

THE BUS SHOULD BE FREE

By Wyatt Gordon and Faith Walker

Mobility is freedom, but just as the slaveholders who founded this country never believed in liberty for all, today too one need only look at a map of Richmond's bus system to see the limits of many folks' freedom.

Routes that end at the county line and buses that only run once an hour are two of the most visible boundaries that fence in Richmonders' freedom. The most ubiquitous and all-too-often unquestioned limitation on our freedom, however, is the farebox. If we want to liberate ourselves from car-dependency, save the planet, and right the wrongs of the past, the bus should be free.

Public good, private payment

The bus doesn't care if you can't afford a car, if your disability disallows driving, or if you've



just had one too many drinks. As long as you're waiting at a stop, the bus will pick you up and carry you home—no questions asked.

The bus epitomizes a public good: it's available to all, and society is better off the more people use it. The problem is that we treat the bus like a private company (and in Richmond it actually is). Unlike other public services such as libraries and schools, we expect the bus to pay for itself, largely on the backs of the working poor who take it.

Most Richmonders don't ride the bus regularly. Many residents of the surrounding suburbs never have. But whether you even know what GRTC stands for or not, you and your lifestyle are transit-reliant. The nurses in your hospital, the clerks at your local supermarket, and the custodians at your office or university represent just a fraction of the folks that rely upon the bus every day to get to work, to pick up their kids from school, and to shop or to seek out healthcare.

Without access to fast, frequent, and reliable public transit, much of our economy and our society would come to a screeching halt.

The crucial role high-quality transit plays in our daily lives is easily overlooked by those who don't regularly ride the bus. When

you're passing a Pulse on Broad Street or waiting behind a bus stopped to let folks on and off, public transit feels like little more than another vehicle in your way—an inconvenience to your personal commute.

From the outside, you can only vaguely make out the bodies of those on board. You know nothing of their lives and their stories. Take a trip with the Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC) and you begin to see, understand, and empathize with your fellow passengers.

A dollar and fifty cents to ride may not seem like a lot, but for Tarrance Bryant—a new GRTC rider—that amount is the difference between a reliable route to work and walking.

It can take up to three weeks to get your first paycheck at a new job, and many people just starting their careers or rejoining the workforce don't have money on hand to finance their commute in the meantime.

That's why Tarrence supports zero-fare transit: "I like that it's free because at this time I just started working, and if it wasn't for it being free I wouldn't really have a ride to work. I would probably have to walk."

No respect for riders

Politicians can always find funding to address the needs of the wealthy and well-connected. Issues important to those who take transit are often just as ignored as those who tend to ride the bus most: the working poor, the disabled, the elderly, teenagers, and people of color.

Twenty-seven percent of bus riders in Richmond have a combined *household* income of less than \$10,000 per year. Over half earn less than the federal poverty rate for Virginia of \$26,500 for a family of four, and a full 89 percent of GRTC's riders have household incomes below the state median.

If bus riders' lacking affluence weren't already enough of a reason for the powers that be to ignore their plight, nearly three quarters of those who take transit are people of color.

In America, we all agree that talk is cheap.

For all the verbal praise heaped upon our "essential workers" throughout the course of the pandemic, we didn't do enough to keep folks on the frontline safe. Instead of introducing substantive policy changes in response to the racial reckoning that was the murder of George Floyd, our society settled on BLM book clubs and empty promises of equity.

The complexities of race, class, and poverty in the United States—much less in the former capital of the Confederacy—seldom allow for simple solutions. If our goal is to expand the freedom of our friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors, then eliminating bus fares is one of the most straightforward and equitable actions we can take.

Fund our future

The cost of a year's worth of access to GRTC adds up to \$720. Scraping together the \$60 needed for a monthly pass often proves so impossible for many poor riders that they end up spending roughly \$1,000 a year on fares, paying \$1.50 each time they ride. If the bus were free like many other public services we all rely upon, Central Virginia's poorest would get to keep that cash to pay for other essential expenses like housing, food, and healthcare. Going fare free functions as a backdoor boost to wages by allowing those who take transit to work to keep more of their money.

Eliminating fares may sound like an expensive endeavor, but in actuality the cost is minor. In fiscal year 2019, GRTC collected \$4.5 million in revenue from local routes in

the City of Richmond, the same routes which are primarily frequented by low-income people of color. That means for roughly five million dollars a year, we could all ride the bus for free whenever we want, as much as we want. Going fare free would also allow GRTC to end fare enforcement, protecting passengers from over-policing and empowering bus operators to avoid conflict with riders who can't afford their fare.

Five million dollars is a lot of money.

However, compared to the \$33 million the City of Richmond plans to spend on road repaving this year, the \$170 million raised annually by the Central Virginia Transportation Authority, or the seven billion dollar budget the commonwealth gives VDOT each year, five million dollars is practically a rounding error. Any or all of these sources could easily eliminate bus fares in Greater Richmond, but we must demand it of our local leaders and state representatives.

The New York Times estimates that 100 cities around the world offer free public transit, with many of them in Europe. But recently, cities in the United States, Kansas City, Mo and Olympia, Washington have begun to implement fare free transit as well. Why can't

Richmond be the next city to embrace free public transit? It's easy to tout an equity agenda or hire a diversity and inclusion officer, it's much more meaningful to put your money where your mouth is. If we want to honor essential workers and invest in eliminating racial inequities, then we must prioritize the needs of our neediest neighbors and make the bus free permanently.

AUTHORS

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Faith Walker grew up in Richmond's East End and still calls the area home. She currently serves as the Director of Community Engagement for RVA Rapid Transit—Virginia's only public transportation non-profit, which represents transit riders. Faith has a long track record for using creative solutions to address systemic issues, community e

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