all transit stops, increased transit service and frequency, and accessible methods of reporting that are promptly responded to.
- 7. Clarify how the Racial Equity Anti-Displacement Tool will be used in non-housing contexts.** The tool provides a powerful lens through which to evaluate property acquisition and other real-estate investment decisions. But the tool is also billed as being appropriate for use in evaluating other types of Project Connect-related decisions and it is not clear how a tool that was designed for evaluating housing interventions should be used for evaluating, for example, different public transit network designs. Either the tool's use needs to be clarified in different contexts, or additional tools and approaches need to be developed for evaluating the multitude of potential equity impacts that will flow from the project.
- 8. Improve the pedestrian and cycling networks that provide critical connections to transit.** Austin's sidewalk and cycling networks are in a less than desirable state. One report estimates that 50% of the city's sidewalk network is missing or incomplete (47). This figure is a problem for public transit because first- and last-mile trip segments are almost always completed along the pedestrian network. If pedestrian and cycling infrastructure are poor, public transit ridership and use will

be reduced relative to a scenario where there are safe and accessible connections. Poor network conditions are likely concentrated in the service area's more peripheral locations, but also exist in the urban core. It is not sensible to invest in a \$10 billion capital project without enhancing the supporting infrastructure that makes public transit work.

- 9. Identify and discuss how program cost increases will affect staging and phasing for different project components.** Changes in project scope, inflation, and supply chain issues are driving increases in the Project Connect budget. The property tax revenues that are funding the project will continue to flow, but difficult decisions will have to be made about which parts of the project will be delayed or scaled back and how their timing will be affected. These tradeoffs need to be identified and communicated with the public in order to avoid a repeat of the 2008 recession.
- 10. Identify, evaluate, and clarify Project Connect's fare policy.** Fares for CapMetro's rail service are currently much more expensive than local bus. Current and future riders need to understand how fare policies are likely to change because these policies will determine who benefits from the system. If Project Connect is expensive, it will benefit fewer riders. If those who currently rely exclusively on bus routes will be forced to transfer to rail, their access will be affected directly.

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# Appendix: Engagement Protocols

## Focus Groups

Students used the following script when conducting the focus groups.

*Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and this is my classmate \_\_\_\_\_. We're UT students in a class studying public transit. Thank you so much for signing up to participate in our focus group on your transit experiences in Austin.*

*Before we get started, we will be recording the meeting to effectively capture your responses for us to review to identify themes and findings. Your identities will remain anonymous and will not be tied to any responses in the report.*

*The session will last about an hour. If you need to leave beyond that time, feel free to do so. We will hard stop the session at an hour and a half.*

*We will also send a follow-up email with more details about the project, the gift card incentive, and opportunities to share more. To receive the gift card, we ask that you participate fully in the focus group by turning on your camera and answering all questions verbally.*

*Before we ask our first questions, we would like for everyone to introduce themselves by saying their name, pronouns, and favorite area/neighborhood in Austin.*

*Questions asked (verbally and posted in the chat):*

- *What do you like about riding CapMetro in Austin?*
- *What are your greatest frustrations with CapMetro transit?*
- *What do you think would make Austin transit better?*
- *How would you describe your experiences with public transit in Austin? What do you usually use transit to get to?*
- *Do you know anything about Project Connect? What are your perceptions about it?*
- *What do you hope Project Connect does for the City?*

*Upon completion of discussion*

- *Thank you so much for your participation and spending your time providing thoughtful responses and insights. Please be on the lookout for our email with further details in the coming weeks. Have a great evening!*

## In-Person Conversations

Students used the following script when talking to existing transit riders at bus stops, transit centers, and along bus routes.

### English

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and this is my classmate \_\_\_\_\_. We're UT students in a class studying public transit. We are trying to understand how current riders feel about CapMetro as part of a class project. Do you have a minute to tell us about your experience riding the bus?

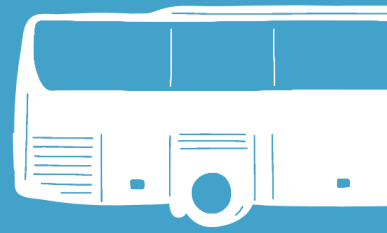
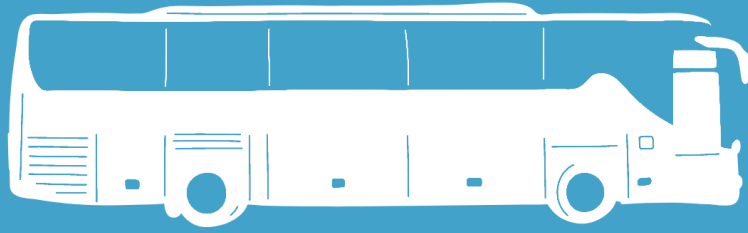
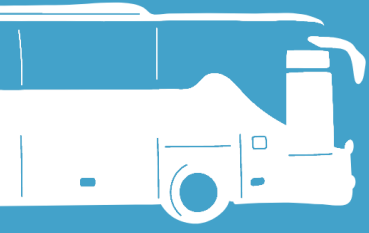
- If yes:
  - Great, thank you so much. Do you mind if we record this conversation? Any information we use will be anonymous.
  - First,
    - How long have you been riding CapMetro?
    - Where do you typically ride the bus to? How often?
    - Can you usually get to where you need to go on time using the bus?
    - What do you enjoy about riding the bus?
    - What do you wish were different?
    - Do you feel like you have a voice in how the transit system works in Austin?
    - Have you heard of Project Connect, the major transit investment voters approved in 2020 that will include new light rail lines and improved bus service?
      - [If yes] What have you heard?
        - How do you feel about that?
  - What're your hopes and dreams for Austin's public transit system?
  - Thank you so much. If you want to stay connected with this project, we are on social media [hand them flyer].
- If no:
  - Of course, thank you. You can follow up with us here [hand them flyer]. Give feedback on social media or we're having some focus groups if you want to go more in depth.

### Spanish

¡Hola, buenas tardes! Mi nombre es \_\_\_\_\_ y ella/él es mi compañera/compañero. Nosotros somos estudiantes de la universidad de UT, estamos en una clase de tránsito público. Estamos tratando de entender como los pasajeros se sienten de CapMetro para un proyecto de clase. ¿Tiene un minuto para hablar de su experiencia usando el camión?

- Sí:

- *Muchas gracias, le molesta si recordamos la conversación de audio en nuestros celulares. Cualquier información que usemos va a hacer anónima.*
- *Primero,*
  - *¿Por cuánto tiempo ha usado CapMetro? (Como manera de transportación)*
  - *A cualquier lugar/lugares típicamente va usando el camión? ¿Con cuanta frecuencia?*
  - *¿Como ejemplo, usa el camión para ir al trabajo, o a la tienda?*
  - *¿Típicamente puede llegar a donde necesite ir a tiempo usando el camión?*
  - *¿Por ejemplo, si necesita ir a un lugar en una hora puede planear su viaje en ese tiempo?*
  - *¿Hay algo que disfruta de viajar en el camión?*
  - *Por ejemplo, el tiempo libre sin manejar, el aire acondicionado...*
  - *¿Hay algo que desea que fuera diferente?*
  - *¿Siente que tiene una voz sobre cómo funciona el sistema de tránsito de Austin?*
  - *¿Ha oído de un proyecto que se llama Project Connect? Los votantes de Austin aprobaron una inversión en 2020 de transporte que incluye nuevas líneas de tren ligero y un mejor servicio de camión.*
    - *Si: ¿Que ha oído del proyecto?*
    - *¿Como se siente de eso?*
- *¿Tiene algunos sueños o deseos para el sistema de transportación de Austin?*
- *Muchas gracias por su tiempo. Si quiere seguir conectado con nuestro proyecto nos puede perseguir en la media social. [Dar papel de información]*
- *No:*
  - *Por supuesto, muchas gracias. Puede perseguirnos aquí [dar papel]. También hay oportunidad a comentar por la media social, y también vamos a tener unos grupos de estudio si le interesa hablar de este tópico más extensamente.*



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