

How Manhattan Sped Up its Buses Without Rapid Transit

ERIC JAFFE | NOV 16, 2011

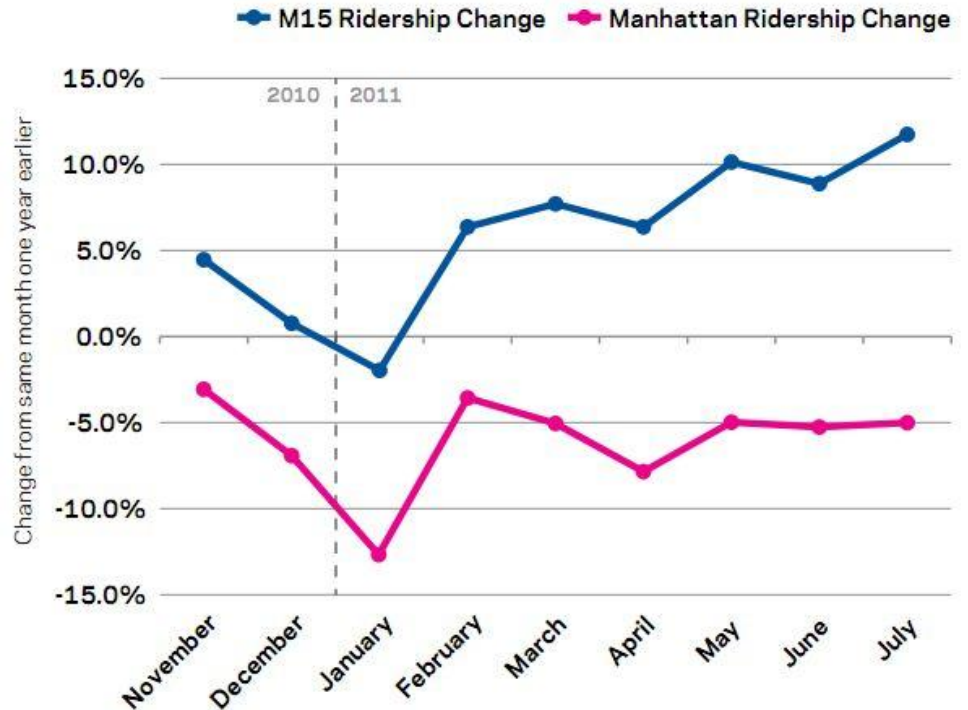


On Sunday, New York City transportation officials [introduced Select Bus Service](#) on 34th Street, a major crosstown artery that serves high-traffic destinations like Madison Square Garden, Penn Station, the flagship Macy's store and the Empire State Building. Something had to be done. The old buses carried some 17,000 riders a day along the corridor, at an average speed of less than 5 miles per hour.

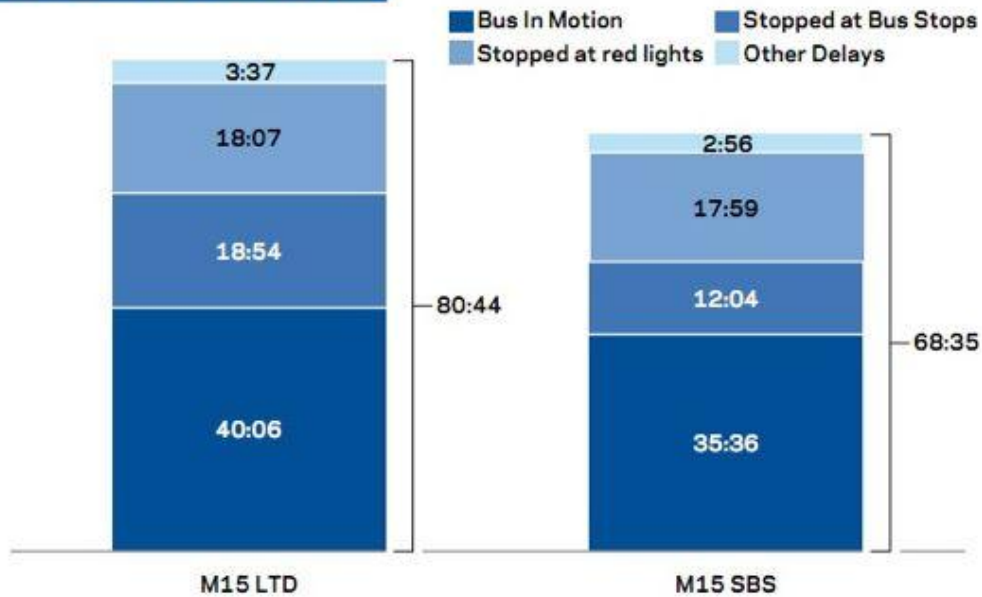
The select buses stand to do considerably better. They require riders to pay their fare at stops, rather than on the bus, allowing them to enter at any of the bus's three doors. That cuts down the amount of time a bus idles at a stop. (Occasionally officials will board the bus and request a proof-of-payment receipt.) In addition, the buses will glide along on dedicated, painted lanes whose exclusive rights to the passage are enforced by security cameras. Additional upgrades are planned for next year, including transit-signal priority and expanded [curb bulbs](#).

For the past year or so the city has used select service for buses on 1st and 2nd Avenues. City officials released [an official report](#) [PDF] this week on the success of that line. The results are impressive. Ridership on the select bus service has increased more than 10 percent, even while bus ridership across the city as a whole has fallen:

The rising popularity has a lot to do with the route's efficiency. Whereas the previous limited bus needed nearly 81 minutes to complete its 125-block route, with 19 minutes spent idling at bus stops, the select buses need only about 68 minutes to make the same trip and idle for just 12 minutes. All told, ridership has increased by about 10,000 passengers a day. That's 3.65 million people a year.



M15 Limited vs. M15 SBS



Rest assured New Yorkers found some reason to complain. A few passengers whined about the logistics of the change, claiming the necessary pre-payment caused them to miss their bus. Those cries will likely pass as they experience the upgrade in speed. A more legitimate gripe has been sounded by livability advocates miffed that the city opted for something less than true bus rapid transit for 34th Street.

In its original plans for the corridor [PDF], the city

transportation department considered separating the 34th Street buses from general traffic with a concrete barrier. Such a move has been adopted by cities with bus rapid transit around the world to cut down on the intrusion of cars into the lanes. But New York City officials ultimately backtracked on this aim after a negative response from area businesses and residents. (The website Second Avenue Sagas ran a good rendering of the Transitway that wasn't.) The decision upset those looking for a significant overhaul of Manhattan's transportation landscape; as Jim O'Grady at Transportation Nation reported in March:

Urban planners, who did not want to speak for attribution, lamented the death of what transportation commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan once called "the the [sic] only true bus rapid transit plan" on the boards for New York, with physically segregated plans. The plan had been modeled on successful bus rapid transit systems in cities like Bogota, Columbia, and Ghanzhou, China. ... The plan for 34th street, planners say, would have provided a true "subway-on-wheels" experience river-to-river in midtown, connecting Bellevue hospital, the Empire State Building, Penn Station, and the Javits Convention Center.

That complaint — and speaking anonymously on bus-related matters in general — is hard to defend from a practical standpoint. Planners rightfully want to reclaim city streets for pedestrians and public transit, but recent improvements to Manhattan's livability have been considerable. You need only visit the pedestrian plaza at Herald Square, right along the 34th Street line, to see one in action. One day New York will have true bus rapid transit, but what it has as of Sunday — a new route that will improve the lives of thousands of people a day — is certainly a helpful step toward that ultimate destination.



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