

BETTER TRANSIT
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BETTER MEMPHIS

December 17, 2024

Dear MATA Board of Commissioner Members, Mayor Young, and the Memphis City Council,

On behalf of the Better Transit for a Better Memphis Coalition (BTBM), **we are writing to ask the MATA Board and Memphis city officials to pause any consideration of MATA leadership changes and restructuring conversations.** Instead, the MATA Board and the City should take time to listen to the true MATA stakeholders- bus riders, front-line MATA employees, and community members. Memphis deserves a fully-funded, reliable, public transit system and funding is the key issue.

On Dec 13, multiple (BTBM) members attended the five sequential MATA Committee meetings where we learned of TransPro's proposal to bring in an intervention team, led by consultant John Lewis. We are shocked and disappointed that such a large proposal to change MATA leadership and direction is being voted on with minimal notice to and input from bus riders, front-line MATA employees, and the general public.

During the committee meeting, Chief Adams from the City of Memphis indicated the Mayor is ready to fund the proposal, pending the MATA Board agrees to execute it. While we appreciate that the Mayor is willing to make needed investments to get MATA back on track, we believe another abrupt change in leadership, following the overhaul of the MATA Board, may continue destabilizing the transit authority and further erode community trust. The current uncertainty at MATA and talks of service reduction have already led to 120+ employees leaving MATA in search of secure jobs.

John Lewis' proposal presentation at Friday's committee meetings affirms our concerns. Lewis said that during his 8-month contract, he would be "designing the transit system from scratch, using the current budget to determine the service MATA will offer." We believe that is a wrong and totally backwards approach.

Any redesign of MATA should start with the system as it should be, followed by a calculation of the revised costs, which the City administration should commit to funding. We have been vocal at MATA Board Meetings, City Council meetings, and even attended the Mayor's one-off meeting with multiple bus riders and community advocates on Oct. 28th and have been clear that we do not support expanding on-demand service and we do not support reducing routes and service schedules, both of which will reduce accessibility for riders and terminate high-paying union jobs.

We are also concerned about the lack of due diligence to determine if TransPro is the right fit to lead MATA. TransPro's record with other transit authorities shows a tendency towards privatization, service

reduction, and service replacement with on-demand services while ignoring community input. Reports from Charlotte, NC, Wilmington, NC, Detroit, MI, and Kansas City, MO indicate a concerning trend of dissatisfaction following TransPro interventions (see appendix). Riders and operators with extensive experience with MATA are best equipped to inform changes at MATA, and yet, we continue to be left out of the conversation and decision-making process.

The root cause of our transit system is the chronic defunding of MATA over the last decade, if not longer. Compared to peer cities, we are significantly behind, meaning, that even with strong leadership, our transit authority is limited. When charged with recommending key actionable strategies to strengthen mass transit, Mayor Young's own transition team submitted one strategy that they considered most critical: "to increase public transit funding in the Mayor's 2024-2025 budget and lay the foundation for a sustainable funding source that is local and dedicated to transforming public transit." Unfortunately, the Mayor has yet to act on this key recommendation. If we have money to invest in transit, then we should apply it to support the system and riders rather than additional out-of-town corporate executives without a clear indication that they can deliver on our vision for an expanded and reliable MATA.

As bus riders, operators, mechanics, and concerned community members, we believe we have been given a false choice- to keep the broken system as is or to restructure and live "within our means." We refuse this choice and believe there is another way- fully funding the transit system Memphis deserves.

Again, we ask the MATA Board and Memphis city officials to pause any consideration of MATA leadership changes and restructuring conversation and, instead, take time to truly listen to the true MATA stakeholders- bus riders, front-line MATA employees, and community members.

Sincerely,

Dorothy Conner, Co-Chair of Better Transit for a Better Memphis
Oyama Hampton III, Co-Chair Better Transit for a Better Memphis
Leo Arnoult, MICAH
Harrison Currie, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 713
Evelyn Williams, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 713
Rita Harris, Sierra Club Chickaw Group
Dennis Lynch, Sierra Club Chickaw Group
Paul Klein, Climate Reality Project
Cardell Orrin, Stand for Children TN
L. Roshell Hubbard, A Certain Woman Ministries
Kimberley Davis, Memphis Community Against Pollution
Gisela Guerrero, MICAH & Mayor Young's Transportation Transition Committee
Virginia Rostick, MICAH

Appendix I. Experiences from other Transit Authorities with TransPro

Wilmington, NC

ATU Local 1328 Chief Shop Steward, Velveeta Clayton, who works at the Wilmington NC transit system for their contractor, Transdev, had to say:

“When [TransPro] made the changes in 2020/2021, they weren't thinking about the riders, the employees, or the community. When they made these changes, they were 750k in the hole between 2020 and 2021. So they thought to make a 750k cut, but it didn't help. We were still in the 750k deficit, and it just made it worse -- the ridership, the elderly, the people who need to go to school, the single moms. All of that they messed up.

When they first did the proposal, I went to city council and said, your computer isn't telling you where the elderly are or where they're going -- none of these runs are going where the elderly really need the bus routes. They aren't concerned about what the bus drivers think. They just pushed it through without listening to us.”

- <https://www.whqr.org/local/2021-01-31/waves-new-executive-director-talks-route-changes-transpro-and-future-of-the-transit-system>
- <https://www.whqr.org/local/2024-02-15/wave-mulls-three-options-for-reimagined-service-while-facing-a-750-000-budget-shortfall>

Detroit, MI

In Dec 2011, Mayor Bing contracted Parsons Brinkerhoff and Envisurage LLC, now TransPro, to improve “fleet reliability, peak pullout compliance, customer satisfaction, and operating efficiency of system.” Following this contract, DDOT announced substantial bus service cuts, including increasing wait times and eliminating overnight service. In April 2012, the contractual management team announced the 415 Plan during public hearings. Detroit Transportation Riders United (TRU’s report states “the Envisurage contractors tried to convince bus riders that the 415 Plan was a service improvement. Nothing can be further from the truth – for most riders most of the time will experience longer waits and longer commutes.”

TRU says “Envisurage were brought in by former Detroit Mayor Dave Bing to slash costs, resulting in massive cuts to our DDOT bus system. The system still hasn't recovered, over a decade later.”

- TRU report from 2012:
<https://www.detroittransit.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/TRU-DDOT-Bus-Timeliness-Report-May-2012.pdf>
- https://www.huffpost.com/entry/detroit-bus-service_n_1311867

Kansas City, MO

From Stand Up KC “Despite IRIS being touted as a solution to Kansas City’s weak transit infrastructure, it has proven to be the opposite, raising serious concerns about the privatization of one of our most essential public services. The taxpayer-funded program is a race to the bottom for transit workers, replacing a functional and free bus system driven by stable, family-sustaining union jobs, with low-wage work characterized by an exploitative fee scheme of which Black and Brown workers disproportionately bear the burden, as well as questionable reliability for KC riders. zTrip maintains control over the platform and operations while shifting the risk and costs to drivers. zTrip has pocketed at least \$2.5 million in exploitative fees from IRIS drivers between March 2023 and July 2024, based on one estimate.”

- <https://www.kshb.com/news/local-news/two-americas-transit-deserts-in-kansas-city-metro>
- <https://thebeaconnews.org/stories/2023/08/30/iris-kansas-city/>
- <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article293793794.html>

Additional articles on Transpro’s privatization efforts

- <https://commonwealthbeacon.org/transportation/t-considering-privatization-of-core-services/>
- <https://www.youobserver.com/news/2019/jul/12/county-to-move-forward-on-implementation-of-scat-service-partnership/>