

Alexandria's Journey into Fare Free Public Transit: Lessons Learned

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Alexandria

- 15.35 mi² (~40 km²)
- Population: ~160,000
- Employees: ~108,000
- Density: 10,700/mi² (~4,000/km²)
- First ring suburb
- Not a strong transit culture
 - Until recently







Credit: Chris Cruz for Visit Alexandria





Credit: Louis Tinsley

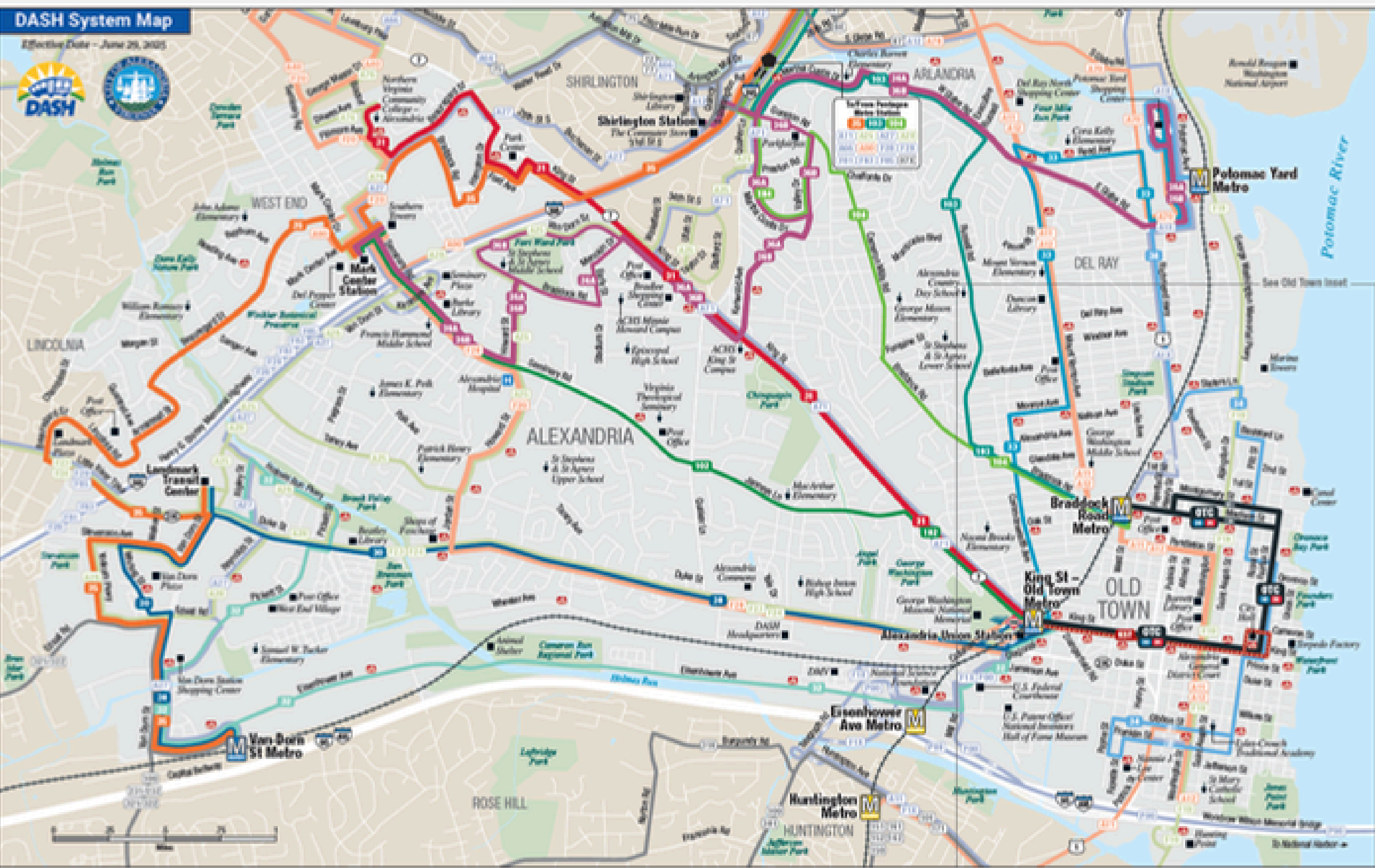


Introduction to DASH and Fare Free

- Local DASH system
 - Not WMATA Metrobus
- 107 buses, 11 routes
- High school students Fare Free (2018)
- Senior Discount (2019)
- September 2021
 - Fare free
 - Route Restructuring

DASH System Map

Effective Date - June 25, 2025



Route List	
	DASH Frequent Routes Every 15 minutes or better, all day, seven days per week
	DASH 7-Day Route
	DASH Weekday Only
	Old Town Circulator
	King Street Trolley
	Metrobus Frequent Route
	Metrobus Route
	Metrobus Weekday Only
	ART/Fairfax Connector

Legend	
	Metro Station
	Metro Line
	Virginia Rail Express (VRE) Station
	Amtrak Station
	Capital Bikeshare
	Point of Interest
	Hospital
	School
	Interstate
	US Highway
	State Highway

Research Questions

1

What were the motivations to implement FFPT?

2

How did City and DASH implement this program?

3

What are the major benefits and challenges?

4

What lessons can be drawn from Alx's case?

Literature Review

Context shapes outcomes
FFPT boosts ridership, not equity
Crisis drives political adoption

“Fare Free” over last 5 years

Web of Science and Transportation Research Board’s TRID database

Kębłowski (2020)

Economic viability of
fare abolition

Maciejewska et al. (2021)

COVID accelerated fare-
free adoption - federal
relief

Kębłowski (2022)

Stable urban regimes enable
FFPT

Inter-institutional
collaboration critical

Ofosu-Kwabe et al. (2023)

Ridership increases
significantly

No labor participation
gains

Methods

Ridership Trend
Comparisons

Stakeholder
Interviews

On-board Rider
Surveys

Document
Review

Thematic
Qualitative
Analysis

Stakeholder Interviews

DASH
General Manager

DASH
Service Planning

DASH
Operations

DASH Communications

City Councilmember

Advocates

Motivation

- **MWCOG Report**
- **Make DASH more Accessible**

Political Support

- **DASH**
- **City Manager**
- **City Council**

Funding

- **State Grant**
 - **Stepped Down**
- **Low Farebox Recovery**
 - **10-12%**
- **COVID Funds**

Operational Adjustments

Fareboxes

On-time
Performance

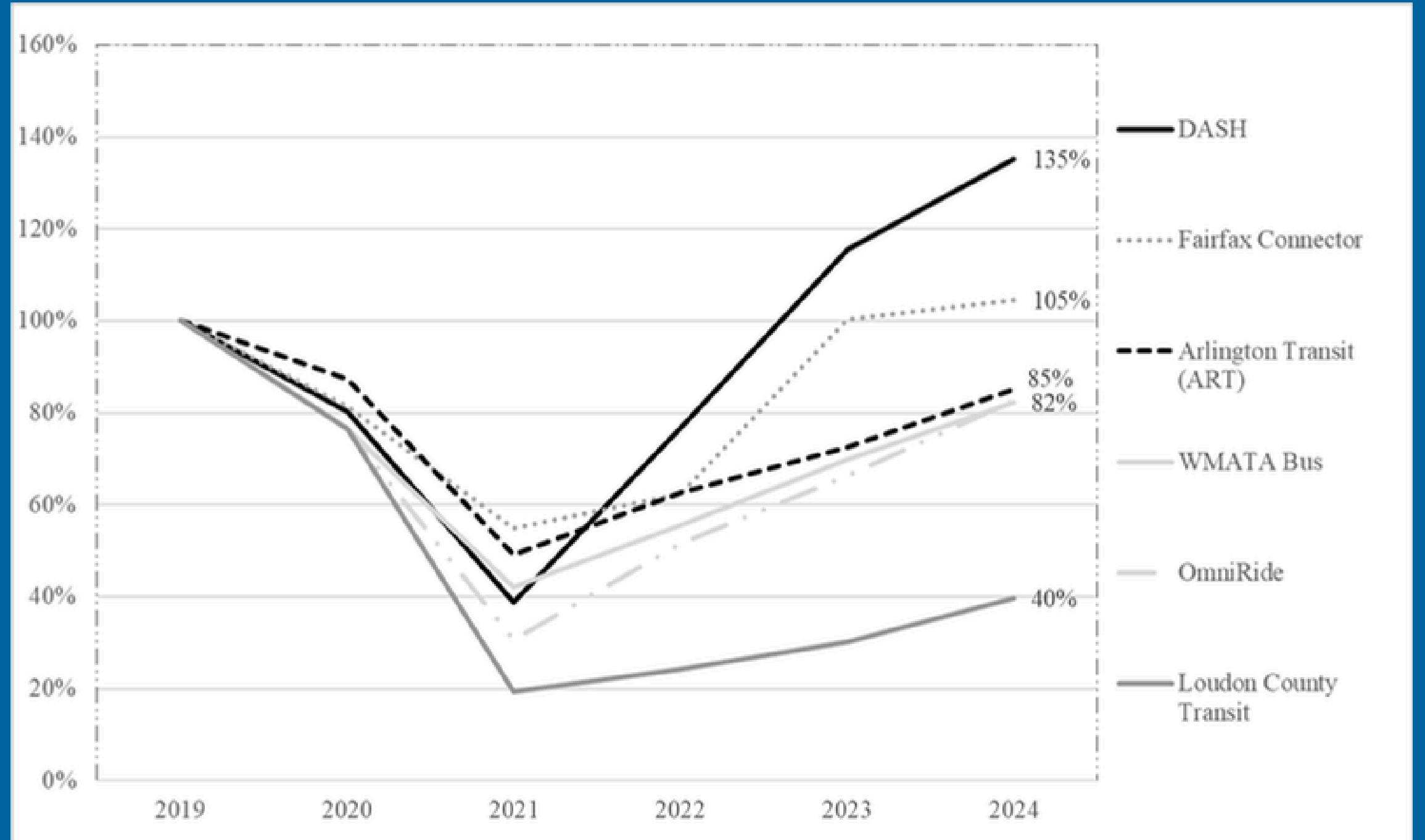
Passenger Code
of Conduct

Passenger Data /
APCs

Disruptive
Passengers

High Ridership Rebound

Relative to 2019





**Ridership
vs.
Service
Expansion
Relative to 2019**

Rider Survey - 2023

74%

Not white

79%

Employed

66%

Below Poverty Level

62%

Never Work from Home

36%

Limited English

40%

No Access to Vehicle

Rider Survey Results

62%

of new riders:
Fares Impacted Decision

53%

of existing riders:
Ride more often because of
free fares

58%

of all riders:
Fares one of top 3 reasons

49%

of all riders chose DASH
because of where it connects

47%

Started riding on weekends
- Penn State

51%

of new riders
would have driven
- Penn State

Benefits

Record Ridership

3.8M in 2019
5.3M in 2023
5.5M in 2024

Off-peak
Ridership
Up

More
Non-commute
Trips

Fewer
Passenger-
Driver
Conflicts

Challenges

Crowding

Reliability

**Staffing and
Maintenance
Capacity**

**Financial and
Political**

**Service
Expansion**

Communications

**Community
Engagement**

Lessons Learned



- **Clear policy narrative and political buy-in**
- **Financial sustainability**
- **Align with system changes**
- **Enhance service quality**
- **Engage public**
- **Track metrics and outcomes**
- **Not a one-size-fits-all solution**

Limitations and Future Research

Single Case Study

Rider-level Data

Fare free
vs
Route Restructuring

Thank you!

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Credit: DASH