



Legislation Text

File #: 21-015, Version: 1

New Links Network Redesign Plan - Final Recommendations (**REVISED BOARD REPORT**)

DESCRIPTION: Requesting Board to adopt the New Links plan and the final recommendations as a first step towards implementation.	AGENDA NO: 21-015
ACTION REQUEST: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approval <input type="checkbox"/> Review Comment <input type="checkbox"/> Information Only <input type="checkbox"/> Other	

RECOMMENDATION:

Adopt the New Links plan and Final Recommendations with a goal to implement the recommendations to the extent possible.

ISSUE/BACKGROUND:

Transit in greater New Orleans has not been re-thought in a long time. Many of the features of the current system are based on a scaled down version of the regional network run by the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA) and Jefferson Transit (JET) before Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The network includes many bus lines that were designed for a different time in the city's history, and some of these "legacy" services are not well-suited to the current needs of the region. Since Katrina, from 2006-2019, there has been significant growth in the region and major changes to the places where residents are living and working, but the transit network has not fully kept up with those changes.

Poor reliability, limited infrastructure for transit users and other issues also add to the challenge of using public transit. Limited coordination between transit services operating in Orleans and Jefferson Parishes mean that cross-parish trips are difficult for riders. Because most bus lines in the city are designed to get riders to and from downtown New Orleans, it is difficult and time consuming to access destinations in other parts of the region. Taken together, these issues create significant barriers for residents of the region who must rely on transit to get to jobs and other destinations. A typical resident can only reach 43% of the region's jobs in 60 minutes or less via transit and walking, while a person driving a car can reach over 99% of the region's jobs. 1 Riders have consistently indicated that they are ready for change, and that they would be willing to make trade-offs to make the overall transit network work better.

In early 2018, the RTA board adopted their Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP), a 20-year comprehensive plan for enhancing the agency's transit service. As part of that plan, the agency committed to implementing a network redesign. The Regional Planning Commission (RPC), which regularly works on planning projects with both the RTA and JET, was approached by the RTA in mid-2018 to lead the planning for a network redesign that could include both agencies as part of a comprehensive effort. At the time, the RPC was managing JET's strategic planning process, and received positive feedback from JET leadership about the prospect of a regional transit redesign that would involve both agencies. JET's Strategic Plan, released in 2019, committed the agency to implementing the recommendations of the network redesign along with the RTA. With the blessing of both agencies, the RPC initiated the New Links study in early 2019.

DISCUSSION:

The purpose of the New Links project is to develop a set of short-term recommendations for improving transit service

that can be implemented quickly using existing funding. The project involves two major components: A Comprehensive Operations Analysis (COA) of existing transit and a planning process for a network redesign of the region's transit system.

A Comprehensive Operations Analysis (COA) is a system-wide study of a transit network that includes a detailed, line-by-line assessment of every transit route in a system. To conduct the COA, the New Links project team gathered and analyzed data on existing lines operated by the RTA and JET to better understand how the existing regional transit system operates, who is currently riding transit, and the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of the system. In March 2019, a national surveying firm contracted with the RPC to gather data on system ridership and conduct a comprehensive demographic and Origin-Destination (OD) survey of regional bus, streetcar and ferry routes. This data was used to create a detailed profile of transit usage in the region including rider demographics, trip purposes, and origin-destination patterns.

The second task of the project consisted of developing a plan for a network redesign of RTA and JET services. A network redesign involves re-imagining transit service in a city or region to create a plan for service that reflects current travel needs and community priorities and can be implemented using existing resources. The New Links project team developed a network redesign plan to incorporate the results of the COA along with community feedback and a detailed analysis of regional transit demand. A draft version of the plan was released for public comment in October 2019, and feedback on the draft plan is incorporated into the Final Recommended Plan, now presented to the public.

While a portion of New Links was completed by a consulting team, the majority of the planning and analysis work on this project was performed in-house by the planning and data science staff of the RPC and RTA, with support from JET, the City of New Orleans, and RIDE New Orleans.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

The New Links Plan was paid for using federal grant funding (\$725,000) procured by the RPC, the local match for which was provided by the RTA (\$145,000) in 2018. The New Links project itself is complete and carries no additional operational costs for the RTA, but rather a reallocation of service between bus and streetcar routes. However, staff is aware that there may be additional operating costs due to increased fuel usage, labor costs and insurance, that we cannot predict of until we fully implement the plan.

We do anticipate that the implementation of the recommendations in the plan would require approximately \$750,000 for associated capital and outreach expenses. The RTA currently has \$245,115 in federal 5307 funds originally earmarked for the New Links project, that can now be utilized toward implementation. Broadly speaking, these funds would go towards the following implementation steps:

- Developing new schedules, system maps, and other public materials
- Relocating some stops and shelters to serve new route alignments
- Replacement of transit stop signs with new route information
- Final Title VI Equity Analysis and associated public outreach
- Media and public outreach campaign to inform people of the new routes, new network, and new schedules
- Training for RTA staff on the new route alignments, particularly operators, supervisors, and customer service representatives.

The RTA regularly allocates money towards the regular maintenance of stops, the replacement of sign blades, the purchase and installation of shelters, the printing of new timetables and maps, and the training of agency staff. Those

existing funds may also be utilized to implement the New Links recommendations, offsetting the implementation costs not covered by the remaining COA/New Links Grant.

NEXT STEPS:

Following adoption of the New Links Final Recommendation Plan by the Board of Commissioners, RTA staff will move towards implementation of the recommendations.

RTA staff is aiming to present an implementation plan to the Board of Commissioners at the May Operations and Administration Committee meeting. The implementation plan will include:

- Implementation timeline, with expected completion date
- Options for phased implementation of New Links Recommendations
- Budget with expected capital expenditures and identified funding sources
- Community and media outreach, engagement plan

After approval of an implementation plan, staff will begin the work to implement the plan recommendations. Staff expects to present the Board of Commissioners with an implementation plan and budget at the May 2021 Operations and Administration meeting.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. New Links Final Recommended Network Report
2. RTA Comprehensive Operations Analysis

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3/17/2021

Date