

PUBLIC TRANSIT

## More than tweaks needed to achieve rider-friendly bus service

By Julia Ramirez

Since 1986, I have been a regular Metro bus rider. Buses take me to work, church and shopping. But being a bus patron has many negatives. Poor scheduling, lack of kiosks, route changes without notice, routes that do not go where you need them to go and bus drivers who lack minimal courtesy skills are all part of the problems that I have had over the years trying to navigate our Metro bus system. Metro is now proposing new changes that the agency believes will make ridership much more rider-friendly. We'll see.

I currently take buses No. 50, 102 and 86 to and from my workplace. I live in the North Forest community and my place of employment is on Harrisburg Boulevard. It takes at least two hours each way to get to my destination — if the buses are running on time. Recently, the Bus 50 route, which is the first bus I take from my place of employment to downtown to transfer to Bus 102, was changed. This change was not well-publicized, which created a real problem for many of us who normally take Route 50 to downtown.

I realize that developing a transportation system for a city of 4 million is an almost insurmountable challenge. For years, I have listened to my fellow bus riders complain about bus service.

So, what do I hope will be changes in the bus system that will make my life as a Metro bus patron a little better?

- 1. More kiosks on the routes.** This is not just about convenience. Standing at a bus stop for anywhere from 15 minutes to one hour is challenging for anyone regardless of their fitness level or mobility. Lighting of these kiosks would also be helpful and create a safer environment.
- 2. Better weekend service.** Bus service even on weekdays can be a challenge, and on weekends it can be almost nonexistent on some routes. Posted times may indicate that a bus should pick up every 15 or 30 minutes, when they may in reality often be as late as 45 minutes between pickups.
- 3. Training drivers to be more courteous to riders, particularly to Latino riders.** Many of the drivers are young and often show minimal people skills. Also, drivers are often rotated to different routes, so they're unfamiliar with us and we with them. Having courteous drivers assigned to the same route could make a big difference in public relations for the whole system. Drivers are the first line of defense in creating a positive relational environment.
- 4. Develop more internal neighborhood loop routes.** For years, people have complained that going from one part of a neighborhood to another part of the neighborhood is problematic. Spring Branch and Alief are two examples of this. To go from one end of Spring Branch to the other requires that a person go all the way to downtown and then take another bus to get to the other end of the suburban neighborhood. I would hope that more short-distance routes could be created that would create more internal mobility.

Throughout Europe, mass transit is quite good, and it's easy to get a bus, tram or underground train. Houston will probably never have a public transit system that is this sophisticated.

Whatever we come up with, buses will be the backbone of any system. So we should make every effort to create a system that works for all its citizens. I am hopeful that Metro's new changes in bus service will be beneficial to Metro patrons like me.

Ramirez is a Metro patron. Franklin Olson, a leader of The Metropolitan Organization, and the Rev. Kevin Collins, pastor of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, contributed to this commentary.



**Gary Coronado / Houston Chronicle**

*Metro of Harris County is kicking off its so-called flex zones, a plan for small buses to offer door-to-door service within a specified area to operate for a few months along with regular service.*