

# Transit, Six Months After COVID-19: A Progress Report

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Transit is fighting its way back, after devastating decreases in ridership and revenue last spring, which necessitated severe service reductions on many lines and throughout many systems. Today, many of those systems are increasing service, both because many of the remaining riders need it, and in the hope that riders from the pre-COVID era will come back. Offices are re-opening slowly and carefully in some transit-rich cities, and many venues that historically attracted tourists (even if only for a day trip) are still shut down. Wherever it is located, transit must fight a protracted battle to remain relevant and regain some of the ground it captured during the past several decades, and then lost during the past several months.

In this report, we will look at how transit providers in the US and Canada are doing, especially with respect to the amount of service they are offering. Some providers are back to offering the level of service that they offered before the virus hit. Others still offer reduced service, while some lines are still shut down completely.

How is your local transit provider doing these days? Read on and find out.

## **The Northeast: Where there is still plenty of transit, but not plenty of money to run it**

The Northeast is the home of three of the nation's legacy rail systems (Boston, the New York area, and Philadelphia), a number of newer rail lines and systems, and Amtrak's Northeast Corridor (NEC) to connect most of them. It also contains cities with some of the highest percentages of transit riders in the country.

In and around Boston, the MBTA (The "T") is running regular weekday and weekend schedules on subway and light rail lines, and regular weekend service on commuter rail. Weekday schedules, although not robust, are running outside peak-commuting hours, while peak-hour service remains reduced slightly. Service remains at a reduced level on Connecticut's Hartford Line, where it is combined with the Amtrak shuttles running on the route. There are six trains in each direction between New Haven and Hartford, three of which continue to Springfield. The weekend schedule is similar, with one additional train going to Springfield, rather than turning at Hartford. The weekday schedule on Shore Line East remains far below pre-COVID levels. There are six trains to New London and two that turn at Old Saybrook seven days a week, similar to the pre-COVID weekend schedules.

New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority reports that ridership on subways is about one third of pre-COVID levels, while bus ridership is about half of last year's. Weekday ridership on the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North is now about 22% of last year's levels on weekdays, but higher on weekends. Service has returned essentially to pre-COVID levels, except that there is no service north of Southeast Station (north of Brewster) on the Harlem Line on weekends, and busing continues on the Waterbury Branch in Connecticut, due to an ongoing project. The historic all-night service on the subway system was discontinued in May, so the only trains running all night are on the Port-Authority Trans-Hudson (PATH) lines between New Jersey and Manhattan. PATH train run at or near pre-COVID levels on all lines. New Jersey Transit returned to full service on July 6 for all modes. Rail ridership is comparable to the MTA's lines, and this writer has observed that trains at historically peak-commuting hours are often busier running reverse direction (outbound in the morning and inbound in the late afternoon) than in traditional commuting direction. Elsewhere in New York State, Metro Rail in Buffalo (the state's only light rail line) is running schedules comparable to pre-COVID levels.

SEPTA in Philadelphia is running hourly on weekdays with no additional “peak-hour” trains, and only the Paoli line runs every half hour. On weekends, only the Airport Line runs hourly; all other run every two hours (approximately on some lines), instead of the pre-COVID hourly service. The service day now ends earlier than during pre-COVID times, as well. The Chestnut Hill West and Cynwyd lines remain suspended, as are trains between Wilmington and Newark, Delaware. SEPTA subway and light rail lines are running at former service levels, and all-night service has returned to the Market-Frankford and Broad Street subway lines on Friday and Saturday nights. The Port Authority Transit Company (PATCO) is running between South Jersey and Philadelphia on schedules close to pre-COVID levels, including hourly overnight service. Elsewhere in Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh’s light rail lines are operating near pre-COVID levels, and the Duquesne and Monongahela Inclines continue to operate. The Inclined Plane in Johnstown is no longer a full-time operation. It now operates from 11 until 7 on Thursdays through Sundays, June through December.

In Baltimore, Maryland’s MTA runs full service on the Subway Link and on the Light Rail Link on weekdays and Saturdays. Service on the Penn Station spur is limited, and the Sunday service day is short. MARC commuter rail service continues to run on a reduced schedule, with three trains on the Brunswick Line from Martinsburg, West Virginia, three more from Brunswick, and three from Frederick. The Camden Line has been reduced to five trains for commuting to Washington, D.C. and two for commuting to Baltimore. Weekday and weekend service on the Penn Line has essentially returned to former levels, although weekday service remains limited between Baltimore and Perryville.

Metro in the Washington, D.C. area reports that current rail ridership is about one-eighth of last year’s levels. Service now runs until 11:00 every night (two hours later than last spring), with service every eight minutes at peak-hours on most lines and every fifteen minutes at other times. The DC Streetcar resumed its full service schedule on September 20, running every 12 minutes, seven days a week. Virginia Railway Express (VRE) continues to run on a reduced schedule, with only five round trips on weekdays from Fredericksburg and four from Manassas.

### **The South: “Islands” of rail transit in selected cities**

Transit has never been strong in the South. It tends to be isolated and locally-based.

The only rail transit line in Virginia outside MetroRail’s territory is the Tide Light Rail in Norfolk. It is running full service, although service does not start until late morning on Sundays. Charlotte is the only city in North Carolina with rail transit. The light rail line, the Link Blue Line, is running a full span of service, except that weekday “peak-hour” service runs every fifteen minutes; the same as mid-day and early evening periods. The CityLink Gold Line runs seven days a week with a full-service schedule, although the Sunday service day is short.

MARTA in Atlanta is still operating on a modified Sunday schedule every day, with trains running approximately every 20 minutes. The Atlanta Streetcar is running on a Sunday schedule every day, too. An interesting non-operational feature is that the MARTA web site, [www.itsmarta.com](http://www.itsmarta.com), features restroom location information and “restroom alerts”; an innovative feature, as wait times can be long. Sun Rail in the Orlando area has returned to its pre-COVID schedule, running on weekdays only with an emphasis on peak-hour commuter trains. Tri-Rail in South Florida has returned almost to hourly service on weekdays; slightly less than pre-COVID service. Weekend trains run every two hours; more than the three-hour intervals last spring, but less than the pre-COVID hourly service. Metrorail in Miami continues to run on a modified schedule. Since May 18, weekday trains have run every 10 minutes during peak-periods, every 15 minutes off-peak, and every 30 minutes from 7:30 pm until the line closes at 10:00 pm. Airport trains run on the same headways, which means that service on the

southern part of the line runs twice as often as on the northern part. On weekends, trains run every 30 minutes on the northern part of the line and on the Airport branch. Brightline, the privately-funded line between downtown Miami and West Palm Beach, has been suspended since March 25. The railroad continues construction on its extension to Orlando Airport, and is planning service on XpressWest, its proposed line that would run from Las Vegas, Nevada to southern California near Victorville, and possibly with connections to Los Angeles.

In New Orleans, streetcar service has returned almost to pre-COVID levels, although the Rampart-St. Claude line has been suspended due to a building collapse last October. The line along Loyola Avenue to the Union Passenger Terminal is now served by the Canal Street line. The same schedule runs seven days a week on all lines. On the historic St. Charles Avenue line, cars run every nine minutes for most of the service day and every 36 minutes overnight. Service on both branches of the Canal Street line runs every 16 minutes for most of the service day and every 32 minutes overnight, with most of the line covered by both schedules. The Riverfront Streetcar operates every 20 minutes for most of the service day and every 30 minutes overnight; the first time overnight service has run there. Service on “trolley” lines in Memphis (the cars are historic but run with pantographs instead of trolley poles) is not back to pre-COVID levels, but all three lines have operated since June 21. The Main Street line runs a full-service schedule on weekdays, an 8:00 a.m. start on Saturdays and from 10:00 until 6:10 on Sundays. Cars run every 20 minutes. The Riverfront Line runs every 40 minutes from 10:30 until 6:00 seven days a week. The Madison Avenue Line runs every 30 minutes on weekdays and Saturdays, but not after 6:00 and not on Sundays. Music City Star in Nashville used to run three commuter trains, but now only runs two from its outer terminal in Lebanon. The trains are stored there, so it is possible to go there from Nashville for a six-hour mid-day visit. The only rail transit line in Arkansas, the Metro Streetcar in Little Rock and North Little Rock, remains suspended.

### **The Midwest: A mixed bag, even in Chicagoland**

Cleveland’s Red Line, a metropolitan-style heavy-rail line, runs every 15 minutes throughout the service day, seven days a week. Since August 9, Blue Line and Green Line light rail run every 15 minutes between downtown Cleveland and Shaker Square, and every 30 minutes on each branch east of there. The Waterfront Line runs every 30 minutes from morning through early evening. The Cincinnati “Bell Connector” resumed operation on September 2. It operates on weekdays and Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., and on Sundays from 10 to 6. The web site does not say how often the cars run. In Detroit, the downtown People Mover and Q-Line Streetcar both remain suspended.

In Chicago, spans of service are the same as in pre-COVID days, including overnight service on the Red and Blue lines and the Evanston Express during peak-periods on weekdays. Suburban trains on Metra are still running reduced schedules. Peak-hour service has been reduced, and off-peak trains on weekdays now run every two hours on most lines. The service day ends two hours earlier than under the pre-COVID schedule on weekdays, but the last weekend train still leaves at about 12:30 a.m. on most lines. Service on peak-hour-oriented lines (Heritage Corridor, Southwest Service, and North Central service) has been reduced sharply. Metra Electric service still runs hourly on weekdays, but only every two hours on weekends now. The Blue Island branch no longer runs on weekends or after 6:00 on weekdays. Most trains that ran on Saturdays but not on Sundays no longer operate. Service on the South Shore Line to Indiana has returned almost to pre-COVID level, with a substantial discount on fares. Eastbound rides have been free since August, and the policy will continue through October. Weekday service runs about every two hours, with a mini-peak for commuters. On weekends, there are eight trains to Chicago and nine from Chicago, with five trains to South Bend Airport every day. The South Shore Line also has a unique COVID-related policy. The second car on every train is now a “mask-optional” car. The railroad says that the policy is in response to customer complaints about

having to wear a mask while riding.

In Wisconsin, the Milwaukee Streetcar (“The Hop”) runs full service until midnight every day; every 15 minutes during peak-periods and every 20 minutes at other times. The Kenosha Streetcar now runs only on weekends, from 10:35 a.m. until 6:15 pm. Blue Line light rail in Minneapolis is running at pre-COVID frequencies, but the last car leaves the Mall of America at 10:30 pm and downtown Minneapolis at 11:17 every night. Green Line cars used to run overnight, but now the last car now leaves Minneapolis at 11:19 and St. Paul at 11:17. Service on Northstar commuter rail was slashed. There are now only two trains from Big Lake to Minneapolis (with a connecting bus from St. Cloud) in the morning and back in the late afternoon. There is no longer any weekend service on the line.

The level of service on MetroLink light rail in St. Louis is back to 15-minute peak and 20-minute off-peak headways on both lines, at the pre-COVID span of service. Elsewhere in St. Louis, the Loop Trolley Company maintains a web site and claims that the line is suspended due to the virus, but service ended at the end of 2019. The Kansas City Streetcar reduced service in April to end at 8:00 pm. Effective August 3, the schedule was extended to end at 10:00. The schedule was not readily available on the web site but, running with three cars, it appears that they run on 15-minute headways.

### **The West and Southwest: Most systems don’t connect and have different service policies**

DART in the Dallas area will increase service on Monday, October 19, to 20-minute headways on all light rail lines until 7:00 pm and every 30 minutes thereafter, seven days a week. The extra service that had operated during peak-hours before the virus hit remains suspended. The Dallas Streetcar between downtown and the Bishop Arts District also runs every 20 minutes, every day. The McKinney Avenue “M-Line” streetcar, which runs with vintage equipment, has returned to pre-COVID hours of service. Trinity Railway Express (TRE) trains again run hourly on weekdays and Saturdays between Dallas and Fort Worth, but the line has never run regularly on Sundays. TEXRail in Fort Worth again runs hourly, seven days a week, with a “mini-peak” with half-hour service for a few hours every day. Houston’s three light rail lines on MetroRail are running full service, essentially at pre-COVID levels. The Denton County A-Train, which connects with DART’s Green Line, runs hourly on weekdays until 9:00, with a few extra runs, and approximately every two hours on Saturdays, with one run later in the evening. These schedules became effective on August 24, and resemble pre-COVID schedules. MetroRail in Austin runs hourly at mid-day on weekdays and more often during peak-hours, but not in the evening or on weekends. The Friday and Saturday evening service that ran pre-COVID remains suspended. The El Paso Streetcar was suspended on March 22, and service has not resumed. Streetcars in Oklahoma City now run for most of the pre-COVID service day, except that service has ended at 10:00 pm since March.

New Mexico Rail Runner Express, the only rail transit line in the state, remains suspended. The SunLink streetcar in Tucson, Arizona runs full service, but ending at 10:00 pm Sunday through Wednesday and running until 2:00 a.m. Thursday through Saturday. Valley Metro Rail in Phoenix also runs essentially at pre-COVID service levels: every 15 minutes at busy times on weekdays, and every 20 minutes on weekends and at other times on weekdays.

Denver’s RTD now runs service similar to pre-COVID schedules on all rail lines except one, seven days a week. The exception is the D-Line between Littleton-Mineral and downtown Denver, which has only a few runs per day. Service in that area is available on other lines. Denver’s rail system expanded on September 19, when the N-Line between Union Station and Eastlake/124<sup>th</sup>, opened for full service. TRAX light rail service and the S-Line Streetcar operated by the Utah Transit Authority (UTA) in the Salt Lake City area has returned to 15-minute headways on weekday mornings and afternoon, and 30-

minute headways on weekends (Sunday service ends shortly after 8:00) and weekday evenings. Front Runner trains run between Provo and Ogden through Salt Lake City hourly on weekdays and Saturdays, but service ends at mid-evening. The line has never run on Sundays.

### **The West Coast: In most places, it's All or Almost Nothing At All**

Transit has boomed in California in recent years, but it remains a mixed bag today, in light of the virus. Light rail service in San Diego again runs every 15 minutes for most of the day, seven days a week, and every 30 minutes during evenings and early-morning. The Silver Line Loop, which ran limited service with vintage PCC cars, has been suspended. On March 23, most weekday trains and all weekend trains on the Coaster line between San Diego and Oceanside were suspended. That schedule has not changed, and only six weekday trains in each direction run today; three each during morning and afternoon peak-periods. Sprinter, a diesel-light rail operation, has returned to full service, as the line defines it. Cars run half-hourly for most of the day on weekdays and part of the day on weekends, and hourly at other times, but only until mid-evening. There are extra trips half-hourly on Friday evenings and hourly on Saturday evenings.

Metro Rail in Los Angeles is running schedules similar to those in effect before the virus hit, including late-night service on Friday and Saturday nights. Metrolink, the local commuter-rail system, has not fared as well. Weekend service, where it runs, has not changed. On weekdays, mid-day, evening, and reverse-peak service has been slashed. There is a fare innovation on the system: a "5-day Flex Pass" which offers five round trips within 30 days, and is only available through Metrolink's mobile app.

The picture is very different in the San Francisco Bay area. The San Francisco Municipal Transit Authority (MUNI) has suspended all rail services: the historic cable cars, streetcars on Market Street and the Embarcadero, and all six light rail lines. There was an attempt to restore some light rail service late in August, but it failed. It is now slated to return next year. In the meantime, the bus network was slashed from 89 routes to 17 last spring, and has recovered to 37 at this writing. As of September 20, the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) reported system ridership at 20% of pre-COVID levels. The system historically operated until 12:00 midnight, but now service ends at 9:00 every day. All lines run every 30 minutes throughout the day. Some lines do not run on Sundays, but all stations have service.

Commuter lines in the area are all running severely-reduced schedules. Caltrain, the commuter line to San José, is in trouble. Before the virus hit, it depended heavily on commuters, and there are few of them riding today. The line is suffering financial woes and the upcoming election may determine its future. It still runs a relatively-robust commuter schedule with "limited" trains running skip-stop service. The "baby bullet" trains, which made the trip in less than an hour and were a marvel of scheduling, are gone. There is still hourly service all day on weekdays, while weekend service now runs only every 90 minutes, with two express trains added in each direction. The Altamont Commuter Express (ACE) train between San José and Stockton only operates during peak-commuting hours, but has cut the number of round trips from four to two. In the North Bay, Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit (SMART) trains have also been slashed. There is no longer any weekend service, and there are only nine trains left on weekdays in each direction. Five trains in each direction have been eliminated, and there is now a 5½-hour gap in service in both directions after morning-peak until mid-afternoon.

Light rail outside San Francisco seems to be doing better. Valley Transit Authority (VTA) in San José runs full service on its three light rail lines, every 20 minutes through afternoon peak on weekdays, and every 30 minutes evenings and weekends. The Blue and Gold Lines of Sacramento Regional Transit (SAC RT) light rail run every 15 minutes during the day and every 30 minutes during the evening seven days a week, although Sunday service ends early; about 9:00. Gold Line service to Folsom runs

every 30 minutes at all operating hours. The Green Line, a short spur, runs half-hourly on weekdays only until mid-evening. These are pre-COVID service levels.

MAX light rail service is strong in Portland, Oregon. All five lines run every 15 minutes until mid-evening and every 30 minutes after that, seven days a week. Westside Express Service (WES) trains between Beaverton (a suburban transit center) and Wilsonville (on the way to Salem) has been weakened. It is a peak-hour-only line that runs every 45 minutes (five trains in each direction during each peak-period), instead of the schedule of every 30 minutes before the virus hit. The Portland Streetcar runs slightly-reduced schedules, compared to pre-COVID levels. Cars run every 20 minutes during evening and early-morning hours and every 15 minutes in between, Monday through Saturday, and every 20 minutes throughout the service day on Sunday.

On September 19, Link light rail service in Seattle returned to pre-COVID frequencies, running every eight minutes during peak-hours, 15 minutes during mid-day and 30 minutes during the evening. On weekends, cars run every 15 minutes through mid-evening and every 30 minutes during late evening. Seattle streetcars (not operated by Sound Transit, although all other rail services in Seattle are) returned to service on September 19. Cars run on 15-minute headways on the South Lake Union line from morning until mid-evening (a shorter span of service on Sundays) with with 12 to 20-minute headways on the First Hill Line, which also runs later in the evening. Tacoma Link light rail now runs every 12 minutes during during the day on weekdays and all day Saturdays, and every 24 minutes in the evening on weekdays, and on Sundays. Sunday service only runs during late morning and afternoon hours, but that was also the pre-COVID schedule. Service on Sounder commuter rail has also been reduced from four peak-hour trains from Everett to two. There are still seven peak-hour trains to Seattle from Lakewood, one additional train from Tacoma, and one reverse-direction train to Tacoma. Four other trains in each direction were suspended.

### **Canada: Most of the service has come back**

Only a few cities in Canada have rail transit. There are major systems in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. Edmonton and Calgary, Alberta have light rail lines, as do Ottawa and Waterloo, Ontario.

Subway service in Montreal is running full service, from 5:30 in the morning, through late-evening. Trains run about every 3 to 5 minutes at peak hours, 4 to 10 minutes at other times on weekdays, and 8 to 10 minutes on weekends. All except one of the region's commuter-rail system, now known as Exo, returned to prior schedules on its six lines during the summer, although service is limited on some of the lines. The electrified line to Deux Montagne currently runs full service (mostly hourly on weekdays), but only between its outer terminal and Bois Franc; not into Montreal. That schedule went into effect on June 21. On November 4, the schedule will be slashed, and the line will be discontinued entirely on December 31 for two years, according to the *Montreal Gazette*. The Mount Royal Tunnel has been closed for construction of a Paris-style REM line since 2018, when weekend service ended.

Toronto's transit seems to be weathering the virus well. The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) does not list full local-transit schedules on their web site, but some observations of "next arrival" posts seems to indicate that service is running frequently. The streetcars that normally run all night (on King Street, Queen Street, Carlton Street, and Spadina Avenue) are doing so. The Union-Pearson Express (UP; not to be confused with the Union Pacific) train to the airport is operating every half-hour for its service day, until midnight. On Go Transit's commuter-rail lines, the Lakeshore Corridor, both east and west segments, are running traditional schedules: half-hourly on weekdays and hourly on weekends. There are now more trains than historic level to Mount Joy on the line to Stouffville, including on weekends. There are also a few trains to and from Barrie on weekends. Other lines that have only run

during peak-commuting periods historically still do, with buses running at other times. The only train that was lost when the virus hit was a commuter train that left Niagara Falls early in the morning and returned from Toronto in the late afternoon. That train is gone (there is a busy bus line along the route), but there are now four trains to and from Niagara Falls on weekends. So Toronto's transit is doing well during the emergency.

OC Transpo in Ottawa, the nation's capital, returned to full train and bus service on June 28. The new Confederation light rail line (which opened in 2019) runs every five minutes at peak hours, every 15 minutes during the late evening, and "very frequently" mid-day, according to the agency's web site. The original O-Train line (which opened in 2001) is now called the Trillium Line and runs every 12 to 15 minutes every day. The ION light rail line in Kitchener and Waterloo made its debut in 2019, and is running essentially full service. On weekdays, cars run every ten minutes until early evening, every 15 until late evening, and less-frequently at the end of the service day. On weekends, cars run every 15 minutes through the day, until late evening, when they run less-frequently.

In Western Canada, only three cities have rail transit: Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver. The two lines of Calgary's C-train run essentially at pre-COVID levels. On weekdays, the run ever 7 or 8 minutes during peak hours, and every 15 minutes during mid-day and most of the evening. On weekends, cars run every 16 to 19 minutes. On the Capitol Line and Metro Line, the two light rail lines run by the Edmonton Transit System (ETS), weekday service runs every fifteen minutes throughout the day. So does weekend service, although the service days ends slightly earlier on Sunday nights.

It is difficult to get precise schedules for Vancouver's Sky Train, but it again runs frequently; similar to pre-COVID schedules. The system is automated and runs three rail transit lines. West Coast Express, the local commuter-rail line, is not faring as well. Historically, the line ran five trips into downtown Vancouver in the morning, and back in the afternoon commuting-peak. Now there are only three.

So transit's recovery has been spotty, although many providers are running strong schedules. On the whole, local rail transit and buses are running more service than "commuter" rail lines, and capturing more riders, too. The big question for 2021 is how long they can continue to run the service, and how much help they might get from government at different levels. We will report to you again, as we learn more.

Amtrak and VIA Rail have implemented severe cuts. The best-known is Amtrak's decision to reduce service on most of its long-distance trains from daily to only three departures per week. Service is still running at reduced levels on the Northeast Corridor (NEC) and its branches, and also on the state-supported corridors elsewhere in the country. Some state-supported trains are not running at all. On VIA Rail, the famed transcontinental trains remain suspended, while corridor service in Ontario and Quebec still runs at reduced levels. We will report on the current situation at Amtrak and VIA Rail soon.