



**AMALGAMATED TRANSIT UNION  
LOCAL 713**  
2600 POPLAR AVENUE, STE 402 MEMPHIS, TN



**MEMPHIS BUS RIDERS UNION**  
3573 SOUTHERN AVE. MEMPHIS TN

The Honorable Jim Strickland,

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 713 and the Memphis Bus Riders Union have partnered in a new effort to promote the expansion and improvement of Memphis Area Transit Authority service.

We have brought together our organizations, representing over 850 Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA) employees and bus riders combined. This historical partnership has formed a broad base of support for the protection and expansion of public transit service in Memphis. Our goal is to work with your administration to reverse the decline of our bus system. We hope to provide relief for the tens of thousands of bus riders whose livelihood hangs in the balance as service cuts and outsourcing is planned for the spring, and ensure that operators are safe and comfortable as they perform the thankless job of getting us around.

#### Background

Over the past 7 years MATA has had to cut over 30% of service. Under the Wharton administration MATA's budget was cut by about 2 million and this cut remained in his budget from 2008 to 2012, when MATA prepared to make massive cuts to service including cutting all holiday service, eliminating several routes and reducing night service in many areas. Due to the severity of this proposal, the newly formed grassroots organization Memphis Bus Riders Union mobilized hundreds of bus riders and MATA employees to public input hearings and city hall meetings. We were able to shore up enough funds from unnecessary budget items with the help of a sympathetic City Council, and we saved service for many riders. Unfortunately MATA experienced a significant loss of funds from all levels of government in 2012-13, totaling about \$3 million per year. Many riders and MATA employees have lost their jobs due to these cuts. This loss has no doubt contributed to the rise of poverty in Memphis which is over 33% for black Memphians, who make up about 90% of ridership and a vast majority of MATA bus operators and employees.

#### MATA's biggest problems

Newly developed areas in Midtown are absorbing business and suburban patrons no longer need to drive the extra 15 minutes to downtown to enjoy trendy new bars and restaurants. This development has occurred simultaneously with MATA's trolley shut down which is now a scapegoat for downtown business owners experiencing a drop in revenue. Local news reporters and the voices of countless downtown business owners and developers have kept trolley renovation at the forefront of MATA's priorities. Every meeting with TDOT and the Federal Transit Administration, every meeting with Congressmen Cohen over the past year has been focused solely on securing funds for the overhaul of MATA's tenuous trolley service. MATA only get's so many chances to request favors from our conservative legislature, drying up the political will to also fund buses after these favors are granted. Trolleys will continue to receive adequate funds. The city has a 5 year, 30 million dollar plan and local private sponsors are sure to kick in substantial funds as they have in the past.

**Buses on the other hand, are experiencing a crisis.** On an average day MATA's aging fleet suffers from multiple breakdowns and constant overcrowding. Many buses have broken wheelchair lifts making them inaccessible. MATA's old fare boxes are jamming constantly resulting in lost revenue. However, these ailments are not incurable. Proper funding and an open dialogue between our organizations and the new administration will save our system.

### Funding Crisis

Nationally, between 2008 and 2012, more than 85% of transit systems slashed service or raised fares -- some multiple times -- due to shortages in state and local funds. In 2012, Congress passed a bill that cut bus capital funds in half. This has hindered MATA's ability to replace the almost 60 buses that sit on the lot completely useless, as well as many buses in their fleet of 127 that are still operating, but are well past their "useful life" in mileage and years. Now, a new post-recession wave of route eliminations and fare increases threatens to once again leave bus riders with no way to work, the grocery store, the doctor, school or church.

### Bus Breakdowns

Daily breakdowns on some of MATA's most heavily used routes have resulted in loss of revenue, worsening on time performance leading to poor morale among riders and operators, and increased operating costs. Local 713 members regularly express concerns of dangerous overcrowding on popular routes such as the 42. Averaging reports from the past 6 months, we believe that at least 17 buses breakdown weekly. The weekly average of buses operating with malfunctioning digital displays, broken wheelchair ramps, broken intercoms and dispatch radios, broken mirrors and poorly functioning or non-functioning AC is likely almost 50%.

### Safety

Operators are performing remarkably well under these circumstances. At the MBRU we often observe operators going the "extra mile" by communicating with dispatch to help a rider make their connection, or helping a new rider navigate the system. Sometimes operators become the target of frustration for passengers who can't access to MATA's customer service or managers. Uncomfortable rides on a hot, standing-room-only bus can lead to arguments between passengers and sometimes even violent altercations. Some operators have reported feeling dizzy due to the heat. Fire Department records indicate that at least 3 buses have caught on fire in the past 12 months. Public transportation remains one of the safest ways to travel, but we are concerned that instances like these will increase without more funds for maintenance, replacing old buses and increased service on these popular routes.

### Finding Solutions

As operators and riders of the system, our insight and ideas for the future must be held in high regard. We are in the streets of Memphis every day, and have our own expertise to provide. There is overwhelming evidence that spending millions of tax dollars on private consultants -- whose interests are more often aligned with downtown developers and the executives of for-profit transit companies than with hard working employees and the transit dependent -- does not yield equitable, just, nor sustainable results. Rather, this strategy concentrates transit investments in affluent and disproportionately white areas, further isolating and disconnecting low-income black and brown communities. Service changes aimed at attracting more affluent riders while remaining "cost neutral" often reduces service in areas where it is needed the most, creating a precondition for outsourcing to private companies who charge more for less.

True prosperity in Memphis depends on our ability to protect good jobs and prevent these service cuts by investing in MATA. We look forward to this opportunity to work with your administration as you lay down a new path for future of our city. Only with your support can we fully implement the expanded, efficient mass transit system you spoke of on the campaign trail.

Sincerely,

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