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Can Buses Be Cool? Transit Advocates Hope So

By **Nicole Dungca** | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 17, 2017

Stacy Thompson wants buses to be cool. It might seem like a long shot, but she's not alone.

Public transportation advocates have long lobbied the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority for better bus service, with varied success. Now, they're trying another approach: giving the humble bus an image makeover in hopes of boosting its popularity and, perhaps, its perceived status.

"Buses are not the second-class citizens of the transit system," said Thompson, executive director of Livable Streets Alliance, a local transportation advocacy group. "They can be awesome, and they should be fun."

The alliance launched a “Better Buses Week” initiative in the fall with a session called “Making Buses Sexy,” and the Barr Foundation in the coming weeks will encourage people to share photographs from buses in a social media campaign called “Beauty and the Bus.”

Jazzing up the bus’s image and improving service, the thinking goes, could broaden ridership and pressure transit officials to make more sweeping changes. That would improve the lives of thousands who reside and commute in the Boston area, many of them low-income, minority residents who rely on the bus as their primary transportation.

Although advocates support making buses nicer and more comfortable, they are more focused on improving service through “bus rapid transit,” a gold-standard system that features routes made largely of bus-only lanes, bus stops with more shelter, and a fare collection system that allows quicker boarding.

Mary Skelton Roberts, a senior program officer with the Barr Foundation, said bus rapid transit has become increasingly popular across the world as a cost-effective way to improve public transportation.

“As you start looking at fiscally constrained state and city budgets, how do you continue to move large numbers of people in ways that are more effective?” Skelton Roberts said. “Buses allow you to do that.”

Some cities with a large percentage of bus passengers have shown a willingness to create bus-only lanes, no matter how unpopular with drivers. For now, Everett is testing the elimination of about 130 parking spaces on a main thoroughfare during rush hour for temporary bus-only lanes, and Boston may agree to a similar program.

The MBTA is also extending the Silver Line, which features some aspects of bus rapid transit, to Chelsea, another city that relies heavily on buses.

Nearly 450,000 riders take an MBTA bus each day, along 180 routes across the area. Despite such strong numbers, problems on the subway and commuter rail receive far more public attention.

“Bus riders who are transit-dependent are still treated as captive,” said Penn Loh, a longtime transit activist who teaches at Tufts University. “They are stuck on the system, they don’t have another choice, and they are the lowest priority.”



To start with, many riders think the lowly image of the bus is often well-deserved: the busiest lines can be loud, slow, and offer a jostling ride that is light on comfort.

The bus’s reputation as the transportation of last resort has deep roots.

Many less wealthy neighborhoods — where households are less likely to have cars — don’t have as many subway and commuter rail stops, leaving buses as the only mass transit option. According to demographic data from 2008, the most recent information available, MBTA buses and trolleys served the highest percentage of low-income riders, followed by subways, then commuter rail and ferries.

The primacy of the car as a powerful symbol of status and freedom has also hurt the image of the bus, advocates say.

“We live in a culture that glorifies automobiles,” Loh said.

Poor performance has also sullied the reputation of buses. By the MBTA’s own account late last year, only about 10 percent of bus lines are on schedule more than 75 percent of the time, forcing commuters to seek out alternatives or simply accept it. On the commuter rail, just one of 13 lines had fewer than 80 percent of all trains arrive on time last year.

“When you’re outside and you’re in the cold and you’re waiting for the bus, that is not a good option,” said Skelton Roberts. “There is a stigma that is real and a stigma that is perceived.”

Thompson, of Livable Streets, said the local conversation about public transportation tends to focus on major rail projects, such as the Green Line extension into Somerville and Medford. But improving buses, and changing their public perception, can be done right now, she said.

“We’re not going to let go of the bigger-picture vision of transportation, but let’s get real and let’s . . . do something,” she said.

MBTA officials said they plan a mix of short- and long-term improvements to service, such as reviewing all bus routes and revising their schedules, a process that is years overdue.

Laurel Paget-Seekins, who directs strategic initiatives at the MBTA, said there is only so much the agency can do to improve service quickly, given the snarls of Boston traffic.

“The buses run in mixed traffic, and the MBTA doesn’t own their right of way,” she said. “We have less control over the reliability and have to work with city partners to improve bus service.”

David Block-Shachter, the MBTA’s chief technology officer, has taken the lead on a new fare collection system that will eventually allow passengers to board either the front or back door of a bus, speeding up the stops. The system will also allow passengers to pay fares with credit cards to get people on board faster.

Still, the MBTA has work to do to entice a younger generation that has grown up with inexpensive ride-hailing services.

Watching the buses in Roxbury's Dudley Square from a coffee shop, Bridget Dahlberg, 26, said she didn't know exactly why she never takes one. She usually opts for an Uber ride and isn't familiar with the bus routes.

"I don't know if it's about being cool or not," she said. "I just think it's about knowing the routes."

As an overcrowded 15 bus left Dudley Square without him, Gio Sosa, 18, said he was skeptical of any makeovers.

"The bus is never cool," he said. "It's never the way to go. It's crowded. It stinks. It's horrible."

Loh and the other transit advocates agreed that the bus's image ultimately depends on substance, not style.

"That's the biggest thing," Loh said. "You can paint them any color you like, but as long as they don't perform, they're not going to be cool."

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