Top 100 Bus Fleets Survey: Stepping Up to Increase Efficiencies, Solve First Mile, Last Mile Issue

Agencies are providing real-time bus information and mobile apps, as well as partnering with ride-, car- and bike-sharing groups to help customers better plan multimodal trips.

BY ALEX ROMAN, Managing Editor

Although public transportation systems seemingly have to do more with less, they are not skimping on the implementation of programs and solutions to increase efficiency and improve service, according to respondents of this year’s METRO Top 100 Bus Fleets Survey.

A popular technology addition for agencies are computer-aided dispatch and automatic vehicle location systems, which help agencies increase efficiency and provide real-time bus arrival, departure information to customers via mobile apps, or directly on their websites — which are also being implemented and upgraded by agencies to make trip planning easier for customers.

Additional technologies added by agencies since last year, include passenger Wi-Fi, mobile surveillance systems, improved fare collection systems and the implementation of new fueling infrastructure for alternative fuels.

Once again, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s (MTA) New York City Transit/MTA Bus Co. tops this year’s list with 5,852 total vehicles. Showing some movement this year, New Jersey Transit (2,825), the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (2,304), Chicago’s Pace suburban Bus (1,980) and Seattle’s King County Metro Transit (1,928) round out this year’s top five, which collectively totals 14,889 vehicles, or 22% of this year’s overall 67,287 vehicles. This year’s total fleet showed an increase of 1,145 vehicles from last year.

With 410 total vehicles, the Milwaukee County Transit System lands right in the center at No. 50, while Bremerton, Wash.’s Kitsap Transit re-enters and rounds out the Top 100 with 180 total vehicles reported. Ohio’s Toledo Area Regional Transit Authority also re-joins the Top 100 at No. 96, with a fleet of 191 vehicles.

SOLVING FIRST MILE, LAST MILE

New to this year’s survey, we asked transit agencies what they are doing to help customers reach their final destination, commonly known as the first mile, last mile issue.

In California, Santa Monica’s Big Blue Bus (No. 92) completed a series of significant service changes to realign its system to better serve the L.A. Metro’s popular Expo Light Rail Line, which opened in May. The service changes, which increased service by 11% to meet additional demand, took place in three phases, from August 2015 to June 2016.

In Portland, Ore., TriMet (No. 30) partners with many local community connectors to create first and last mile options. Additionally, TriMet riders now have the ability to connect with other transportation options as part of a new feature in its TriMet Tickets mobile app, called RideTap, developed
TriMet is the first U.S. transit agency to pilot the RideTap feature that enables riders to tap into nearby transportation options from one app to help close trip gaps. Initially, RideTap included ridesharing service Lyft and carsharing service car2go, but has added more options recently including the BIKE TOWN bikesharing service.

Partnering with ridesharing services like Uber and Lyft have also continued to increase. In Clearwater, Fla., the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (No. 91) and Uber forged a partnership for a one-year pilot program — TD Late Shift — which will offer disadvantaged residents in Pinellas County free, on-demand rides when the regular bus service ends.

The $300,000 grant-funded pilot demonstration — PSTA’s second partnership with Uber — is aimed at helping low-income, unemployed residents overcome transportation barriers to employment. With this new program, riders can request up to 23 free rides per month between the hours of 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. Rides must be to a place of employment or residence.

Other solutions being implemented include, forging partnerships with bikesharing companies and increasing the capacity for bicycle surveillance systems and installing, biometric surveillance systems and installing, mobile surveillance systems and installing, or considering the installation of, driver partitions to increase operator safety.

To further enhance operator safety, Sun Tran also installed various bus partition models for evaluation during fiscal year 2016, with the agency currently weighing operator feedback on the various models. The next steps for Sun Tran will be to determine which partition is best, and if bus partitions will be integrated in part or all of its bus fleet.

Meanwhile in San Antonio, VIA Metro Transit (No. 32) actively utilizes its surveillance system onboard buses and transit facilities and trains operators de-escalation techniques, as well as how to deal with difficult situations. The agency also has a “See Something, Say Something” campaign that encourages the reporting of suspicious activity before situations occur, as well as both plain-clothed and uniformed patrols onboard buses.

Overall, the majority of respondents reported that they are installing mobile surveillance systems and installing, or considering the installation of, driver partitions to increase operator safety. Increasing police presence and security and improved training were also popular answers.

THE NUMBERS
A closer look at the numbers reveals 48,130 buses are 35-feet or longer, making up 71% of the total vehicles reported, with 12,466, or 19%, of vehicles 35-feet and under.

Nearly 87% of the vehicles reported are fixed-route, with 13% of that number contracted, while demand response vehicles make up nearly 13% of the total.

Overall, this year’s respondents report that they intend to, or have on order 5,208 vehicles in the next year. A good number of those planned purchases include electric buses, though on a small scale. When asked who those new purchases will be with, New Flyer, Gillig, BYD and Nova Bus were the suppliers most mentioned.

Metro would especially like to thank all of the transit agencies for participating this year. If you know a fleet that belongs on this list or have suggestions on how to improve our future lists, please let us know. (info@metro-magazine.com)
# TOP 100 Bus Fleets

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