

## Texas Transit Agencies Bring The Grocery Store to Their Riders



SANDY SMITH JUNE 5, 2020



(Photo by Jeff / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

**O**ur weekly “New Starts” roundup of new and newsworthy transportation developments.

The paradigm shift continues, but it seems not everyone’s getting the memo. Thinkers in the field are arguing that transit is an essential social service. As if mirroring this shift in thinking, several Texas transit agencies have put some of their empty vehicles to work delivering groceries to onetime riders who have shut themselves in in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

But while we were sitting at home, a man whose heinous crime was passing a bad \$20 bill at a convenience store got his life snuffed out by Minneapolis police officers. First the city, then cities across the country, have erupted in protests as a result. Cities and transit agencies have responded in two ways to the disruptions. Some cities have modified service to avoid districts where protests are widespread, causing inconvenience for some of those essential workers still traveling. Others have suspended service entirely, causing even more hardship, and still others have shut down service when city-imposed curfews take effect in an effort to clamp down on looting. And when New York City crafted its curfew regulations, it made matters even worse by leaving micromobility off the menu: It

required the city's bike- and scooter-share networks to cease operations during the curfew period but allowed essential workers to continue to travel via private auto.

### **Texas Transit Agencies Enter the Grocery Delivery Business, at Least for Now**

Austin's Capital Metro noticed that far fewer people were requesting rides via its MetroAccess paratransit service for riders with disabilities. Like everyone else, the COVID-19 pandemic has kept them out of circulation. They also noticed that these riders weren't even requesting trips to grocery stores for the food they need to survive out of worries they might catch the virus.

So, according to [a news story](#) in the Austin American-Statesman, the agency put two and two together:

“We had all this capacity and we saw all this need, so we said, ‘Instead of transporting customers to grocery store, let's transport groceries to vulnerable populations,’” Suzie Edrington, Capital Metro's director of demand response operations, told the paper.

As of May 29, Capital Metro had delivered 300,000 free meals to MetroAccess users since the agency started its meals-on-wheels service in March.

And, according to the story, Capital Metro is not the only Texas transit agency to get into the food delivery business as a way of putting idle vehicles and drivers to good use. Houston's Metropolitan Transportation Authority has delivered 3,287 boxes of food since the pandemic began, and Dallas Area Rapid Transit delivers meals to 100 families in South Dallas food deserts and Dallas public-school students.

The report also notes that transit agencies in Phoenix, Las Vegas and Spokane, Wash., have also launched food-delivery programs in response to the COVID outbreak. In addition, Texas transit agencies have also come up with other ways to put sidelined buses and transit vans to work: The agencies in Austin and San Antonio have deployed Wi-Fi-equipped buses to serve as mobile hotspots in locations where such service is spotty or nonexistent.

### **City Transportation Agencies Have Mixed Responses to George Floyd Protests**

The riots and protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police last week have served as a wake-up call for public officials and police chiefs across the country. Organizations across the board have issued statements expressing their solidarity with the George Floyd protesters and pledging to take action to eradicate the persistent racism that informed the Minneapolis cops' actions.

Among them: the National Association of City Transportation Officials. Smart Cities Dive [reports](#) that the organization of 84 city transportation and transit agencies across North America issued a statement that came down firmly in support of the protesters: “The harassment and injustice that people of color, particularly Black people, experience at the hands of law enforcement on transit and in streets and public spaces is unacceptable and wrong,” NACTO said in the course of [its 600-word statement](#) in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, one of the organizations leading the peaceful protests in cities across the country.

But cities and transit agencies have responded to the violence surrounding the protests as well. Most cities have, at the least, routed transit service around the sites of demonstrations, and some agencies have cut out service completely to hard-hit areas. Agencies in Denver, Minneapolis, New York and

Philadelphia all suspended or modified service to parts of their cities, and agencies in Los Angeles and Miami faced criticism for suspending service completely.

Some agencies also wrestled with the issue of assisting police who were arresting protesters. Cincinnati and Dallas were among the cities where transit buses were used to transport arrested protesters for booking. But transit workers in at least two cities refused to assist the police. Transport Workers Union Local 100 in New York and Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005 in Minneapolis were two of the unions whose members refused to transport arrested protesters, while the advocacy group for ride-hailing drivers in Philadelphia [criticized](#) TWU 100's sister local for agreeing to transport arrested protesters.

### **New York City Leaves Bike, Scooter Commuters Stranded During Protest Curfew**

Dozens of cities across the country have imposed curfews at night in the wake of protests over the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. The overnight curfews prohibit all but essential personnel to be on the streets after they take effect each night.

In many cities, the curfews have been accompanied by shutdowns of transit service. In New York City, the curfew also shut down the city's bike- and scooter-share networks, inconveniencing some essential personnel, [Streetsblog NYC reports](#).

Citi Bike, which is operated by Uber, specifically identified Mayor Bill de Blasio's office as the source of the shutdown order.

As directed by [@NYCMayorsOffice](#), we are temporarily shutting down service tonight, restarting as soon as curfew is lifted at 5am.

We know NYC is hurting right now. We're still discussing options for providing service during curfew hours and will share more when we can.

— Citi Bike (@CitiBikeNYC) [June 2, 2020](#)

Some essential workers voiced their disapproval in reply. One Citi Bike user who gave his name as John, responded, "It's ridiculous. I'm using it to ride alongside the protest and film everything in case things go wrong, and as you know, they've gone wrong." Other comments offered more pointed criticism of the mayor directly.

The curfew order does not ban auto, ride-hailing or car-share trips by essential personnel during curfew hours. Some other cities, including Chicago and Oakland, have also shut down bike- and scooter-share services overnight as part of their curfew orders.

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