

COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE
PLANNING REPORT NO. 353

Milwaukee County Transit Benefits Report

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

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Executive Summary

Introduction

At the request of Milwaukee County, the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (Commission or SEWRPC) quantified the value that the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) produces. Building on VISION 2050 – the region's long-range land-use and transportation plan, this report estimates the value of transit using federal valuation guidance, regional travel demand modeling, emissions modeling, national data, and local transit operating characteristics. This report quantifies the benefits of transit service provided by Milwaukee County using the best available data at the time of the analysis. The report provides a snapshot of the benefits and highlights that a transit system that meets travel needs by providing frequent, safe, and convenient service will create more value. Specifically, these benefits include decreasing the number of vehicles on the road, reducing automobile crashes, and lowering air pollution. The findings demonstrate that frequent and on-time bus service provides benefits that are experienced by both transit riders and non-riders.

In plain terms: The benefits of transit accumulate over time as fewer vehicle miles are driven, congestion grows more slowly, crash risk declines, and air emissions are reduced. Furthermore, transit supports mobility, economic activity, and public health across the community. These benefits are experienced by transit riders and non-riders alike.

The Value of Transit in Milwaukee County

This report describes both the quantified value of transit and additional economic and societal benefits of transit. To quantify the benefits of transit, a "No-MCTS Scenario" was modeled to estimate travel impacts without transit in Milwaukee County. Every trip MCTS carries results in fewer vehicles on Milwaukee County's roadways. Fewer vehicles equal less delay, less fuel and wear, fewer crashes, and lower emissions. The "No-MCTS Scenario" resulted in an increase of approximately 425,000 vehicle miles each weekday, which would further result in increases of 25,000 person-hours of delay each weekday, 700 crashes per year, and 92,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions per year. Monetizing these increases using federal valuation guidance results in approximately $366 million, and about $3.1 billion over a ten-year period, (2024-2033) to all those living in or traveling to Milwaukee County, regardless of whether they personally ride the bus.

Annual Avoided Costs from MCTS Fixed-Route Service

Transit avoids about **$366 million** in regional costs each year

Congestion & Travel-Time Delay	**$172M**
Vehicle Operating Costs	**$85M**
Crash Avoidance	**$80M**
Emissions	**$29M**

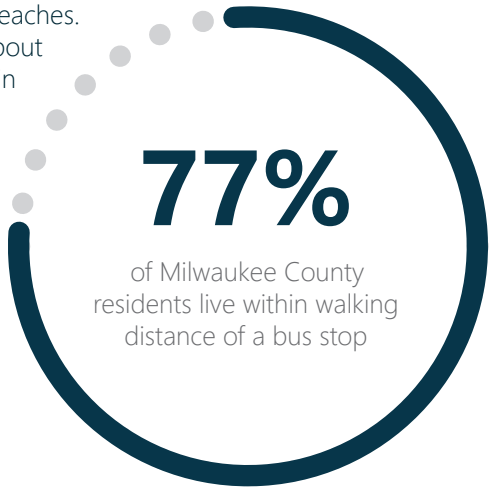
Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency MOtor Vehicle Emission Simulator (MOVES), U.S. Department of Transportation Benefit-Cost Analysis Guidance, and SEWRPC

There are additional benefits of transit that were not quantified in this report. For example, the $366 million in annual benefits does not include travel time reliability, health gains from walking to transit, avoided costs of car ownership, and the trips that would not be completed without transit. Reliable, frequent transit also gives employers a deeper pool of workers to recruit and retain, and it puts more jobs, schools, and services within reach for residents. Further, transit allows the region to make better use of infrastructure by carrying trips that would add to traffic, extending the useful life of roadways.

Service Investment in MCTS and Ridership Results

The value calculated in this study flows from the ridership and performance of the transit system. As described in Section 1, the ridership in years 2024 and 2025 exceeded MCTS's long-term trend. Specifically, riders took more than 25 million trips in each of 2024 and 2025, and in both years, ridership exceeded what the system's own long-term trend would have predicted, the first time MCTS has performed above that trendline since 2016. The ridership gains suggest that strategic service changes can deliver ridership, thereby increasing transit's utility and value for Milwaukee County. A recent example of a strategic change includes the 2021 MCTS NEXT redesign, which reoriented the network around frequency where demand is strongest. The redesign resulted in transit performance improvements, including increased job access, increased riders per revenue hour, and a reduction in the cost per trip.

How much value the transit system produces depends on who and what it reaches. Based on an analysis of transit access documented in Section 3 of this study, about 709,000 residents, or roughly 77% of Milwaukee County's population, live within walking distance of an MCTS stop, along with 78% of all jobs and nearly 82% of essential jobs. The 2024 fixed route network also reaches most of the destinations that shape daily life, including 39 of the County's 45 hospitals and medical centers, 125 of 134 grocery stores, and 422 of 514 major employers. Alongside the fixed-route network, the County's Transit Plus paratransit service carried 385,602 door-to-door trips in 2025 for riders who cannot use fixed route bus service.



Destinations Served

All jobs within 5-minute walk	78%
Essential jobs within 5-minute walk	82%
Hospitals	39 of 45
Grocery stores	125 of 134
Senior-serving facilities	59 of 64
Major employers	422 of 514

Note: Walking distance for population served is defined as ⅓ mile from a bus stop along a high frequency route and ¼ mile from a bus stop along all other routes. Walking distance for destinations served is defined as ¼ mile around the employer or facility.

Sources: U.S. Census, MCTS, and SEWRPC

Access to these destinations through fixed-route transit and paratransit supports healthcare, food access, caregiving, and independent living—needs that extend well beyond the daily commute.

Reliable, frequent transit service expands the number of trips for which transit is a practical option. When more workers, students, and older adults can reach their daily needs by transit, households gain more manageable budgets and schedules, employers benefit from a more dependable workforce, and pressure on roadways and parking facilities is reduced.

Transit Provides Benefits to Employers and Households

Reliable, frequent transit widens the labor market, expanding the area from which employers can recruit, but particularly in Milwaukee County where nearly 40% of people can't or don't drive due to age, disability, or income limitations. Nearly 50 employers, among them Milwaukee County, the City of Milwaukee, and Northwestern Mutual, provide transit benefits to more than 1,500 employees through the Commuter Value Pass program, and recent headquarters relocations by Fiserv and Enerpac placed both firms directly on high-frequency transit corridors. Reliable transit also helps employees arrive to their shifts on time with the potential to save local employers money. Industry benchmarks put the cost to employers of late arrivals and missed shifts at roughly $3,600 annually per hourly employee.

As discussed in Section 2, dependable transit service can help households save money. A frequent rider's fares are capped at about $1,200 a year, compared to the costs to own and operate a car, which are estimated to be roughly $12,200 a year. The lowest-income households in the region devote about 30% of their income to transportation, approximately double the typical share. Therefore, dependable transit can help households stretch budgets further and free those dollars for housing, childcare, or savings.

MCTS Performs at the top of its Peer Group

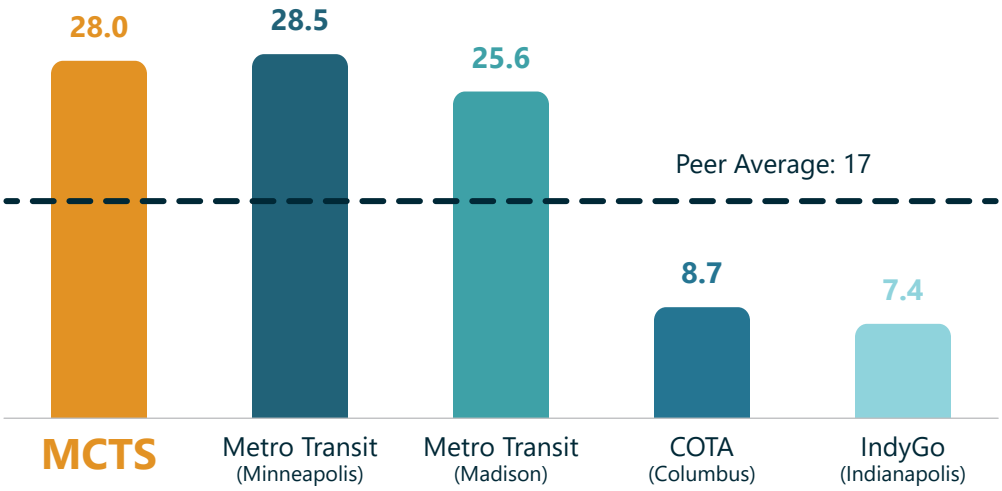
As described in Section 3, MCTS carries about 28 trips per service-area resident compared to a Midwest peer average of roughly 18 trips per resident. Further, in 2024 MCTS operated at a cost per trip of $6.57, compared to the peer average of $13.52.

In plain terms: MCTS produces regional benefits on the scale of much larger systems while operating at one of the lowest per-trip costs in the Midwest.

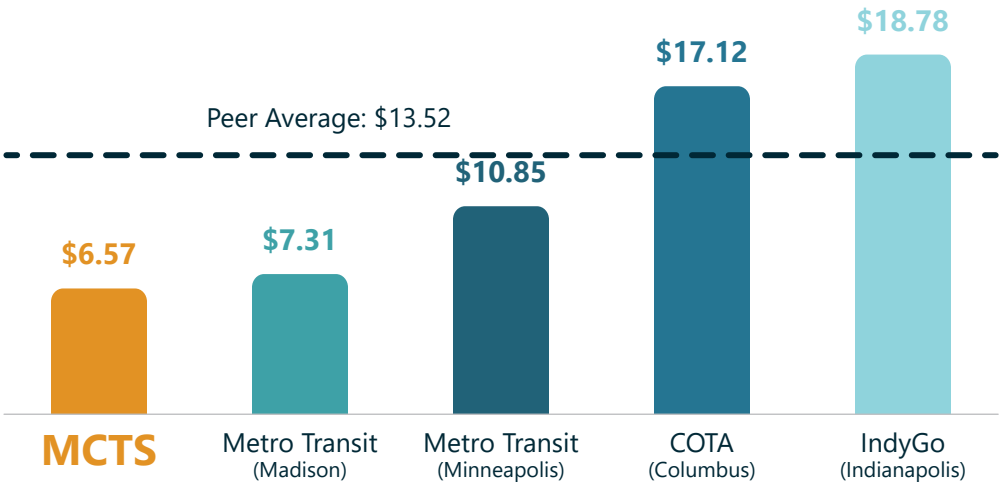
HIGH USE, LOW COST

MCTS leads its Midwest peer group

Trips per Service-Area Resident



Operating Cost per Trip



Source: National Transit Database

The Value is Based on the Usefulness of Transit Service

The estimated $366 million in annual avoided costs is directly related to ridership. To preserve a strong return on investment in transit, ongoing and consistent funding is essential to provide frequent, reliable, and available service that drives ridership levels.

In plain terms: The purchasing power from funding sources has declined with inflation, reducing the amount of transit service, and its resulting value.

However, while ridership remains critical to sustaining these benefits, the funding needed to support that service has not kept pace. Funding for transit remains flat, while the purchasing power of a dollar has declined with inflation. For example, the State has contributed similar levels of operating assistance since 2010. Because prices have risen, that amount purchases roughly 30% less than it did in 2010. Meaning that each year the same state funding supports fewer hours of transit service. To maintain reliability for riders, MCTS has been concentrating a majority of its resources on higher demand routes. A system that is operating at the level of efficiency, such as MCTS which provides service at roughly half the cost per trip of its Midwest peers, has little room left to absorb further funding losses without reducing service. When service declines, so does the system's overall value to the community.

Conclusion

This report calculated that transit in Milwaukee County provides about $366 million per year in avoided costs for riders and non-riders alike. That value comes from ridership earned through the usefulness of the service, and it grows or declines with the frequency, span, and reliability of what MCTS operates. Additional benefits such as reduced congestion, improved safety, and cleaner air accrue to the benefit of households, businesses, and public agencies. Furthermore, transit supports mobility, economic activity, and public health across the community as a whole. Maintaining and growing a useful transit system is best accomplished with stable funding that supports a transit network that attracts riders. Although MCTS is a leader in efficiency, the purchasing power of transit funding has declined by about 30% since 2010. Stable funding that is adjusted for inflation would allow the transit benefits documented in this report to remain steady and possibly increase.

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Section One:

A System Rebuilt Around Riders

This report examines the value the Milwaukee County Transit System delivers to the County. That value flows to both riders who depend on it daily and to the far larger population of residents, employers, and institutions who also benefit whether they ride or not. It begins with an exploration of the transit system itself. This section reviews how MCTS has performed in recent years and the decisions behind that performance, then it turns to the people the system serves: workers, students, and residents of every age and ability whose daily lives are shaped by the fixed-route and paratransit networks.

1.1 Ridership Above the Trendline

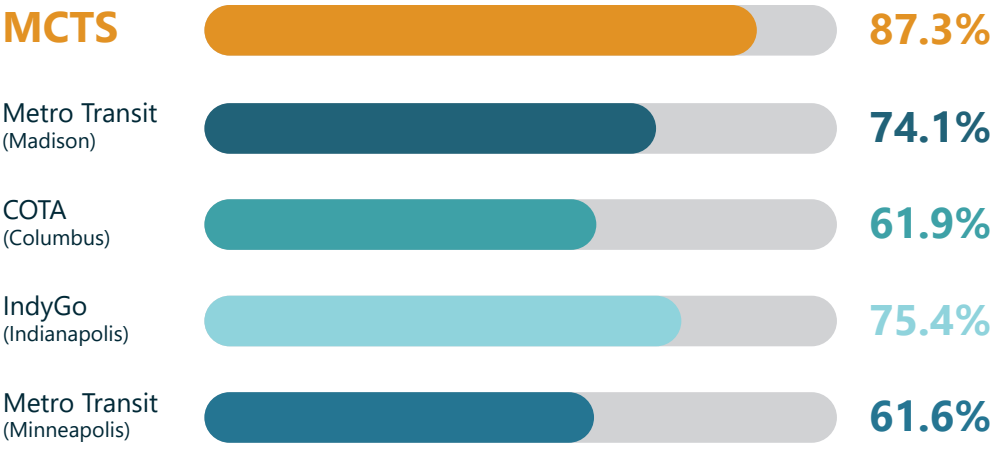
MCTS ridership data show that the agency is recovering faster and more consistently than its peers following the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of 2024, MCTS had carried 25.7 million trips and regained 87.3% of its pre-pandemic ridership. In 2025, despite service reductions that took effect in August, total ridership still reached 25.4 million trips. National Transit Database reporting indicates that this recovery exceeds Madison's (71.7%), Columbus' (63.6%), Indianapolis' (74.9%), and Minneapolis–St. Paul's (61.0%). Section 3.7 revisits these comparisons on a population-normalized basis.



RIDERSHIP RECOVERY

MCTS is recovering faster and more consistently than its peers following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Percent of 2019 Recovered



Source: National Transit Database, Monthly Ridership Module

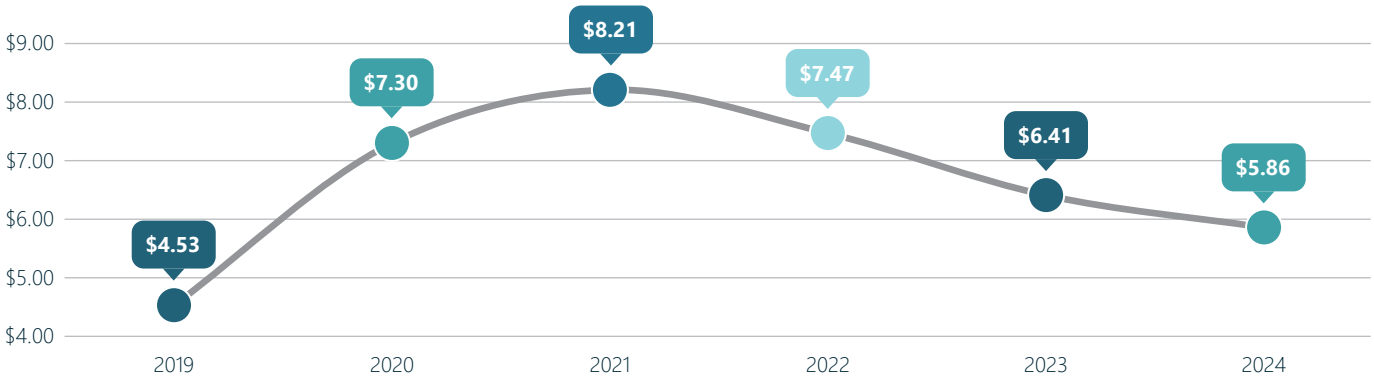
Both 2024 and 2025 ridership exceeded what MCTS's own long-term trend would have predicted. Between 2002 and 2019, fixed-route bus ridership declined at an average rate of roughly 1.6 million trips per year. Had that trajectory continued, the system would have been expected to carry about 24.1 million bus trips in 2024 and about 22.6 million in 2025. Actual bus ridership came in above those projections by about 1.2 million trips in 2024 and 2.5 million in 2025 (National Transit Database). In 2024, the system moved above its long-term trendline for the first time since 2016. The 2025 margin was built almost entirely in the first seven months of the year before service reductions took effect in late August (a point Section 4 examines in detail). Ridership decline is not inevitable. Strategic service changes can deliver ridership gains and increase transit's utility and value for Milwaukee County.

In plain terms: For the first time since 2016, more people rode the bus than the system's own long-term trend would have predicted. Deliberate changes to how service is designed and delivered raised ridership.

Reliability-focused improvements, such as steady, all-day headways, coordinated transfers, and targeted corridor upgrades, increased ridership. By contrast, COTA (Columbus), IndyGo (Indianapolis), and Metro Transit (Minneapolis–St. Paul) remain below both their pre-COVID ridership levels and their pre-pandemic ridership trendlines. As the following sections detail, MCTS has paired these service changes with structural improvements that make the system more reliable and easier to use.

These ridership gains are improving the agency's financial performance. In 2019, the agency spent about $146 million to provide 29.4 million trips, or roughly $4.96 per rider. When the pandemic reduced demand and increased costs, that figure almost doubled, peaking at $8.81 in 2021. As of 2024, the agency's cost per trip stands at $6.57—a 25% reduction from the 2021 peak.[1] Fixed-route bus service is even more cost-effective, at $5.86 per rider. Adjusted for inflation, that is only about 5% above the cost in 2019.

MCTS Bus Cost Per Trip

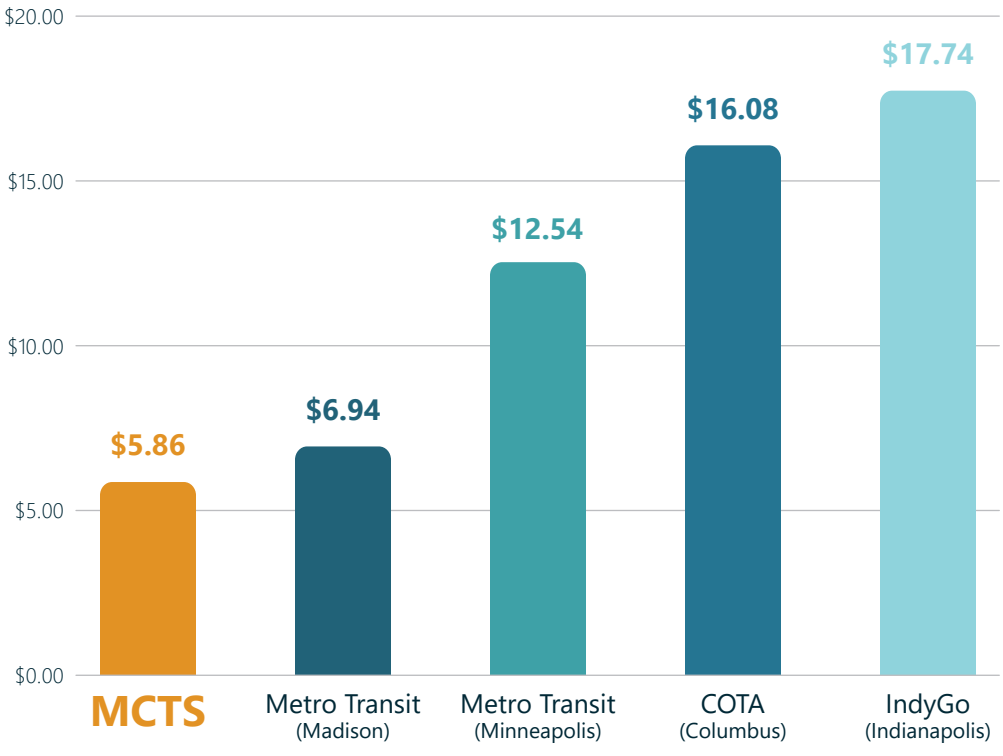


Source: National Transit Database

Part of this improvement reflects a deliberate shift in how MCTS allocates its resources. Between 2015 and 2024, the system's geographic footprint shrank by about 25%, measured in directional route miles. Over the same period, the amount of service delivered per remaining route mile rose by about 32% (National Transit Database). In practical terms, MCTS concentrated more frequent service onto fewer corridors. That decision improved productivity and is a key reason the cost-per-trip figures compare favorably to peer systems. It also means that the routes still operating carry a larger share of the system's total ridership than they did a decade ago. This is relevant context for the discussion in Section 4 about what further service reductions would mean for the system.

Holding fixed-route costs broadly in line with inflation despite lower total ridership took sustained attention to efficiency. One area where costs have increased well above the rate of inflation, though, is paratransit. At the end of 2024, each paratransit ride cost the agency $56.03, a 71% increase over 2019. Paratransit is a critical transportation service for some of Milwaukee's most vulnerable residents; therefore, identifying solutions to control paratransit costs is essential to maintaining the much-needed service for people who depend on it while preserving the agency's ability to deliver high-quality, fixed-route service that serves the vast majority of riders.

Bus Cost Per Trip (2024)

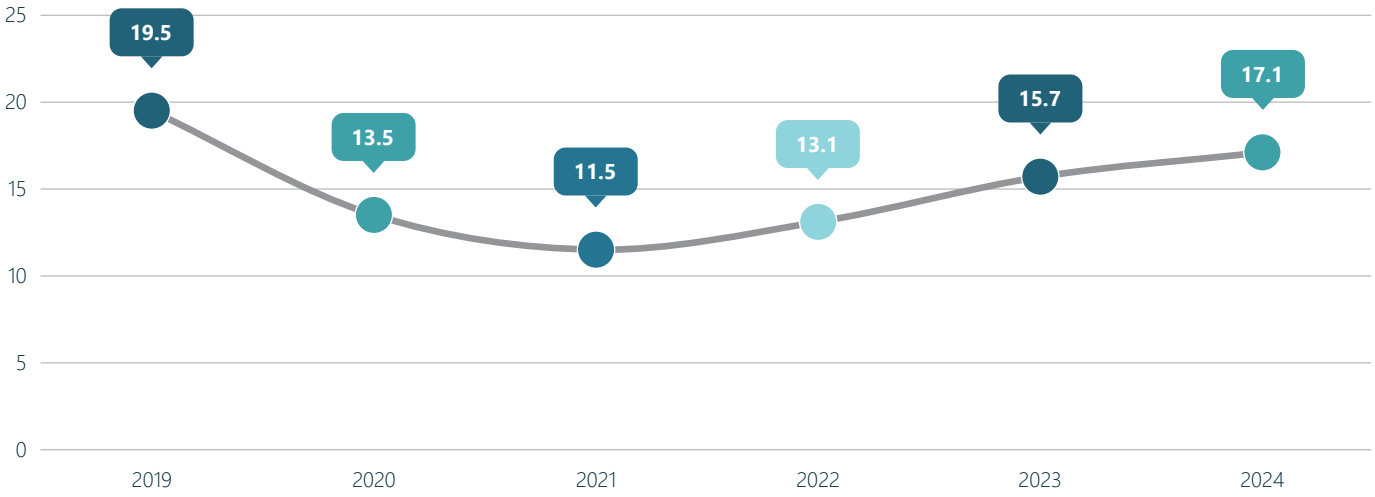


Lower is better. MCTS has the **lowest bus cost per trip** among peers.

Source: National Transit Database

Riders per revenue hour increased from 11.5 in 2021 to 17.1 in 2024, returning to nearly 90% of the agency's 2019 level of 19.5 riders per revenue hour. Farebox recovery stands at 14.5%, higher than Madison's (14.2%), Indianapolis' (4.5%), Columbus' (6.8%), or Minneapolis–St. Paul's (8.5%).[ii] Every additional boarding moves the network toward more cost-efficient operations. Continued support for ridership-focused service can deliver further productivity gains and ease the path to long-run financial stability. Section 4 examines how recurring service reductions, like those that began in August 2025, bear on this trajectory.

MCTS Bus Cost Per Trip



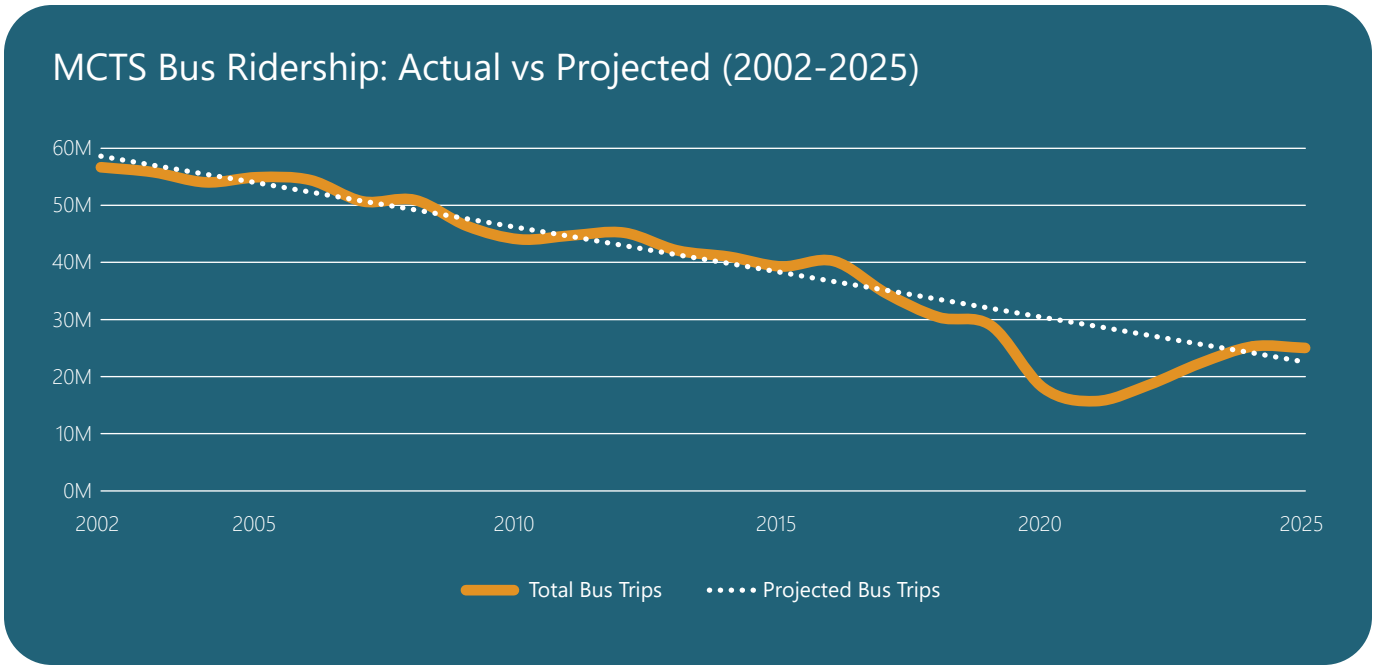
Source: National Transit Database

The Longer View

These gains stand out even more against the system's longer trajectory.

Between 2002 and 2019, MCTS ridership fell from roughly 57.8 million annual trips to 29.4 million, a decline of about 49%. Service reductions over the same period were real but considerably smaller. Vehicle revenue miles fell about 22% and vehicle revenue hours fell about 18% (National Transit Database). The scale of the ridership decline substantially exceeded the scale of the service reductions, suggesting that factors beyond service quantity, including changes in land use, travel patterns, competition from ride-hailing, and shifts in the regional economy, were also at work. Service cuts contributed to the decline, but they do not fully account for it.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this decline sharply, dropping ridership to 18.3 million in 2020 and 16.0 million in 2021. But the disruption also created conditions for a meaningful change in approach. Beginning in March 2021, MCTS rolled out the MCTS NEXT system redesign, which reoriented the network around ridership rather than geographic coverage. Routes were restructured to increase frequency on the corridors where demand was strongest, and service patterns were simplified to make the system easier to understand and use. This was a deliberate departure from the approach that had guided the system through the previous two decades.



Source: FTA NTD Complete Monthly Ridership (with adjustments and estimates), 2025

The results suggest that the change in approach worked. In both 2024 and 2025, actual ridership exceeded what the long-term trendline would have predicted. For the first time since 2016, the system performed above its historical trajectory. A bounce-back from the pandemic would have returned the system to its old path. Moving above that path is evidence that a different approach to service design produces different outcomes.

1.2 What MCTS Changed and Why It Worked

MCTS' ridership gains reflect deliberate, data-informed service decisions. In 2021, the agency launched MCTS NEXT, prioritizing access to employment by reallocating service toward high-frequency corridors with stronger demand. The redesign also delivered rider-facing improvements such as better access to real-time information, upgraded stops, and routing changes that shorten travel times. As a result, a larger share of service now operates on high-frequency lines, job access within 30 minutes increased by 32% following the system redesign (ACEEE, 2024), and 61.7% of county residents now live within walking distance of a high-frequency bus route.

In plain terms: MCTS put its limited service hours where they do the most good: frequent routes on the corridors where people already need to go—jobs, school, and daily errands.

In June 2023, MCTS rolled out Wisconsin's first Bus Rapid Transit line, CONNECT 1, along a nine-mile corridor between Downtown Milwaukee and the Regional Medical Center in Wauwatosa. The line completes the trip in about 40 minutes and was designed as a cost-effective way to add capacity and improve reliability on a high-demand corridor. CONNECT 1 averaged more than 3,200 weekday boardings in its first full year, and the transition from a fare-free launch to standard fare collection did not produce a significant decline in ridership.[2]

MCTS NEXT and CONNECT 1 advance the Commission's VISION 2050 recommendations to establish rapid and high-frequency corridors that expand job access, and they reinforce MCTS' mission to connect people to jobs, education, and the destinations of daily life through essential transit service.

Among the agency's routes carrying at least 250 riders per day, more than a dozen have surpassed their 2019 ridership levels. Routes 30 and 35 have reached 177% and 132% of their 2019 ridership, respectively. Route 18, a new service on National and Greenfield Avenues, has already become a Top 10 route by ridership and is up 33% since launch. Across the network, more frequent, reliable, and connected service is attracting new riders and bringing back long-standing ones.[3]

By concentrating frequent service where demand is already strong, the redesign lets MCTS carry more riders with the same operating resources and provide more dependable trips for people who rely on transit.

1.3 Partnerships for Work and School

In plain terms: For employers and campuses, transit is part of how they staff, enroll, and function day to day. Pass programs can be mutually supportive: institutions buy access to workers and students who in turn ride at the lowest available cost.

Across Milwaukee County, nearly 2,000 workers and students use MCTS each day through dedicated pass programs like the Commuter Value Pass (CVP) and U-PASS. As of early 2025, nearly 50 employers actively participate in the CVP program, providing more than 1,500 employees with pre-tax transit benefits.[4] Participants include major public employers, such as Milwaukee County and the City of Milwaukee, as well as prominent private employers. One such participant, Northwestern Mutual, is consolidating and expanding its downtown campus in part to draw talent to, and from across, the region. The company views transit as integral to its strategy. "MCTS is an important part of that equation," said Robert Wilks, Assistant Director of Enterprise Security, Transportation & Parking.[5]

UBUS routes serving UW–Milwaukee carried more than 450 daily passengers in 2024, linking outlying neighborhoods to campus with limited-stop service that shortens travel times.[6] Combined with U-PASS programs at Marquette University, MATC, and MIAD, these offerings give students essential access to classes, jobs, and internships at the lowest available transportation cost. Together, CVP and university pass programs function as workforce and educational infrastructure. For residents who do not drive, whether by circumstance or by choice, these systems are essential to fully participate in daily life.

1.4 Serving More Student Trips

MCTS and Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) can further strengthen the transportation system, and potentially improve both of their budgets, by coordinating to serve more student trips on the MCTS network. The goals would be to reduce duplicative services, add capacity where and when students ride, and keep people moving when school traffic peaks in the morning and mid-afternoon.

Other regions offer models Milwaukee can adapt. In Minneapolis, thousands of high school students shifted from exclusive school buses to public transit beginning in 2014, supported by free "Go-To" passes and added trips at bell times. Reported outcomes included a 37.6% reduction in excused absences and an increase of 3.5 million annual transit trips within a year.[7] Officials also noted reduced yellow-bus demand during rush hour and lower costs when Metro Transit supplemented routes heavily used by students. Tallahassee's STAR program provides free transit passes to all K-12 students (approximately 11,000 student trips per month in 2023). Washington State's Move Ahead Washington program funds fare-free youth public transit rides statewide. In the Bay Area, agencies such as AC Transit operate supplementary school-oriented service with discounted youth fares.

Milwaukee has already begun to test similar approaches. An MCTS route now serves Howard Fuller Collegiate Academy's new campus, carrying more than 200 student rides per day. Several MPS high schools, such as Reagan, provide free WisGo cards in place of yellow buses. Expanding these initiatives could help MPS address bus-driver shortages and ensure students have reliable transportation for after-school programs, internships, and jobs.

Beyond easing logistics and improving budgets, studies show that early experience with public transit builds independence and navigational skills. It also normalizes transit as an everyday option. When students understand their transportation options, they can pursue cross-town opportunities, summer jobs, and cultural institutions that might otherwise have been out of reach.

1.5 Independence Through Buses and Paratransit

Milwaukee County is home to a diverse population with a wide range of transportation and accessibility needs. Nearly 940,000 people live in the County, representing all ages, backgrounds, abilities, and household types. Milwaukee County residents rely on a range of modes to meet their daily needs. According to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, more than 40% of County residents are non-drivers—a group that includes children, older adults, and working-age residents who either do not hold a license or do not have a registered vehicle at their household.[8] The figure spans the full population, but it shows how many residents stand to participate more fully in the local economy when useful transportation options are available.

In plain terms: Many Milwaukee County residents do not drive. For a large share of households, daily life depends on the bus.

Nearly one in eight households in Milwaukee lack access to a vehicle, and a University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee study found that about one-third of voting-age adults do not hold a valid driver's license.[9] For these residents, a frequent, reliable network is what puts employment, education, and healthcare within reach.

Fixed-Route for Most Trips; Paratransit when Needed

Fixed-route buses are the backbone of Milwaukee County's transit system. MCTS carries more than 80,000 weekday passenger trips on its regular routes—volumes comparable to daily traffic counts on interstate segments around the region. That level of use supports the regional economy and helps reduce congestion.

Paratransit fills critical gaps by serving trips that fixed routes cannot provide. In 2024, the County's Transit Plus program provided 364,452 door-to-door trips, about 30,400 rides per month, or roughly 1,000 trips each weekday. Full-year 2025 ridership rose further, to 385,602 trips, about 6% above 2024.[10] Looking ahead, paratransit's role will grow as the region's population ages. VISION 2050 projects that the share of residents age 65 and older will nearly double by 2050, a trend examined further in Section 3. The plan also notes that average household sizes will continue to shrink, in part because older age groups will make up a larger share of the population. These trends are challenging for cost-effective transit operations and reinforce the need for affordable door-to-door options that support aging in place.

Despite its cost, Transit Plus is often the difference between isolation and independence for riders who cannot use regular buses, especially older adults and individuals with disabilities. The service also relieves pressure on health-care networks, social-service agencies, and family caregivers. Transit Plus is critical infrastructure alongside MCTS' fixed bus routes.

VISION 2050 recommends maintaining ADA paratransit and, in the 2024 Update, encourages agencies to explore real-time scheduling and adding intermediate stops to better meet riders' needs. As noted earlier, rapidly accelerating paratransit costs will require additional funding if agencies are to meet growing demand.

Same Day Pilot

The Transit Plus Same Day pilot, launched in September 2024, grew quickly. After the March 2025 expansion of eligibility beyond medical and employment trips, monthly ridership rose from fewer than 30 rides in February to 272 in May. The number of unique riders increased from 46 to 327 over the same period.[11] Facing a budget shortfall that threatened to end the program in late 2025, the County Board instead restructured it to stay within available funding: service now operates from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. seven days a week, rides for medical, work, and emergency needs receive priority, and Transit Plus riders pay a $10 one-way fare for the on-demand service.

Together, fixed-route and paratransit services carry residents to jobs, school, medical care, and shopping. They keep Milwaukee County moving. Transit allows employers to depend on a more stable workforce and helps public institutions serve their constituencies more efficiently. Sustaining these services, and where possible modestly expanding them, is central to the County's economic competitiveness, equity, and quality of life.

1.6 Conclusion

In plain terms: The question is not whether ridership matches some past year. It is whether the service MCTS runs connects people to daily life as effectively as its funding allows.

In 2024 and 2025, riders took more than 25 million trips on the system each year, and both years exceeded what the system's long-term trend would have predicted. Those results were built, not inherited. MCTS NEXT, CONNECT 1 BRT, and targeted corridor upgrades concentrated frequent, dependable service where it carries the most people, and ridership responded. As funding has tightened, MCTS has held to the same strategies: matching service to the corridors and hours where need is greatest, holding fixed-route costs near inflation, and sustaining productivity and farebox recovery that lead its peers. The measure of a transit system should not be whether ridership returns to a past year's total, but whether the service it operates connects people to work, school, care, and commerce as effectively as its resources allow.

Reliable, frequent, easy-to-use service expands the number of trips for which transit is the most practical option. When more workers, students, and older adults can reach jobs, education, healthcare, and daily needs by transit, households gain more manageable budgets and schedules, employers benefit from a more dependable workforce, and pressure on roadways and parking facilities is reduced.

Section 2 builds on this operational picture to examine business and economic outcomes: how reliability supports hiring and retention, stabilizes employer operations, helps keep household budgets affordable, and strengthens commercial corridors and neighborhood vitality.

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Section Two:

The Business and Economic Value of Reliable Transit

Section 1 described how MCTS built its ridership gains by concentrating frequent, dependable service where it carries the most people, and why the measure of that service is how well it connects riders to work, school, care, and commerce within available resources. This section turns to what dependable service means for Southeastern Wisconsin's economy. It makes the business and economic case for sustained investment in transit by showing how reliable service affects hiring, business operating costs, household budgets, commercial corridor performance, and development decisions.

In plain terms: A dependable bus network works like any other piece of economic infrastructure. Employers hire from a wider area, workers reach more jobs, and businesses along the routes see steadier customer traffic.

Reliable, frequent transit is core economic infrastructure. It gives employers a deeper pool of workers to recruit and retain, and it puts more jobs, schools, and services within reach for residents. When transit service is frequent, commutes become more dependable, hiring pools widen, and employers face fewer delays or staffing shortages. Workers, in turn, gain access to a larger number of jobs within a reasonable travel time and at an affordable price. And businesses in transit-served corridors benefit from steadier foot traffic and easier access for customers and employees.

These effects begin with the hiring decision and ripple outward through employer operating costs, household budgets, commercial corridors, and the value of land near frequent service.

2.1 Hiring Reach and Business Growth

For employers, frequent, all-day transit is one of the lowest-cost ways to widen the hiring pool and support business growth. Reliable service expands the area from which employers can recruit, supports workers across multiple shifts, and reduces the risk of late arrivals caused by traffic or parking delays. Downtown employers, including Northwestern Mutual whose partnership is described in Section 1.3, have publicly linked transit access and employer-subsidized passes to their ability to attract and retain talent.[1]

Research from other regions shows that this relationship is consistent. In the Houston area, locations with stronger bus access tend to have higher concentrations of jobs, suggesting that frequent service supports employment density.[2] In Clayton County, Georgia, unemployment and poverty rose measurably in affected neighborhoods after the county eliminated its bus service.[3] Milwaukee reflects this same pattern. As discussed earlier, the MCTS NEXT system redesign increased the number of jobs reachable by transit within a 30-minute commute, and the region remains among the top ten of the fifty largest U.S. metros for transit access to jobs.[4]

In plain terms: When transit service is cut, the "map" of reachable jobs shrinks quickly, sometimes by tens of thousands of jobs, even though the jobs still exist.

Milwaukee's experience also shows the consequences when service is reduced. The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Center for Economic Development estimated that at least 40,000 jobs became inaccessible by transit following service cuts between 2001 and 2007.[5] In 2018, UWM researchers projected that eliminating the JobLines routes would remove transit access to nearly 700 employers and 15,000 jobs; those routes were discontinued the following year. Based on current funding and cost trends, MCTS will continue to face pressure to reduce service unless additional funding mechanisms are developed. The 2024 VISION 2050 Equity Analysis similarly found that, compared with the full regional transit vision, a transportation system constrained by existing funding assumptions would leave minority residents, families in poverty, and people with disabilities with substantially fewer jobs reachable by transit within 30 minutes.[6] Further cuts would reverse the job-access gains created by MCTS NEXT, unwind ridership gains, and deepen existing inequities in access to employment.

By contrast, maintaining and extending frequent, all-day service functions as a protective investment for both workers and employers. The 2024 VISION 2050 Equity Analysis shows that implementing the full regional transit vision would make hundreds of thousands of additional jobs reachable within a 30-minute transit commute for minority residents, families in poverty, and people with disabilities. The share of minority residents with access to at least 100,000 jobs would more than double, with similar gains for low-income households and people with disabilities.[vi] These benefits extend across the region but are especially important for households without reliable access to a car.

Dependable transit service also shapes where and how businesses choose to locate and grow. Across regions, employers consistently cite proximity to reliable transit as a factor in site selection, both to reach workers and to attract customers.[7] Corridors with frequent, all-day service also tend to require less parking, which reduces development costs and frees up valuable site space for offices, labs, production, or retail activity.

Recent relocations in Milwaukee reflect this pattern. Fiserv moved its global headquarters from suburban Brookfield to Downtown Milwaukee, directly along the CONNECT 1 BRT corridor. Enerpac Tool Group likewise relocated its global headquarters from Menomonee Falls to North Plankinton Avenue downtown, investing in space closer to transit, amenities, and a larger labor pool. These moves show how maintaining frequent service gives employers the flexibility to relocate, expand, or consolidate operations as their needs change.

At the route level, MCTS and its partners have used two complementary approaches to connect people to growing employment centers: adding service to reach specific job sites, and strengthening frequent, all-day service along major travel corridors. In 2020, MCTS launched Route 81 to Amazon's Oak Creek fulfillment center, linking roughly 1,500 jobs to the transit network.[8] Ridership has been modest, reflecting the route's specialized, express design, but it demonstrates a willingness to adapt service to reach new employment locations.

Broader investments in frequent corridors have produced larger and more durable gains. Since the launch of CONNECT 1, Waukesha Metro Route 1 was extended to the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center and its all-day frequency improved from every 30 minutes to every 20 minutes. Together, these changes made the route more useful across its full length by increasing service frequency, adding a major employment destination, and eliminating a required transfer at Brookfield Square. Ridership on the route more than doubled following these improvements.[9]

Maintaining and strengthening frequent, high-demand routes deliver higher returns than allowing core service to erode, which would shrink job access, hiring reach, and expansion opportunities.

2.2 Employer Costs and Commute Reliability

When workers cannot count on their commute, employers bear real costs. Late arrivals, missed starts, overtime to cover gaps, and idled equipment all reduce productivity and increase labor expenses. Industry benchmarks estimate that unscheduled absenteeism costs employers roughly $3,600 per hourly employee and $2,650 per salaried employee each year.[10] Disruptions such as traffic congestion, missed transfers, and parking shortages raise the likelihood that workers arrive late or miss shifts altogether.

In plain terms: Unreliable commutes cost employers money: late starts, missed shifts, and overtime to cover gaps. Transit passes and dependable service reduce those day-to-day disruptions.

In Milwaukee, employers and partners are using transit as one of several tools to reduce these risks. As of early 2025, nearly 50 companies had enrolled more than 1,500 employees in MCTS's Commuter Value Pass program (introduced in Section 1.3) to help stabilize attendance across shifts.[11] Where fixed routes do not fully meet the needs of all workers, complementary services fill the gaps.

For workers who cannot use fixed-route service because of a disability, Transit Plus, Milwaukee County's ADA paratransit service, provides door-to-door access to employment and essential destinations. In more limited cases, partner-operated services such as FlexRide Milwaukee complement the MCTS network by providing targeted connections between city neighborhoods and suburban employment centers where fixed-route service is less practical. Participating employers report that these services have helped them fill shifts and retain hires.[12]

These strategies depend on the continued availability of underlying transit service. When service is reduced or eliminated, commuting options shrink for both employers and employees. In Milwaukee County, the cancellation of several express routes, including the former Freeway Flyers that connected city neighborhoods to suburban job centers, removed direct, time-competitive links to major employment destinations and narrowed workers' practical commuting choices.

Maintaining frequent, all-day fixed routes where demand is proven, expanding employer-subsidized passes, and deploying targeted complementary services all increase the likelihood that workers can arrive on time, every day. For employers, that means steadier attendance, less overtime to backfill missed shifts, and lower turnover costs. Investing in reliable transit trims these hidden operating costs while strengthening access to labor across the region.

2.3 Household Budgets and Upward Mobility

Vehicle ownership is one of the largest non-housing expenses for families, so every trip made by transit instead of by car can represent real money saved. In 2023, U.S. households spent an average of $13,174 on transportation, second only to housing, so deferring a vehicle purchase or avoiding a second car altogether can meaningfully improve families' financial pictures.[13] For Milwaukee riders, WisGo fare capping holds adult regular-rider costs to $8.25 per day, $33 per week, and $99 per month when using the Umo app or WisGo card.[14] Even for a frequent rider who reaches the monthly cap every month, annual transit spending would not exceed $1,200—far below the roughly $12,200 average annual cost of owning and operating a new vehicle.[15]

In plain terms: For frequent riders, transit costs are capped at about $99 per month—far less than the yearly cost of owning and operating a car. That can be the difference between needing one car and needing two.

Dependable transit helps households stretch budgets further while reducing reliance on costly vehicle ownership.[16] The lowest-income households in the region devote about 30% of their income to transportation, roughly double the typical share. Frequent transit can reduce that burden and free those dollars for housing, childcare, or savings. Milwaukee's overall transportation costs track near the U.S. average, and its income-based cost burden gap mirrors national patterns. Holding transit investment firm gives the region a foundation to break from those patterns.

Modeling conducted for this study, the travel demand modeling presented fully in Section 3, indicates that without MCTS, Milwaukee County would see roughly 17,700 additional vehicle-hours of driving on an average weekday, or about 4.6 million vehicle-hours each year. Congested roadway miles would climb nearly 10% in the county and about 6% regionwide, while severe congestion would rise by more than 22%.[17] The result of less transit would be more gridlock, longer delays for all road users, and higher time and fuel costs for households and businesses.

In plain terms: Without MCTS, more trips would shift to driving, meaning more congestion, longer delays, and higher time and fuel costs for everyone using the road system.

Avoiding these costs depends on maintaining service that makes trips by transit feasible. Frequency and span determine whether jobs are reachable within reasonable door-to-door times, and reliability reduces the risk of late arrivals and missed shifts.[18] Longer commutes are associated with higher turnover; a workable commute makes a job easier to keep.[19]

Dependable, time-competitive transit pays off twice: it expands realistic job options today and supports "car-light" budgets that free up resources over the long term.[20]

2.4 Commercial Corridors and Neighborhood Vitality

Frequent transit also supports safer, more active commercial streets by keeping people present throughout the day. Transit stops function as everyday neighborhood hubs, bringing a steady flow of riders past storefronts and services. Well-lit stops, clear sightlines, and nearby businesses make these areas feel more visible and predictable, which supports both customer activity and private reinvestment. Studies find that well-designed stops with consistent pedestrian activity deter unwanted behavior and encourage investment on adjoining blocks.[21]

How the system operates reinforces that safety. MCTS buses carry interior and exterior cameras and are monitored through a 24-hour dispatch system, so problems are identified and addressed quickly.

In plain terms: Frequent service keeps people on the street and customers at the door. Steady activity makes a corridor safer and easier to invest in.

Frequent transit service also strengthens the economic performance of entire corridors. In Chicago, the City expanded transit-oriented development incentives beyond rail stations to more than twenty high-ridership bus routes and paired those incentives with an equitable TOD program. Since 2023, that approach has supported twenty-nine projects representing roughly $300 million in community investment near transit.[22] Reliable service reduces risk for investors by keeping streets active, accessible, and predictable.

Milwaukee is well positioned to capture similar benefits. MCTS's high-frequency routes already align closely with the county's most active housing, employment, and service areas, so each additional rider strengthens corridors where economic activity is already concentrated.

SEWRPC employment forecasts through 2050 show that Downtown Milwaukee, Mayfair, and the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center will remain among the county's most job-dense locations, and each is already served by high-frequency transit.[vi] Mayfair Mall, in particular, functions as a major employment center and transfer point, with six routes beginning or ending there and more than two million annual passenger trips. Transit already links thousands of workers and customers to these destinations; keeping service frequent along these corridors supports both current businesses and future job growth.

Using transit as a tool for corridor and neighborhood investment along high-frequency routes aligns with VISION 2050's emphasis on compact, transit-supportive development and with Milwaukee County's broader approach to health and racial equity, which recognizes access to jobs, services, and stable neighborhood conditions as foundational to long-term outcomes. For local governments, this makes transit investment a practical way to reinforce commercial corridors, protect the tax base, and support reinvestment along streets where public infrastructure already exists.

2.5 Transit, Parking, and Development Value

High-quality transit helps new development use land and dollars more efficiently, lowering per-unit costs for project sponsors and stretching public infrastructure dollars further. Projects located near frequent, reliable service can right-size parking, cutting construction costs and opening more room for homes and workplaces. Structured parking is expensive: in Milwaukee, recent projects have ranged from about $17,000 to $31,000 per stall.[23] Those costs do not disappear; they show up in project financing and ultimately in rents or sale prices. In a county where more than half of renter households already spend 30% or more of their income on housing, the amount and type of parking can directly influence both rent levels and whether projects are financially feasible.[24] The City's 2024 Housing Affordability Analysis calls for aligning development standards, including parking, with production and affordability goals.[25] Transit is a necessary tool to make that alignment achievable.

In plain terms: Parking is expensive to build, and those costs show up in rents and prices. Good transit lets projects use less parking and put more of the site toward housing, jobs, and tax base.

Corridor investments such as bus rapid transit (BRT) concentrate growth where infrastructure already exists. This allows projects to convert or avoid costly parking structures and deliver more homes and jobs within walking distance of frequent service. Along Milwaukee's CONNECT 1 corridor, recent investments have paired transit upgrades with station-area improvements, better connecting major employment centers and educational destinations. Along Cleveland's Euclid Avenue, officials reported $4–$5 billion in adjacent investment following the HealthLine BRT. It is one of several cases where local leaders credited BRT, anchor-institution expansion, streetscape improvements, and transit-supportive local policies with catalyzing corridor reinvestment.[26] Subsequent analyses placed the total economic impact near $5.8 billion.[27]

For project sponsors and local governments, these land-use efficiencies create measurable value: lower per-unit costs, increased leasable space, and higher taxable value per acre. For households, they mean more homes within walking distance of daily needs and fewer parking costs embedded in rent. Aligning parking policy, site design, and transit investment stretches public dollars by focusing growth where streets, utilities, and services already operate. In commercial districts, the same alignment shows up as steadier customer access and more visible activity throughout the day. That activity supports sales, strengthens the local tax base, and makes storefront investments less risky. Well-funded transit helps both the private and public sectors draw more value from each acre and each dollar already invested in streets, utilities, and buildings.

2.6 Conclusion

For employers and investors, the value of transit often shows up in ways that never appear on a balance sheet. Reliable service reduces day-to-day uncertainty in travel times, expands the pool of workers who can reasonably reach a job, and helps employees arrive on time more consistently. Workers reach more jobs at a predictable cost; businesses see fewer missed starts, less overtime to cover gaps, and steadier operations.

In Milwaukee County, the evidence is clear. High-frequency routes have expanded access to jobs across the region. CONNECT 1 BRT averaged more than 3,200 weekday boardings in its first full year. Employer-subsidized passes help stabilize attendance across shifts. Targeted and complementary services support workers where fixed-route transit alone is not sufficient. The result is larger recruiting areas, fewer late arrivals and no-shows, smaller parking needs, and more consistent foot traffic in key corridors.

Sustaining these benefits depends on protecting service frequency and span. Transit networks produce compounding effects: when service improves, job access and reliability grow across the system; when service is cut, those gains unwind quickly. Maintaining dependable, all-day transit preserves access to employment, supports business expansion and retention, and helps households manage transportation costs, particularly for residents without reliable access to a car.

For Southeastern Wisconsin's business community, reliable transit is not simply a social service or a discretionary amenity. It is core economic infrastructure. By keeping workers connected to jobs, customers connected to businesses, and growth focused along already served corridors, transit draws more value from the streets, utilities, and communities it has already built—and positions the regional economy to adapt as workforce and business needs continue to change.

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Section Three:

Quantifying the Regional Benefits of Transit

Sections 1 and 2 examined how reliable transit supports riders, employers, development, and the local economy. This section quantifies those benefits at a regional scale, using travel demand modeling, crash data, emissions analysis, and federal valuation guidance, and compares MCTS's performance with that of selected peer systems.

The impacts examined in this section amount to approximately $366.3 million per year in avoided regional costs. Benefit values are computed in 2023 dollars, the analysis year, using the U.S. Department of Transportation's 2025 benefit-cost guidance, and restated to 2025 dollars using the federal GDP price deflator. The equivalent total is approximately $347.6 million in 2023 dollars. Unless otherwise noted, dollar figures in this section are expressed in 2025 dollars.

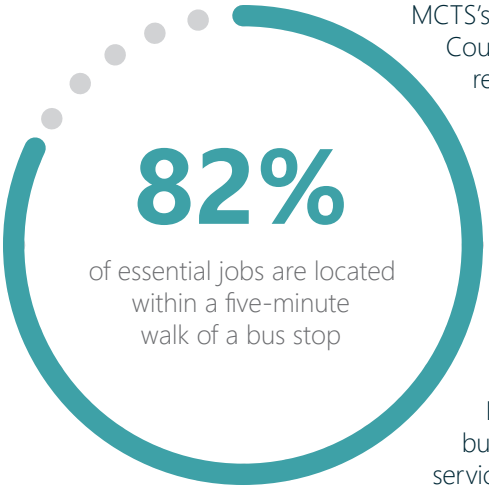
These benefits accrue not only to MCTS riders but to all road users and to residents who benefit from cleaner air and a safer, more efficient transportation system, regardless of whether they personally ride the bus.

3.1 Populations and Destinations Served

How much value the system produces depends first on who and what it reaches. A well-functioning transportation system must serve people with different needs and circumstances. Milwaukee County's residents vary widely by age, income, ability, race, and whether they can or choose to drive. These differences shape how people travel and how critical transit is to their ability to work, access services, and participate in daily life.



How Coverage Was Measured: Population and demographic coverage were evaluated using a walkshed analysis that accounts for differences in how people access transit. Research on walking behavior shows that riders are generally willing to walk farther for more frequent service. For this analysis, a one-third-mile walkshed was drawn around stops served by MCTS high-frequency routes, and a one-quarter-mile walkshed was drawn around stops on lower-frequency routes. Census tract demographic data (ACS 2024 5-Year Estimates) were then allocated proportionally based on the share of each tract's area falling within these walksheds. This approach provides a more accurate picture of effective transit access than a uniform buffer and allows coverage to be examined separately for high-frequency and lower-frequency service areas. Employment and destination coverage were evaluated using a quarter-mile walkshed around all stops, based on SEWRPC Quartersection Data (2020 U.S. Census).



MCTS's fixed-route network reaches a large share of the County's population and employment base. About 709,000 residents, roughly 77% of the County's population, live within walking distance of an MCTS bus stop.[1] Transit access to jobs is similarly broad. About 78% of all jobs and nearly 82% of essential jobs are located within walking distance of a bus stop.[2] MCTS connects most residents to most of the region's jobs.

Who Lives Near Transit

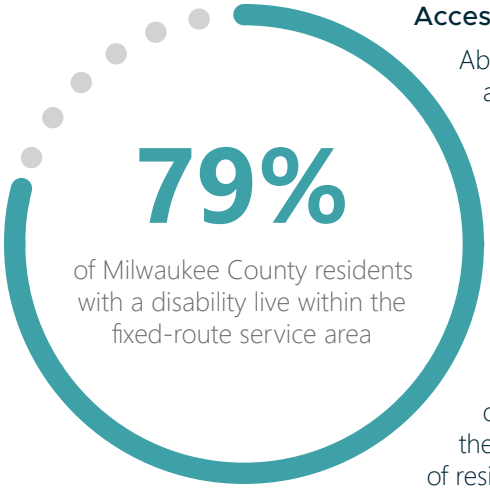
Transit's regional value is most evident in who it reliably serves. Nearly 88% of zero-vehicle households in Milwaukee County live within walking distance of an MCTS bus stop, and about 74% are within the high-frequency service area specifically. For many of these households, transit is not a convenience but the primary means by which they reach work, school, healthcare, and other essential destinations.

The racial dimensions of transit access in Milwaukee County are consistent with patterns documented at the regional level. About 89% of Black residents and 86% of Hispanic residents live within walking distance of a bus stop, compared with 67% of White, non-Hispanic residents. The difference is more pronounced for high-frequency service. About 73% of Black residents and 68% of Hispanic residents live within the high-frequency service area, compared with 49% of White residents.[3]

The composition of the transit service area reflects these coverage differences. Milwaukee County's total population is about 52% minority. Within the high-frequency service area, the share is 60%. Outside the transit service area entirely, the population is 68% White, non-Hispanic. As a factual matter, changes to transit service, particularly to high-frequency routes, affect a population that is more racially and ethnically diverse than the county as a whole.

The MCTS Rider Survey confirms that these access patterns correspond to actual use. About 70% of all MCTS trips are made by minority riders, a figure that exceeds minority representation both in the service area population and in the county as a whole. Similarly, about 49% of riders are not licensed drivers, and 40% live in households with no vehicle available. Nearly half of riders use the system more than five days a week, and 42% are traveling to or from work. For 16% of respondents, if their bus route were unavailable, they could not make the trip at all.[4]

These findings are consistent with regional data. SEWRPC's 2024 Updated Equity Analysis for the VISION 2050 transportation system found that minority populations represent a significantly larger share of transit ridership than of the overall population across all transit systems in Southeastern Wisconsin. In Milwaukee County specifically, about 10% of African American workers use transit to commute, compared with about 2% of White workers. About 25% of African American households and 10% of Hispanic households in the county have no vehicle available, compared with 8% of White, non-Hispanic households.[5]



Access across life stages

About 79% of Milwaukee County residents with a disability live within the service area, and about 62% are within the high-frequency walkshed.[6] Frequent, easy-to-understand bus service works alongside ADA paratransit as part of a broader mobility system. SEWRPC's rider survey found that about 10% of trips involve a rider with difficulty walking, and an additional 8% involve riders with visual impairments, difficulty climbing stairs, or multiple impairments.[7]

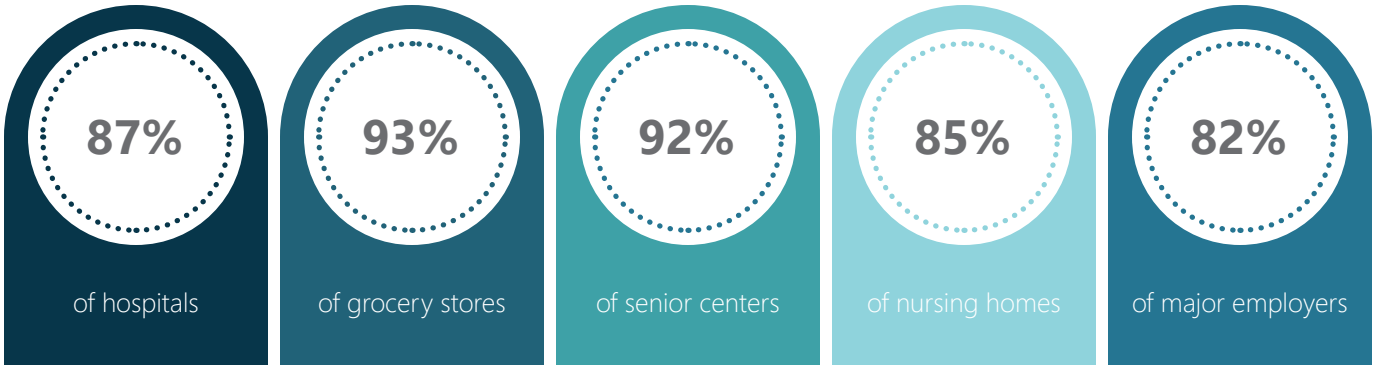
About 71% of older adults in Milwaukee County, residents age 65 and older, live within walking distance of fixed-route service, and 53% are within the high-frequency service area. This proximity supports aging in place as driving becomes more difficult with age. Seniors have the lowest transit coverage rate of any group examined in this analysis, a gap that will become more significant as the population ages. VISION 2050 demographic projections indicate that the share of residents age 65 and older will nearly double to about one in five people by 2050.[8] For many older residents, nearby and predictable transit is the difference between staying connected to daily activities and becoming reliant on others for basic mobility.

At the other end of the age spectrum, about 78% of youth in Milwaukee County, residents under age 18, live within walking distance of a bus stop.[9] This access supports trips to school, after-school activities, part-time jobs, and social activities during years when driving is not yet an option. The rider survey found that about 15% of all MCTS trips are school-related.[10] Early exposure to reliable transit helps young people build basic navigation skills, reduces dependence on household vehicle availability, and establishes transit as a normal, everyday way to travel.

Destinations Served

MCTS's mainline bus routes reach most of the destinations that shape people's everyday, non-work travel. The fixed-route network serves 39 of the County's 45 hospitals, 125 of 134 grocery stores, 59 of 64 senior centers, 28 of 33 nursing homes, and 422 of 514 major employers.[11] Access to these destinations supports healthcare, food access, caregiving, and independent living, needs that extend well beyond the daily commute.

The fixed-route network serves:



3.2 Reliability, Congestion, and Time Savings

Systemwide reliability improvements, such as the MCTS NEXT redesign and corridor upgrades like those implemented on CONNECT 1 BRT, do more than improve individual trips. They keep the broader transportation system moving. At a regional scale, even modest improvements in transit reliability and frequency save meaningful time for transit users and for people who never set foot on a bus.

To estimate these effects, regional travel modeling compared current weekday conditions with a scenario in which MCTS fixed-route service did not exist. The analysis shows that transit removes roughly 425,000 vehicle miles of travel from Milwaukee County roads each weekday. Without transit, much of that travel would shift onto already congested arterial streets, such as Wisconsin Avenue, Fond du Lac Avenue, Capitol Drive, and National Avenue, adding pressure where the system is most constrained.

In total, this shift would result in nearly 25,000 additional person-hours spent in traffic every weekday across the county. That is tens of thousands of commuters each losing a few minutes on otherwise routine trips. These impacts rarely show up as a single dramatic slowdown. Instead, they appear as slightly longer peak-period commutes, extra signal cycles at busy intersections, and less predictable arrival times. Individually, these delays may seem small—five or ten minutes at a time—but when they occur on the region's busiest roads and repeat day after day, they add up to a substantial loss of time and reliability.

Using U.S. Department of Transportation guidance to value travel time, the avoided delay attributable to transit service amounts to approximately $172.4 million per year in congestion and delay costs.[12] This figure combines weekday benefits derived from regional travel modeling with a weekend estimate scaled proportionally from National Transit Database 2024 ridership. Weekend congestion benefits are discounted by half to reflect the lower baseline traffic volumes typical of Saturdays and Sundays.



$172.4 million per year in congestion and delay costs avoided

Not all of transit's benefits show up in congestion statistics. For some residents, the absence of MCTS service would not mean a slower trip. It would mean no trip at all. Being unable to reach work, school, healthcare, or daily needs is a quiet failure of the transportation system. Fixed-route transit prevents that failure by keeping essential trips possible when driving is not an option.

The congestion and delay estimates presented here therefore understate transit's full value. They capture how transit improves travel for people already moving through the system, but they do not account for the cost of exclusion when trips simply cannot happen. By maintaining service where reliance is highest, MCTS keeps basic mobility part of the regional transportation system, rather than something available only to those who can afford and operate a car.

In plain terms: Reliable transit acts like a small but continuous increase in roadway capacity. By reducing the number of vehicles competing for space on roads that already exist, it helps traffic move more smoothly and predictably. The result is more reliable travel for everyone, both people riding transit and those driving.

3.3 Vehicle Operating Cost Savings

Beyond saving travelers time, the trips that MCTS carries each year reduce the total amount of driving on Milwaukee County roads, lowering the fuel, maintenance, and wear-and-tear costs that vehicle operators would otherwise pay. These savings accrue to households, businesses, and public fleets that share the same road network, regardless of whether they personally use transit. They are distinct from, and additional to, the household-level cost avoidance for individual transit riders discussed in Section 2.

Building on the regional travel modeling described above, the analysis applies a per-mile vehicle operating cost rate to the additional driving that would occur if MCTS service did not exist. The current rate of $0.56 per mile, drawn from U.S. Department of Transportation 2025 benefit-cost guidance, captures fuel, routine maintenance, and tire and component wear for a typical light-duty vehicle.



MCTS service avoids **$85.0 million** per year in vehicle operating costs

Applied to the roughly 425,000 weekday vehicle miles avoided in Milwaukee County, and combined with a proportional weekend estimate based on relative ridership, MCTS service avoids approximately $85.0 million per year in vehicle operating costs.[13] These savings represent real money that does not have to be spent on fuel, oil changes, brake pads, and tires across the regional vehicle fleet.

3.4 Reduced Crash Risk

Transit also delivers substantial safety benefits. Because transit is one of the safest ways to travel, each trip taken on it reduces the likelihood that anyone, riders or non-riders alike, will be involved in a crash. National and local data consistently show that, per passenger mile, travel by transit carries a much lower crash risk than travel by personal vehicle. At a system level, fewer vehicle miles traveled on busy corridors means fewer opportunities for collisions, especially at intersections and along arterials where crashes are most common.

Building on the regional travel modeling described earlier, this analysis applies recent Milwaukee County crash rates to the additional vehicle travel that would occur if MCTS service did not exist. Using a county-average crash rate applied to the additional vehicle miles, MCTS service avoids approximately 724 crashes per year in Milwaukee County, including about 2 fatal crashes, 14 crashes causing serious injury, and roughly 700 additional crashes ranging from suspected injury to property damage only.

For residents, these impacts would show up in familiar ways: more minor crashes at congested intersections, a higher risk of serious collisions, and increased danger for people walking or biking. For employers, higher crash rates mean disrupted commutes, delayed deliveries, and lost work time. For public agencies, they bring greater demands on emergency response, healthcare services, and roadway repair.

These avoided crashes represent approximately $80.2 million per year in avoided social costs, including medical expenses, lost productivity, property damage, and quality-of-life impacts.[14] This estimate is intentionally conservative. It treats the marginal vehicle mile as if it carried average crash exposure across all county roads, which understates risk on the busy arterial corridors where transit-diverted trips would primarily flow.

An alternative method, applying arterial- and intersection-specific crash rates to the same additional vehicle miles, produces a higher estimate of approximately 911 crashes per year (about 4 fatal) and roughly $122 million in avoided social costs.[15] This link-average method is arguably more accurate for the diverted-trip scenario, since the trips most likely to shift from transit to driving concentrate on busy arterials rather than freeways or low-volume streets. The lower county-average figure is used as the headline value in this report to maintain a conservative analytical posture; the higher figure indicates the upper end of the plausible range.

Crashes avoided represent an estimated **$80.2 million** per year in avoided social costs

In plain terms: Transit reduces crash exposure by lowering the number of vehicles competing for space on the busiest roads. The conservative, county-average estimate avoids overstating the safety benefit; a method tied to where those vehicles would actually drive puts the value higher still.

3.5 Air Emissions Reductions

Transit service reduces air pollution by lowering the amount of driving on the region's road network. When some daily trips shift from private vehicles to higher-capacity transit, fewer vehicle miles are traveled overall. That reduction directly lowers tailpipe emissions, especially on congested arterial streets where stop-and-go traffic produces higher emissions per mile.

Using EPA MOVES modeling, regional emissions were estimated under current conditions and compared with a scenario in which MCTS service does not exist. The analysis shows that transit service avoids approximately 92,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide–equivalent (CO_2e) emissions each year in Milwaukee County. This includes reductions in carbon dioxide, as well as smaller amounts of nitrous oxide and methane expressed on a CO_2-equivalent basis.

Transit also reduces emissions of air pollutants with more immediate, local health effects. Without MCTS, annual emissions in Milwaukee County would increase by an estimated 64 tons of nitrogen oxides (NO_x), about 1 ton of sulfur oxides (SO_x), and roughly 4 tons of fine particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$). While these amounts may appear small at a regional scale, they are concentrated along busy roads and in densely populated areas, where exposure is highest.

For residents, these effects are felt as poorer air quality near major streets, higher exposure for people walking or biking, and greater health risks for children, older adults, and people with respiratory conditions. For local governments and healthcare providers, higher emissions increase public health burdens and make it more difficult to meet state and federal air-quality goals.

The emissions avoided because of existing transit service are valued at approximately $28.7 million per year, combining weekday and weekend estimates.[16] These are costs that residents would otherwise bear through poorer air quality, higher health risks, and accelerated climate impacts. Like the other benefits described in this section, these effects scale directly with the level of transit service the County provides.

Emissions avoided are valued at approximately **$28.7 million** per year in climate-related benefits

3.6 The Cumulative Value of Transit at a Regional Scale

Transit service helps Milwaukee County avoid **$366.3 million** per year in regional costs

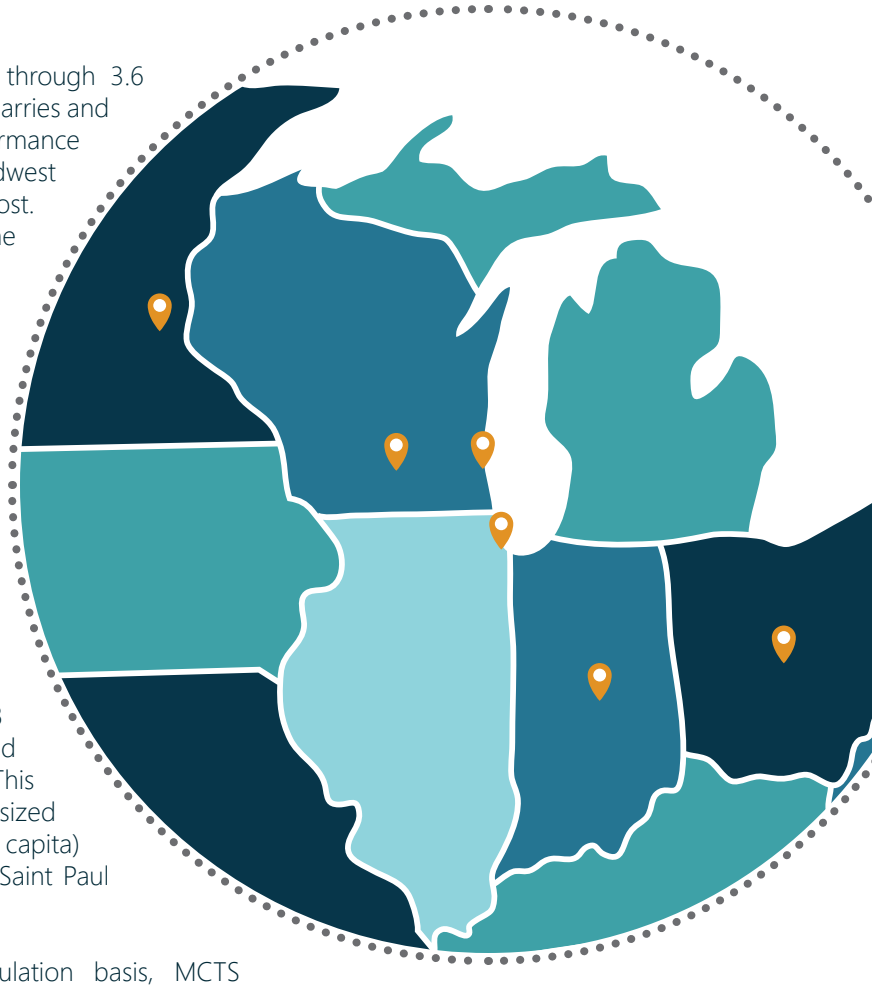
The congestion, vehicle operating cost, safety, and emissions effects described above sum to approximately $366.3 million per year in avoided regional costs: $172.4 million in congestion and delay savings, $85.0 million in avoided vehicle operating costs, $80.2 million in avoided crash costs, and $28.7 million in avoided emissions costs. Over a 10-year period, these avoided costs amount to approximately $3.1 billion in present-value terms ($3.0 billion in 2023 dollars), using standard federal valuation guidance and assuming service is held at its 2023 level. That figure is a present value of avoided social costs, not a return on investment; it does not net out the cost of operating the system.

The figures above describe benefits accruing within Milwaukee County. Because trips into and through the County affect travel conditions in neighboring areas as well, MCTS service also produces meaningful regional spillover benefits. Travel modeling indicates that approximately $15 million per year in additional congestion, vehicle operating cost, and emissions benefits accrue to travelers outside Milwaukee County, on roads connecting the county to the broader Southeastern Wisconsin region. These spillover benefits are excluded from the $366.3 million headline figure, which reports Milwaukee County effects only. They are one more way the headline understates the full benefit.

These benefits do not appear as a single line item in any one budget. Instead, they accumulate over time as fewer vehicle miles are driven, congestion grows more slowly on already-busy roads, crash risk declines, and emissions are reduced. No single household or agency captures the full value on its own, but together these effects result in a transportation system that operates with less delay, lower risk, and fewer long-term infrastructure and public-health costs.

In practical terms, transit allows the region to make better use of infrastructure it has already built. By carrying trips that would otherwise add to peak-period traffic, MCTS helps manage congestion growth, extend the useful life of roadways, and limit the downstream costs associated with crashes and pollution.

3.7 Peer Comparison and System Performance



The regional benefits quantified in Sections 3.2 through 3.6 depend largely on how many trips a transit system carries and how efficiently it delivers them. To put MCTS's performance in context, this section compares it with a set of Midwest peer transit agencies on ridership, recovery, and cost. All of the data used for the following analyses came from the FTA's National Transit Database.

The comparison includes systems in Madison, Minneapolis–Saint Paul, Columbus, and Indianapolis. These systems provide a relevant benchmark for assessing how MCTS performs relative to similar agencies operating in comparable regional contexts. Chicago's CTA is included as well because it is Milwaukee's closest and largest neighbor, but its size and density set it far apart from Milwaukee's true peers; it appears here for context, not as a direct comparison.

On a per-capita basis, MCTS carries a high volume of travel. In 2024, MCTS provided about 28 passenger trips per service-area resident, compared with a peer-system average of roughly 17 trips. This places Milwaukee well above several similarly sized Midwestern cities, including Columbus (8.7 trips per capita) and Indianapolis (7.4), and between Minneapolis–Saint Paul (28.5) and Madison (25.6).

Measured on the same per–service-area population basis, MCTS ridership in 2024 was about 90 to 91% of its 2019 level, reflecting both ridership growth and modest population change. For context, total system ridership reported to the National Transit Database had recovered to about 87% of pre-pandemic levels by 2024. Both measures show substantial recovery, but the normalized metric provides a clearer comparison across systems of different sizes.

Using the same normalized approach, peer systems show weaker recovery trajectories. Columbus and Madison remain below 50% of their 2019 per-capita ridership levels, Indianapolis is near 70%, and Minneapolis–Saint Paul remains in the upper-60% range. CTA, while operating at a much larger scale, also remains below its pre-pandemic normalized ridership level. These normalized results differ from the total-ridership recovery rates cited in Section 1 because several peer agencies' reported service-area populations changed substantially over this period—Madison's grew by roughly 46% and Columbus's by about a third—which lowers their per-capita figures even where total ridership recovered further.

MCTS delivers this ridership at very low unit cost. In 2024, MCTS's cost per trip across all modes was approximately $6.57, compared with a peer-system average of about $13.52. Many Midwestern systems report per-trip costs above $17, including IndyGo ($18.78) and COTA in Columbus ($17.12). Among the selected group, only Chicago's CTA reports a comparable all-mode cost per trip (about $6.20), reflecting a level of operating scale and density that Milwaukee does not share. In this context, MCTS performs at the top of its Midwestern peer group for cost efficiency.

On a fixed-route bus-only basis, MCTS's performance is even stronger. In 2024, the cost per bus trip was approximately $5.86, slightly lower than CTA's bus-only cost and far below most peer systems; Columbus and Indianapolis both exceed $16 per bus trip. Milwaukee delivers bus service at efficiency levels comparable to Chicago's while operating in a much less dense environment.

MCTS, in short, produces high ridership from modest operating inputs. The regional benefits quantified earlier in this section come from a system that carries a large share of daily travel at one of the lowest per-trip costs in the Midwest, not from unusually high spending or excess capacity.



Unless otherwise noted, ridership comparisons in this subsection are shown on a per-service-area population basis, rather than as total system ridership. Normalizing ridership this way allows for more meaningful comparisons across regions of different sizes by showing how intensively transit is used relative to the population it serves.

Cost and productivity measures, such as cost per trip and trips per revenue hour, are reported as published in the National Transit Database or agency financial reports.

3.8 What These Regional Benefits Mean in Practice

MCTS serves a large share of residents, jobs, and essential destinations, especially for households and individuals most likely to depend on transit, and it measurably reduces travel delays, crash risk, emissions, and long-term pressure on regional infrastructure.

The value of transit extends well beyond its riders as well. Reduced congestion, improved safety, and cleaner air accrue to the benefit of households, employers, and public agencies alike. Furthermore, transit supports mobility, economic activity, and public health across the community as a whole.

In plain terms: When transit works, the entire transportation system works better. MCTS already delivers these benefits at scale. Decisions about future service will shape how people travel and how effectively Milwaukee County manages growth, reduces risk, and uses limited public resources.

4.1 Useful Transit Service Produces Value 36

4.2 Value Requires Sustained Service and Funding 37

4.3 Funding Sets the Level of Service 38

4.4 In Conclusion 40

Section Four:

The Three Key Observations

This report has explored the many ways that the Milwaukee County Transit System produces benefits for the region. It has calculated the estimated $366 million per year in avoided costs and compared how MCTS stacks up relative to a selection of its peers. This section makes several key observations based on the report's data and evidence. Specifically, that useful transit service that is frequent and reliable, encourages ridership that produces benefits for both transit riders and non-riders.

4.1 Useful Transit Service Produces Value

In plain terms: MCTS saves the region about $366 million per year because its service attracts riders. The value follows the ridership, and the ridership follows the usefulness of the service.

The estimated $366 million in savings calculated in this report scales with how useful the transit service is to current and future riders. As referenced in Section 1, when MCTS made the system more useful by increasing service frequency along key corridors, ridership increased along several routes. In addition, systemwide, ridership in both 2024 and 2025 exceeded what the long-term trend would have predicted. Therefore, useful transit service that is frequent and reliable makes transit a more attractive option, which creates value.

4.2 Value Requires Sustained Service and Funding

Sustained transit service can increase ridership by offering predictable routes and schedules to riders. For example, riders take up new or improved service gradually, as they discover and build routines around it. Service reductions require riders to change their behaviors quickly, and once those routines have re-formed around other options, riders are harder to regain. Therefore, ridership depends on frequent and stable service hours that allow riders to plan and have confidence that their travel routines will remain in place.

As described in Section 1, MCTS service reductions in 2025 likely impacted ridership. Through July 2025, ridership ran about 6% above 2024 levels. In August 2025, MCTS made the first of two rounds of service reductions, removing roughly 2% of annual service hours. Ridership turned that month and continued to fall throughout the rest of the year.[1] A second round of reductions began in January 2026 and completed phasing in on March 8. Across both rounds, MCTS reduced service by about 15%. Meanwhile ridership has run about 19% lower than in the same months of 2025.[2]

The magnitude of ridership loss exceeds the size of the cut, in part, because of how the transit network is built. Milwaukee County's street grid supports a gridded bus network, with routes running the length of the county in both directions and intersecting one another throughout. That structure lets riders reach most destinations by combining two routes rather than riding one end to end, so the usefulness of any single route depends partly on how often the routes it meets are running. Frequency on a busy corridor is felt twice, once by riders on that route and again by riders who need to connect to it. Service added to any corridor improves the utility of every route connected to it, and service removed is felt the same way but in reverse.[3]

The 2025 trends show how quickly ridership responds to a change in service while the 2026 trends show how the ridership response typically exceeds the transit service reductions. That relationship is close enough, and consistent enough, that the effect of reductions in transit frequency can generally be anticipated, as supported by research on post-pandemic ridership trends.[4] MCTS has described the same relationship in its own planning work. The MCTS Forward "Choices Report" identifies total service as a key driver of ridership and reports that ridership has changed in response when the quantity of service has changed.[5] These changes are more likely to impact those who depend on transit at higher rates, such as households without access to a vehicle and lower income households.

The research conducted for this report demonstrates that the lack of stable funding has generally prevented consistent transit service improvements. This results in potentially less useful transit service, which impacts ridership.

In plain terms:
The value of transit requires predictable service that grows and sustains ridership.

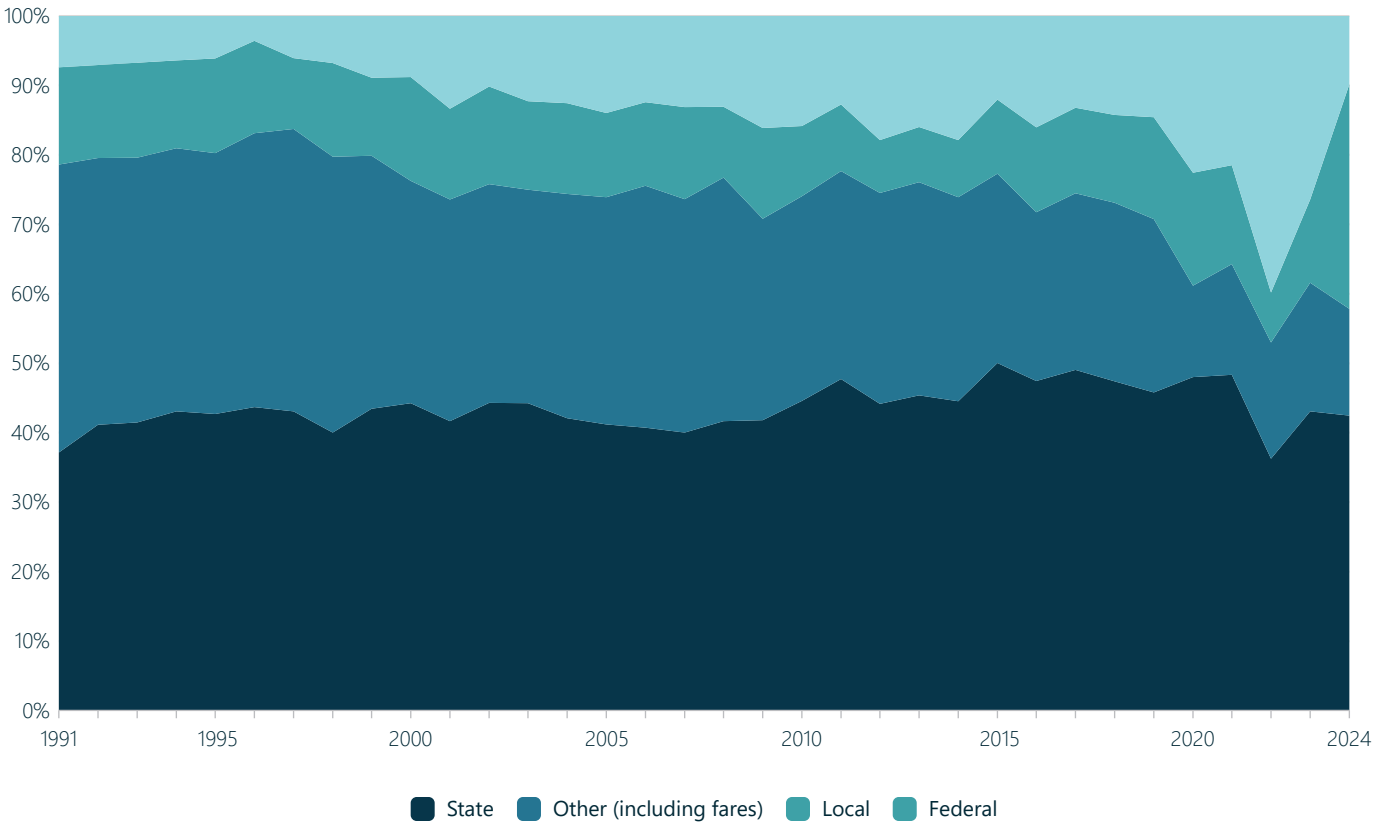
4.3 Funding Sets the Level of Service

MCTS' fixed-route service was funded in 2025 by about $131 million from four sources: roughly $67 million in state transit aid, $25 million in passenger fares, $24 million in County tax levy, and $16 million in federal funds.[6]

Each source has some unique considerations that must be considered. State funds are set by statute, and federal funds generally carry complex grant requirements. Both types of funds also typically require a local contribution.[7] Fares move directly with ridership so when service reductions reduce ridership, fare revenue falls with it. Falling ridership also forces the system's remaining costs to be spread across fewer trips, which impacts the cost-per-trip and farebox recovery advantages MCTS holds over its peers.[8]

The shares of each funding source have broadly held steady; however, gradual trends have started to present themselves as larger shifts. State aid has provided around 40% of the operating costs, while fares and other revenue have lessened as ridership declined. Local dollars funding the system have had to increase since 2023 as federal COVID relief funds have been drawn down.

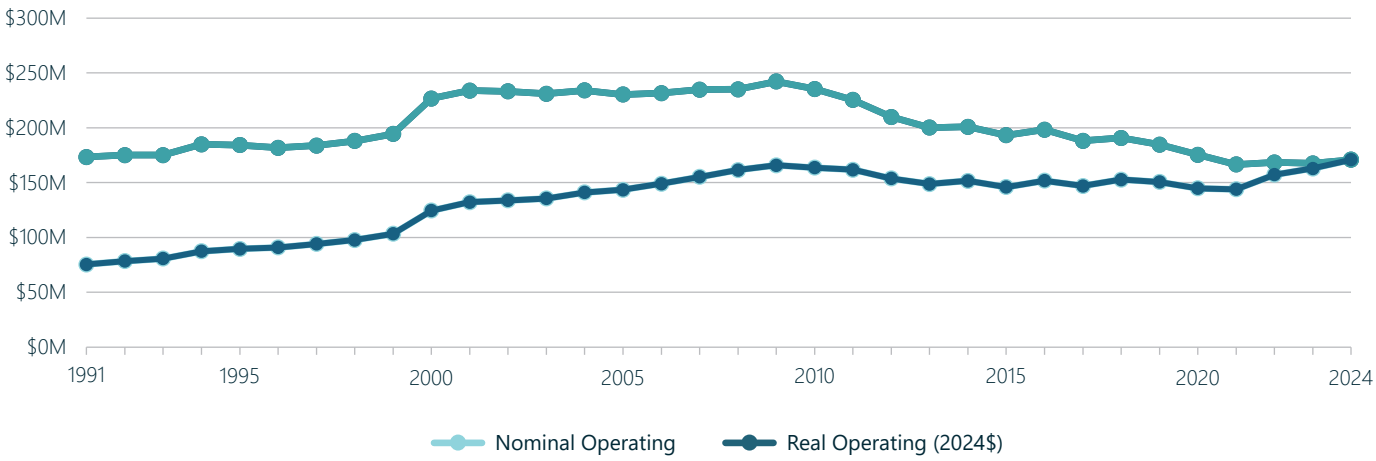
Operating Funding Composition by Source



Source: National Transit Database

While there have been some funding shifts in recent years, the purchasing power of each dollar from each source has declined with inflation. Measured in nominal dollars, funding has more than doubled since 1991. As measured in 2024 dollars, it buys about what it bought in the early 1990s, but that is nearly a third less than it was at its peak in the late 2000s. The State's contribution has been fixed in nominal terms since about 2010. In that time, it has lost roughly 30% of its purchasing power, and each funding cycle in which the allocation remains unchanged supports fewer hours of service than the one before it contributing to the ridership consequences discussed earlier.[9]

Operating Funding: Nominal and Inflation-Adjusted (2024$)



Source: National Transit Database

A system losing revenue can either run more efficiently or run less service. After years of constrained funding, MCTS has, as shown in Section 3, already become very efficient relative to its peers. As Section 1 describes, MCTS has also been shifting more of its resources to higher productivity routes in areas with more jobs and people. A system that has already concentrated its service where demand is strongest has little cushion left to absorb a funding gap without disproportionately impacting ridership, and therefore, its value.

In plain terms: Transit funding decisions are service decisions. The purchasing power from each funding source has declined with inflation, reducing the amount of transit service, and its resulting value.

4.4 In Conclusion

As documented in Section 3, the estimated $366 million per year in avoided societal costs. MCTS delivers for Milwaukee County provides benefits to riders and non-riders alike. This value comes from ridership earned through frequent, reliable service. Maintaining a transit system that supports ridership at its 2023 level for ten years could avoid approximately $3.1 billion in costs in present-value terms. Although MCTS is a leader in efficiency, the purchasing power of transit funding has declined by about 30% since 2010. Without stable funding that is adjusted for inflation, the value of transit documented in this report will decline.

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[6] ACS 2024 5-Year Estimates, Table B18101

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[8] ACS 2024 5-Year Estimates, Table B01001; SEWRPC VISION 2050 Vol. I Ch. 6 Table 6.2

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[13] USDOT BCA 2025 + SEWRPC modeling

[14] TOPS Lab + SEWRPC modeling

[15] TOPS Lab + SEWRPC modeling

[16] SEWRPC MOVES modeling

Section 4 Endnotes

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Appendix A:

Methodology, Data Sources & Analytical Approach

Peer Comparison and National Transit Database Methodology

Purpose and Scope

This section documents the data and method behind the ridership recovery figures in Section 1.1 and the peer comparisons in Section 3.7. All peer figures are drawn from the Federal Transit Administration's National Transit Database (NTD), the uniform national reporting system for transit agencies receiving federal formula funds. Using a single reporting system for every agency keeps the comparisons on one definitional basis.

Peer Group Selection

The peer group comprises Midwest systems operating in comparable regional contexts: Metro Transit in Madison, the Central Ohio Transit Authority in Columbus, IndyGo in Indianapolis, and Metro Transit in Minneapolis–Saint Paul, with the Metropolitan Council's separately reported services shown separately where relevant. Chicago is included for regional context only. Its scale and density are of a different order than Milwaukee's true peers, and its three NTD reporters—CTA, Metra, and Pace—are kept separate rather than combined. Chicago should not be read as a direct peer, and it is excluded from every peer average the report reports.

Data Sources and Vintages

Annual NTD agency profiles for report years 2019 through 2024 are the primary source, so every figure traces to a published federal document. Minneapolis–Saint Paul figures distinguish Metro Transit from Metropolitan Council services because the two report to the NTD separately.

Measures and Definitions

Ridership is unlinked passenger trips, all modes as reported, unless a bus-only figure is noted. Recovery is the ratio of a year's trips to 2019 trips. Per-capita ridership divides each year's trips by that year's NTD-reported service-area population, so both the numerator and the denominator move with the agency's own reporting. Cost per trip is operating expense divided by trips, reported on both an all-modes and a bus-only basis. Trips per revenue hour is trips divided by vehicle revenue hours. Farebox recovery is fare revenue divided by operating expense, all modes. Service-footprint measures for MCTS—directional route miles, and service delivered per route mile, 2015 through 2024—are taken directly from NTD reporting.

Normalization and the Service-Area Population Caveat

Section 1.1 reports recovery on a total-ridership basis. Section 3.7 reports it per service-area resident. The two can diverge, because several peer agencies' reported service-area populations changed substantially over this period. Madison's grew by roughly 46 percent, from about 249,000 in 2019 to about 363,000 in 2024, and Columbus's by about a third, from about 1.06 million to about 1.41 million. A growing denominator lowers a per-capita figure even where total ridership recovered further.

The report treats the normalized measure as the better cross-system comparison, because it describes how intensively a system is used relative to the population it serves rather than how large the system is. Section 3.7 carries a bridge sentence explaining the divergence so a reader moving between the two sections is not left to reconcile them.

Key Results

On a per-service-area-population basis, MCTS's 2024 ridership stood at about 90 to 91 percent of its 2019 level, 28.1 trips per resident against 31.0 in 2019. MCTS's bus-only cost per trip in 2024 was $5.86. The peer-system average cost per trip of $13.52 is the mean of the four peer agencies' all-modes figures; the Chicago reporters and the Metropolitan Council are excluded from that average.

Agency	2024 trips (all modes)	Recovery vs. 2019 (total)	2024 trips per service-area resident	2024 cost per trip (all modes)
MCTS (Milwaukee)	25,665,100	87.2%	28.1	$6.57
Metro Transit (Madison)	9,297,857	71.7%	25.6	$7.31
COTA (Columbus)	12,349,881	63.6%	8.7	$17.12
IndyGo (Indianapolis)	7,133,338	74.9%	7.4	$18.78
Metro Transit (Minneapolis–St. Paul)	47,558,455	61.0%	28.5	$10.85
CTA (Chicago — context only)	309,197,026	67.8%	96.6	$6.20

MCTS Ridership Vintages

Two MCTS ridership vintages appear in the report, and they are not interchangeable. Calendar 2024 is 25,665,100 unlinked trips, all modes, from the 2024 NTD agency profile, about 25.7 million. Calendar 2025 is 25,415,403 trips—25,029,801 fixed-route motor bus plus 385,602 demand response—compiled from MCTS's NTD-basis monthly reporting, about 25.4 million. The 2025 figure is taken from monthly reporting rather than an annual profile because the 2025 profile was not yet published when this report was prepared.

The Hop streetcar carried 494,557 riders in 2025. It is a City of Milwaukee service and is excluded from the MCTS totals throughout.

The Long-Term Trendline Comparison

Section 1.1 compares actual ridership against the system's own pre-pandemic trajectory. A linear trend fitted to fixed-route bus ridership from 2002 through 2019—an average decline of roughly 1.6 million trips per year—is projected forward, yielding expected bus ridership of about 24.1 million in 2024 and about 22.6 million in 2025. Actual bus ridership exceeded those projections by about 1.2 million trips in 2024 and about 2.5 million in 2025, the first sustained move above the long-term trendline since 2016.

The annual series behind the fit is MCTS's own historic ridership reporting, reconciled to an NTD basis. The fit is ordinary least squares on year alone. It carries no adjustment for service level, fare policy, or external conditions, which is why the projection is presented as a descriptive benchmark against the system's own history rather than as a forecast or a counterfactual. Section 1.1 treats separately the evidence that service reductions alone do not account for the 2002 through 2019 decline.

Inflation Adjustment

The report applies two deflators, each matched to its purpose. Benefit values in the "Benefits Valuation Methodology" section of this appendix are adjusted with the Bureau of Economic Analysis GDP implicit price deflator, because federal benefit-cost guidance specifies that index for its own adjustments. Operating dollars compared across time—unit costs in Section 1.1 and the funding series in Section 4.3—are adjusted with the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers, the conventional index for restating a public agency's operating dollars over a long period. The two differ by a few percent across the spans used here and would not change any statement the report makes.

Limitations

NTD figures are self-reported by each agency, and reporting practices vary at the margins. Service-area population is defined by each agency and revised at its discretion, which is the source of the divergence described in the "Normalization and the Service-Area Population Caveat" section of this appendix. Cost per trip reflects each agency's own cost structure, mode mix, and labor agreements, so it measures unit cost rather than efficiency alone. These limitations affect the precision of individual comparisons, not the pattern the comparisons show.

Service Area, Population, and Destination Coverage

Purpose and Scope

This section documents the coverage analysis behind Section 3.1: how many county residents, and which populations, live within walking distance of MCTS service; how many jobs and essential destinations the network reaches; and the rider survey figures that describe how the system is actually used.

Walkshed Definitions

Population and demographic coverage use frequency-sensitive walksheds, reflecting research showing that riders will generally walk farther for more frequent service. A one-third-mile walkshed is drawn around stops served by MCTS high-frequency routes, and a one-quarter-mile walkshed around stops on lower-frequency routes. The stop-level walksheds are dissolved into two service-area polygons, the high-frequency service area and the total service area. Coverage is computed for each, and the low-frequency-only area is derived as the difference.

Employment and destination coverage use a uniform one-quarter-mile walkshed around all stops. The frequency-sensitive definition is not applied to these measures, because the behavioral research supporting the longer walk concerns a rider deciding whether to use a service, not the fixed location of a workplace or a facility. The uniform quarter mile is the more conservative choice and keeps every employment and destination figure on one basis.

Data Sources

Demographic inputs are census-tract-level estimates from the American Community Survey 2024 5-Year Estimates. Five detailed tables are used:

ACS Table	Subject	Universe
B03002	Hispanic or Latino origin by race	Total population
B01001	Sex by age	Total population
B08201	Household size by vehicles available	Households
B17001	Poverty status in the past 12 months	Population for whom poverty status is determined
B18101	Sex by age by disability status	Civilian noninstitutionalized population

Employment and destination inputs come from Commission quartersection data on a 2020 U.S. Census basis. Essential-jobs counts come from the Census Bureau's Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Origin-Destination Employment Statistics.

Allocation Method

Tract estimates are allocated to the service areas by area weighting. Each census tract is intersected with the service-area polygons in a geographic information system, and the share of the tract's land area falling inside each service area is computed. Each tract's population, or households, is then multiplied by that share, and the weighted values are summed across all tracts to produce service-area totals. The procedure is run separately for the high-frequency service area and the total service area. Coverage percentages divide each service-area total by the corresponding countywide total.

Population and Demographic Coverage

Area-weighted estimates for Milwaukee County, American Community Survey 2024 5-Year Estimates using the walkshed definitions described above from the Fall 2024 MCTS Route alignments:

Group	County Total	Within any Service Area	Share	Within High-Frequency Area	Share
Total population	926,331	708,750	76.5%	549,366	59.3%
White alone, non-Hispanic	445,132	297,524	66.8%	218,860	49.2%
Black alone, non-Hispanic	235,244	208,968	88.8%	172,091	73.2%
Hispanic or Latino	157,150	134,790	85.8%	107,258	68.3%
All minority	481,199	411,226	85.5%	330,506	68.7%
Under 18	219,441	170,424	77.7%	131,392	59.9%
65 and over	136,581	96,921	71.0%	72,208	52.9%
Zero-vehicle households	49,178	43,031	87.5%	36,573	74.4%
Below poverty level	156,419	136,602	87.3%	111,623	71.4%
With a disability	119,008	94,180	79.1%	73,657	61.9%

The composition measures in Section 3.1 follow from the same estimates. The county population is about 52 percent minority, the high-frequency service area about 60 percent, and the population outside the service area entirely about 68 percent White, non-Hispanic.

Employment and Destination Coverage

Employment, essential jobs, and destinations are evaluated against the uniform quarter-mile walkshed from Fall 2024 MCTS routes. A destination counts as served when its location falls inside the walkshed.

Measure	Within Walkshed	Countywide	Share
All jobs	455,027	579,001	78.6%
Essential jobs	167,121	204,027	81.9%
Hospitals	39	45	86.7%
Grocery stores	125	134	93.3%
Senior serving facilities	59	64	92.2%
Nursing homes	28	33	84.8%
Major employers	422	514	82.1%

Essential jobs are a subset of total employment identified from industry sector, and generally include workers in hospitals, food manufacturing plants, and utilities. Facility locations come from Commission inventories. The hospital category includes hospitals, medical centers, or clinics with 10 or more physicians. Senior serving facilities include senior centers, senior meal sites, and adult day centers. Major employers include those employers with 100 or more employees.

Two points bear on how these figures should be read. The employment and destination analysis uses a 2020 Census population base of 939,492 for Milwaukee County, while the demographic coverage in the "Walkshed Definitions" section of this appendix uses the American Community Survey estimate of 926,331. Walkshed population is nearly identical on either basis—709,666 and 708,750—so the figure of about 709,000 residents holds either way, but the coverage share differs slightly, and Section 3.1 reports the survey-based share.

Second, these measures record proximity to a stop, not the quality of service at that stop. A hospital served once an hour by a single route and a hospital served by four high-frequency routes each count once. The measure answers whether the network reaches a destination.

Rider Survey

Figures describing how the system is actually used come from the 2023 MCTS Rider Survey rather than from the coverage analysis. The two answer different questions. Coverage describes who lives near service. The survey describes who rides.

Every published survey figure is a share of total weighted trips, not a share of riders or of respondents. The survey is trip-weighted, so a figure such as 40 percent zero-vehicle means that 40 percent of trips are made by riders who report no household vehicle. Because frequent riders contribute more trips, the two quantities differ, and the trip basis is the correct one for the use the report makes of them.

Non-response is retained in the denominator throughout. It is substantial on several items, including 11.6 percent on driver's license status and 21.8 percent on vehicle availability. Reported shares therefore understate prevalence among riders who answered the question. Where 49.3 percent of all trips are made by riders reporting no driver's license, the share among trips for which the question was answered is 55.8 percent. The report uses the lower, all-trips figure throughout.

Measure	Share of Trips
Rider is a minority	70.5%
Rider does not hold a driver's license	49.3%
No household vehicle available	40.1%
Uses the system more than five days a week	48.2%
Trip purpose: home-based work	42.3%
Trip purpose: home-based school	15.3%
Could not make the trip if the route were unavailable	16.0%
Walked to the stop	81.4%

The work-trip figure in Section 3.1 is the home-based work share. Adding non-home-based work brings work-related travel to 50.0 percent.

Limitations

Area weighting assumes population is distributed uniformly within each tract. Where population clusters near or away from the service area inside a tract, the allocation can over- or understate coverage. American Community Survey five-year estimates carry sampling margins of error that are not propagated through the analysis.

Walksheds are drawn as distance around stops. They approximate rather than measure door-to-stop walking routes, and they do not account for freeways, rivers, or missing sidewalks that can make a nominal quarter mile impassable. Coverage measures proximity, not usable service.

The rider survey carries the limitations common to intercept surveys. It describes trips made by people already using the system and says nothing about people who have stopped riding or who never started.

These limitations affect precision rather than the direction of the findings. The coverage estimates should be read as close approximations.

Benefits Valuation Methodology

Purpose and Overview

This section documents how the annual benefits of MCTS fixed-route service were estimated and how each figure was derived. The valuation measures avoided costs—the costs the region would bear if the trips the transit system currently carries were instead made by private vehicle. Four categories of avoided cost are estimated: congestion and travel-time delay, vehicle operating costs, crash avoidance, and emissions. Each category starts with a physical quantity produced by Commission modeling or analysis, which is then multiplied by a monetary unit value from United States Department of Transportation benefit-cost analysis guidance. The four categories measure separate effects and do not overlap, so they are added to a single annual figure.

Analytical Basis

The estimate uses the No-MCTS scenario from the Commission's regional travel demand model. In that scenario, the trips carried by buses on the fixed-route system are reassigned to private vehicles, and the model reports the resulting change in vehicle travel relative to the baseline. That difference is the physical foundation for the valuation. All figures represent Milwaukee County, and the analysis year is 2023, the most recent year for which a complete model run and emissions analysis are available.

The model also produces a No-Transit scenario, in which every bus trip in the region shifts to a private vehicle. This estimate uses the smaller No-MCTS increment, which isolates the effect of the Milwaukee County Transit System specifically and is the more conservative of the two choices. Benefits accruing beyond the county line are calculated and reported separately as context. They are not part of the headline figure.

Data Sources and Vintages

The inputs span several years, because each draws on its most current authoritative source and each source has its own update cycle. The physical analysis driving three of the four categories is based on the 2023 analysis year.

Input	Source	Vintage
Vehicle-hour and vehicle-mile increments	Commission regional travel demand model	2023
Emissions tonnages	EPA MOtor Vehicle Emission Simulator (MOVES), analysis by SEWRPC	2023
Crash base counts	Wisconsin Traffic Operations and Safety Laboratory (TOPS Lab)	2019 to 2023
Average vehicle occupancy, weekday and weekend	USDOT BCA guidance, 2025 edition, Table A-3	Values in 2023$
Day-type ridership	National Transit Database (NTD) service report	2023
Monetary unit values	USDOT BCA guidance, 2025 edition	Values in 2023$
Inflation factor	BEA GDP implicit price deflator	2023 and 2025 index values

The 2023 NTD service report supplies day-type ridership rather than the 2024 report because the travel demand model and the emissions analysis are both anchored to 2023. Holding the reference year constant keeps the weekend estimate internally consistent with the physical modeling.

Dollar Year and Inflation Adjustment

All four categories are first computed in 2023 dollars, using the 2025 edition of the federal benefit-cost analysis guidance, whose unit values are expressed in 2023 dollars. The 2025 edition is used rather than the 2026 edition for a specific reason: the 2026 edition removed the valuation of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases entirely, citing Executive Order 14154 and OMB Memorandum M-25-27. Because the carbon dioxide benefit can only be drawn from the 2025 edition, that edition is used for all four categories, keeping the entire valuation on one consistent basis.

Once all four categories are expressed in 2023 dollars, they are adjusted to 2025 dollars to reflect current purchasing power. The adjustment uses the GDP implicit price deflator published by the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the same index the federal guidance uses for its own inflation adjustments. The factor is the 2025 annual deflator divided by the 2023 annual deflator: 128.979 divided by 122.390, which equals 1.0538.

The $241 per metric ton value is the social cost of a ton of carbon dioxide emitted in 2024, expressed in 2023 dollars. The 2024 emission year is used because the 2025 guidance does not publish a 2023 emission-year rate; 2024 is the earliest available and the closest to the 2023 analysis year. The inflation factor then separately restates that 2023-dollar value in 2025 dollars. These are two independent adjustments. The first selects the marginal cost of a near-term emission, a real economic quantity that rises over time as cumulative atmospheric concentrations increase. The second converts the unit of account from 2023 dollars to 2025 dollars. They do not overlap, and the figure does not count inflation twice.

Congestion and Travel-Time Delay

This category is the value of the additional time that would be spent traveling if the transit trips were instead made by private vehicle. The model reports an increment of 17,700 vehicle-hours on an average weekday for Milwaukee County. That is converted to person-hours using a weekday average vehicle occupancy of 1.41 persons per vehicle, from Table A-3 of the 2025 federal guidance, which gives 24,957 person-hours per weekday. Person-hours are valued at $21.10 per hour, the all-purposes value of travel time from Table A-2, and annualized across 260 weekdays. The weekday congestion benefit is 24,957 person hours of travel time delay multiplied by $21.10 multiplied by 260 weekdays, which equals $136,914,102 as the cost of delay in 2023 dollars.

A weekend estimate of $26,702,427 in the cost of travel time delay is added from the calculation described in the "Weekend Estimates" section of this appendix, for an annual county congestion benefit of $163,616,529 in 2023 dollars.

Vehicle Operating Costs

This category is the value of the fuel, maintenance, tires, and mileage-based depreciation that would be incurred if the bus trips were taken by private vehicle instead. The model reports an increment of 424,900 vehicle-miles on an average weekday for Milwaukee County. Vehicle-miles are valued at $0.56 per mile, the operating cost of an average light-duty vehicle from Table A-4, and annualized across 260 weekdays. The weekday benefit is 424,900 vehicle-miles multiplied by $0.56 multiplied by 260, which equals $61,865,440 in 2023 dollars. The per-mile value excludes fixed ownership costs such as insurance and registration, which do not vary with mileage.

A weekend estimate of $18,798,413 is added from the "Weekend Estimates" section of this appendix, for an annual county operating-cost benefit of $80,663,853 in 2023 dollars.

Crash Avoidance

This category is the value of the crashes that would occur if bus trips were driven instead. The Commission's crash analysis applied the additional vehicle volume from the No-MCTS scenario to Milwaukee County crash rates, using a five-year base period of 2019 through 2023, and estimated the number of additional crashes by severity. The headline value uses the county-average method, which applies average countywide crash rates to the volume increment. Each severity level is valued using the corresponding unit value from Table A-1 of the 2025 federal benefit-cost analysis guidance.

Crash Severity	Avoided Crashes (annual)	Unit Value (2023$)	Value (2023$)
Fatal (K)	2	$13,200,000	$26,400,000
Incapacitating injury (A)	14	$1,254,700	$17,565,800
Non-incapacitating injury (B)	70	$246,900	$17,283,000
Possible injury (C)	102	$118,000	$12,036,000
Property damage or no injury (O)	536	$5,300	$2,840,800
Total	724	$14,824,900	$76,125,600

A second method, the link-average method, applies crash rates specific to arterial links and intersections rather than countywide averages. It produces about 911 avoided crashes annually, including about 4 fatal, valued at $116,194,600 in 2023 dollars, or $122,450,064 in 2025 dollars. That figure is reported as context and is not used in the headline value.

The choice is a deliberate understatement rather than a judgment that the county-average method is the more accurate one. Trips diverted from transit would concentrate on the arterial corridors the link-average method describes, not distribute evenly across all county roads. Section 3.4 states this openly and gives both figures.

Crash base counts are annual figures that already incorporate weekend travel, so no separate weekend crash estimate is added.

Emissions

This category calculates the value of the air-pollutant and greenhouse-gas costs that would occur if the transit trips taken by bus were instead taken by automobile. Emissions are estimated with the EPA MOVES model for the 2023 analysis year and represent a full calendar year including weekends. Because the figures are already full-year, no separate weekend emissions estimate is added.

The model reports emissions in United States short tons, while the federal cost values are stated per metric ton, so quantities are converted by dividing by 1.1023, the factor cited in the footnote to Table A-6 of the 2025 federal guidance. All quantities are the Milwaukee County increment. Where the report quotes a tonnage in text, it quotes the metric figure, because that is the quantity the valuation uses.

Pollutant	Quantity (short tons)	Metric Tons	Value per Metric Ton (2023$)	Value (2023$)
Carbon dioxide equivalent	101,477	92,059	$241	$22,186,299
Nitrogen oxides	71	64.4	$20,800	$1,339,744
Sulfur oxides	1	0.9	$55,800	$50,621
Fine particulate (PM2.5)	4	3.6	$998,300	$3,622,607
Total	--	--	--	$27,199,272

All four pollutants are valued at their 2024 emission-year rates from Table A-6, the earliest rates published in the 2025 guidance and the closest to the 2023 analysis year. As noted in the "Dollar Year and Inflation Adjustment" section of this appendix, the inflation adjustment applied throughout separately converts these 2023-dollar values to 2025 dollars. The two are independent operations. The annual emissions benefit is $27,199,272 in 2023 dollars.

Weekend Estimates

The travel congestion and vehicle operating cost figures derived from the travel demand model are weekday figures, so a weekend estimate is added for both categories. The weekend estimate scales from weekday values using the ratio of weekend to weekday ridership, drawn from the 2023 NTD service report for MCTS. Average ridership in 2023 was 67,355 on a weekday, 59,543 on a Saturday, and 41,982 on a Sunday, giving Saturday and Sunday ratios of 0.884 and 0.623.

Weekend travel congestion. Weekend travel congestion is calculated differently from weekend operating costs, because congestion is sensitive both to the number of vehicles on the road and to how many people are in each vehicle. On weekends, vehicles carry more passengers on average—1.81 persons per vehicle against 1.41 on weekdays, per Table A-3 of the 2025 USDOT BCA guidance. A weekend occupancy adjustment factor of 1.284, which is 1.81 divided by 1.41, is applied to the weekend congestion figures.

Weekend congestion is also reduced by 50 percent to reflect lower baseline traffic on weekends. This is a conservative judgment rather than a measured value. The USDOT BCA guidance publishes no weekend-specific congestion discount, and the travel demand model was run for weekday conditions only, so an empirical weekend estimate is not available. The discount is applied in the direction that understates rather than overstates the benefit.

The Saturday congestion benefit is the per-weekday congestion value multiplied by the Saturday ridership ratio of 0.884, by 52 Saturdays, by the 50 percent discount, and by the 1.284 occupancy factor, which equals $15,537,048. The Sunday benefit is calculated the same way using the Sunday ratio of 0.623 and 53 Sundays, equaling $11,165,379. The weekend congestion benefit total is $26,702,427 in 2023 dollars.

Weekend operating costs. Weekend operating costs are scaled directly from weekday values using the ridership ratios, with no congestion discount and no occupancy adjustment, because vehicle operating costs are per-mile costs that do not depend on occupancy. The Saturday benefit is the per-weekday value multiplied by 0.884 and by 52 Saturdays, equaling $10,938,027. The Sunday figure uses 0.623 and 53 Sundays, equaling $7,860,387. The weekend vehicle operating-cost total is $18,798,413 in 2023 dollars.

Emissions and crashes are excluded from the weekend estimate, because both are already full-year annual figures that incorporate weekend conditions.

Benefits Beyond Milwaukee County

The travel demand model reports increments for the full region. The Milwaukee County share is the headline. The remainder is calculated and reported as context only.

The regional weekday increments are 18,600 vehicle-hours and 460,200 vehicle-miles, against county increments of 17,700 and 424,900. The outside-county remainders are 900 vehicle-hours and 35,300 vehicle-miles.

Component	2023$	2025$
Congestion and travel-time delay	$6,961,734	$7,336,527
Vehicle operating costs	$5,139,680	$5,416,380
Emissions (proportional estimate)	$2,259,671	$2,381,323
Total	$14,361,085	$15,134,230

This total is the roughly $15 million in spillover benefits cited in Section 3.6. Two qualifications travel with it. The congestion and operating-cost components are weekday only, because no weekend increment is available outside the county. And the emissions component is not separately modeled: it applies the county emissions benefit to the outside-county share of the regional vehicle-mile increment, about 8.3 percent, and should be read as an order of magnitude rather than a precise value. Because the entire outside-county total is excluded from the headline benefit, neither qualification affects any reported benefit figure.

What Is Excluded

Several items are deliberately excluded from the headline figure. Paratransit service is not included, because the travel demand model represents fixed-route transit service only. Benefits beyond the county line, documented in the "Benefits Beyond Milwaukee County" section of this appendix, are shown as context.

Whole categories of benefit are absent from the estimate rather than valued at zero: travel-time reliability, the health effects of walking to and from transit, avoided vehicle ownership at the household level, and the value of trips that would not be made at all if service were unavailable. Section 3.2 addresses the last of these directly. For 16 percent of surveyed trips, an unavailable route means no trip rather than a slower one.

The figure is an avoided-cost estimate. It is not combined with economic-impact estimates such as those produced under the American Public Transportation Association's Economic Impact Tool, which measure a different value-production pathway and would double-count if added. Within the valuation itself, the four categories measure separate effects and do not overlap.

Summary of Results

Component	2023$	2025$
Congestion and travel-time delay	$163,616,529	$172,425,004
Vehicle operating costs	$80,663,853	$85,006,480
Crash avoidance (county-average)	$76,125,600	$80,223,905
Emissions	$27,199,272	$28,663,574
Total annual benefit	$347,605,254	$366,318,964

The headline annual benefit is approximately $347.6 million in 2023 dollars, or approximately $366.3 million in 2025 dollars. The 2025-dollar figure is the one the report carries.

Ten-Year Present Value of Avoided Social Costs

The annual benefit described above represents a single year. To express the value of the service over a longer horizon, the annual avoided cost is extended across ten years and discounted to present value.

Component	2023$	2025$
Ten-year present value of avoided social costs	$2,979,452,475	$3,139,854,570

In rounded terms, the ten-year present value is approximately $3.0 billion in 2023 dollars, or approximately $3.1 billion in 2025 dollars.

The estimate holds congestion, vehicle operating cost, and crash avoidance benefits flat at their 2023 values across all ten years, reflecting transit service held at its 2023 level. Emission values are not held flat. Following Table A-6 of the 2025 federal guidance, the social cost of each pollutant rises year by year, so the analysis applies the rate for each emission year from 2024 through 2033. That rise is real growth in the marginal damage of each pollutant, not inflation, so the figures remain in constant 2023 dollars. Each year is then discounted to the 2023 analysis year, at 3.1 percent for congestion, operating costs, crashes, and the non-carbon pollutants, and at 2.0 percent for carbon dioxide, the rates the 2025 guidance specifies. The discounted annual values are summed across the ten years.

This figure is a present value of avoided social costs. It is not a net present value. It does not subtract the cost of operating the transit system, and it is not a benefit-cost comparison. It measures only the social costs the region avoids by carrying these trips on fixed-route transit rather than in private vehicles.

The estimate assumes fixed-route service continues at its 2023 level for the full ten years. Service has been reduced since 2023, so the figure represents the value that would be sustained if service were held at the 2023 level. It is not a forecast of the benefits the system will actually deliver over the coming decade.

The benefits are discounted to the 2023 analysis year and reported in 2023 dollars, then restated in 2025 dollars using the same factor applied to the annual figures. The present-value base year, 2023, is the year to which future benefits are discounted. It is distinct from the dollar year in which the result is expressed.

Transit Funding in Milwaukee County

Purpose and Scope

This section documents the funding figures in Section 4.3: the composition of MCTS fixed-route funding in 2025, the share supplied by the county tax levy, and the long-run funding history behind the figures. It covers how the funding was counted, not what the funding buys. The relationship between funding, service, and ridership is the subject of the "Service Reductions and the Ridership Response" section of this appendix.

Scope: Fixed Route Only

The 2025 figures cover fixed-route service only. Paratransit is excluded from the program budget, the tax levy, and passenger revenue alike, so that the funding described here corresponds to the service described elsewhere in the report. The long-run series in the "Long-Run Funding, 1991 Through 2024" section of this appendix is the exception, and is identified as such.

The 2025 Funding Split

The county budget reports fixed-route revenue as a single non-levy total of $107.4 million rather than by source, so the sources were separated in three steps.

Passenger fares of $24.6 million come directly from the budget's activity data. The remaining $82.8 million is apportioned between state and federal sources using shares from the 2024 National Transit Database agency profile, in which state funds are about 81 percent and federal funds about 19 percent of combined state-and-federal operating funding. The county tax levy is reported in the budget directly.

The apportionment is validated independently. The resulting state figure of $67.2 million lands within about 1 percent of both the $66.7 million in state transit aid cited in the budget narrative and the amount fixed in statute, which is the closest available check on a figure the budget does not publish.

Two imprecisions attend the method and are disclosed rather than smoothed over. The NTD shares are system-level and include federal allowances for paratransit, which may slightly overstate the federal share assigned to fixed route. And miscellaneous non-fare local revenue is small and folded into the apportionment. Neither materially affects the result.

Source	2025 Adopted, Fixed Route
State transit aid	$67.2 million
Passenger fares	$24.6 million
County tax levy	$23.9 million
Federal	$15.6 million
Total	$131.3 million

Why 2025

2025 is the basis year for two reasons.

The first is service comparability. Budgeted 2025 bus hours are within about 4 percent of 2023 actuals, so the funding year and the service the report describes correspond closely. The 2026 budget reduces bus hours by roughly 18 percent, which breaks that correspondence.

The second is funding-structure representativeness. The county levy is a residual—expenditures minus all other revenue—so it absorbs structural shocks rather than adjusting smoothly with prices. Between 2020 and 2023, roughly $192 million in one-time federal pandemic relief temporarily displaced county dollars, and the adopted 2023 fixed-route levy fell to $4.7 million as a result. Those years cannot describe how the system is ordinarily funded. A deflator can restate prices; it cannot repair a distorted funding structure. The basis year is therefore chosen on service and structure rather than on matching the model year.

Adopted budgets are used throughout, both for consistency and because an adopted figure represents the deliberate funding decision. Where actual results diverged materially, the divergence is disclosed rather than mixed in. The 2024 adopted fixed-route levy was $21.4 million against a $48.5 million actual, reflecting levy backfill of revenue shortfalls.

The Federal Line

Large transit systems generally may not use federal formula funds for day-to-day operations. The federal amount in the 2025 operating budget therefore consists mostly of expiring pandemic relief and capitalized preventive maintenance—routine maintenance that federal rules treat as a capital expense reimbursable at 80 percent. This is why Section 4.3 describes federal funds as carrying conditions rather than as ordinary operating revenue, and why the federal share cannot be assumed to persist.

Residual pandemic relief remains in the 2024 through 2026 adopted budgets at roughly $8 million, $10.5 million, and $8.5 million, scheduled for depletion by late 2026 or early 2027.

The Levy Share

Two figures in Section 4.3 follow directly from the funding split. The county tax levy of $23.9 million is 18.2 percent of the $131.3 million total. Each levy dollar is accompanied by $4.49 from state, federal, and fare sources.

Both are budget arithmetic. Neither is a measure of return, and neither attributes any portion of the benefit estimated in the "Benefits Valuation Methodology" section of this appendix to any particular funder. The report states this alongside the figures wherever they appear, because a ratio of dollars to dollars invites being read as something more.

Long-Run Funding, 1991 Through 2024

The figures in Section 4.3 draw on National Transit Database operating funding reporting for MCTS, report years 1991 through 2024. The NTD reports operating funding in four source categories: federal, state, local, and other directly generated revenue. The last of these groups passenger fares with advertising, interest, and other agency-generated income, which is why the fourth band in the figure is labeled for fares and other revenue rather than fares alone.

This series is not on the same basis as the 2025 figures above. It covers all MCTS operating funding, fixed route and paratransit together, and it comes from federal reporting rather than the county budget. The two are not interchangeable, and the report does not combine them.

Total operating funding rose from $75.3 million in 1991 to $170.8 million in 2024. The figure restates that series in 2024 dollars using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers, as described in the "Inflation Adjustment" section of this appendix. Four statements in Section 4.3 rest on the adjusted series: nominal funding more than doubled across the period; in 2024 dollars, 2024 funding sits within a few percent of the 1991 level; real funding in 2024 is roughly 30 percent below its late-2000s peak; and state assistance, roughly flat in nominal terms since 2010, has lost about 30 percent of its purchasing power over that period.

One feature of the series should be read carefully. The reported local operating figure rises from $19.6 million in 2023 to $55.2 million in 2024. That is not an expansion of county support for service. It reflects levy backfill of revenue shortfalls as federal pandemic relief was drawn down, the same divergence between adopted and actual levy described in the "Why 2025" section of this appendix. Section 4.3 describes it as local dollars growing quickly as relief funds were exhausted, which is the correct reading.

Limitations

The 2025 funding split rests on a disclosed apportionment rather than on published fixed-route revenue detail. The composition will shift as federal relief expires and as service levels change, so the figures describe a single budget year rather than a stable structure. Long-run comparisons are sensitive to the choice of price index and to changes in federal reporting categories over a thirty-four-year period. These figures indicate scale and direction. They are not forecasts.

Service Reductions and the Ridership Response

Purpose and Scope

This section documents the ridership analysis in Sections 4.1 and 4.2: how ridership since 2023 compares with the base year of the benefits valuation, how ridership moved through the service reductions of 2025 and 2026, and how the report uses published research on the relationship between service and ridership.

Data and Definitions

Ridership figures come from National Transit Database monthly reporting for MCTS. All figures are fixed-route motor bus. Paratransit and the City of Milwaukee streetcar are excluded, so that the ridership measured corresponds to the service that was reduced. Service-hour figures come from MCTS. Months through April 2026 are reported actuals; May 2026 is a preliminary figure and is identified as preliminary wherever it appears.

The Service Reduction Record

The first round of reductions took effect August 24, 2025 and removed about 2 percent of annual service hours. The second round began in January 2026 and completed its phase-in on March 8, 2026. Across both rounds, service fell by about 15 percent.

Comparison Method

Ridership changes are computed month against the same month of the prior year, so seasonal variation does not enter the comparison. Through July 2025, the last full month before the first reduction, ridership ran about 6 percent above the same months of 2024. From January 2026 forward, ridership has run about 19 percent below the same months of 2025.

Comparison to the Analysis Year

Fixed-route bus ridership was about 22.4 million in 2023, 25.3 million in 2024, and 25.0 million in 2025. Section 4.1 uses these figures to observe that both 2024 and 2025 ran above the 2023 base year on which the benefits valuation rests, so the value the system produced in those years was likely somewhat higher than the headline estimate describes. April and May 2026, the first full months after the second round completed phasing in, each ran within about 2 percent of the same month in 2023, which is the basis for the statement that the system has returned to something near its 2023 level of value production.

What the Comparison Establishes

These figures are descriptive. They record that ridership turned in the month service was first reduced, that it has run below the prior year since, and that the percentage ridership decline exceeds the percentage service reduction. They do not isolate the service reduction from every other influence on 2026 ridership, and the report does not claim that they do.

Two further lines of evidence support the reading Section 4.2 gives them. MCTS has found the same relationship in its own network planning work, identifying total service as a key driver of ridership and reporting that ridership has moved when the quantity of service changed. And the structure of the network explains why the ridership loss exceeds the service loss: in a gridded system where most trips combine two routes, frequency on any corridor is felt twice, once by riders on that route and again by riders connecting to it. Service removed from one corridor degrades the usefulness of every route that meets it. That mechanism accounts for the gap between a 15 percent service reduction and a larger ridership decline without requiring an elasticity estimate.

The Service – Ridership Relationship in the Literature

Section 4.2 states that the effect of a service change on ridership can generally be anticipated. That statement rests on published research rather than on a model estimated for this report. No elasticity was estimated from MCTS data, and no elasticity value produces any figure in the report. The literature corroborates a descriptive finding; it is not an input to a calculation.

The research runs in two directions. The percentage sensitivity of ridership to a frequency change is generally highest on lower-frequency routes, a pattern documented since the early 1980s and reaffirmed in recent multi-agency panel data. More recent post-pandemic route-level work finds elasticity concentrated instead on already-frequent core routes, with caveats offered by its own authors.

The report does not resolve that tension. Its argument runs on absolute ridership and network structure rather than on percentage elasticity. High-frequency routes carry most of the riders and anchor the transfers that make a gridded network useful, so a given percentage reduction on those routes produces the largest absolute loss and the widest disruption.

Limitations

Monthly comparisons describe what happened alongside the service reductions. They do not, on their own, establish how much of the change is attributable to service and how much to fare policy, weather, employment, or other conditions. The most recent months are preliminary and subject to revision. The service-hour reduction is measured against annual scheduled hours and does not capture where in the network, or at what times of day, the reductions fell—both of which affect how much ridership a given percentage reduction removes.