



MEMPHIS AREA TRANSIT AUTHORITY

# STAKEHOLDER REPORT

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# STAKEHOLDER REPORT

## OVERVIEW

As part of the Short Range Transit Plan (S RTP) members of the Nelson\Nygaard study team conducted a series of stakeholder interviews. These interviews were held with members of the community identified by MATA as having a stake or interest in the development of Memphis' public transportation system. The purpose of the interviews was to collect a broad perspective on community interests, needs and expectations for MATA services. The interviews also provided insights into MATA service development and the perception of MATA in the community.

## METHODOLOGY

MATA assumed responsibility for identifying the specific organizations and individuals most appropriate for participation in the interview process. MATA staff also contacted the organizations and individuals to confirm their willingness to participate in the process. This step helped to encourage participation in the process and also ensured the stakeholder list contained the most appropriate individuals for an interview within an organization.

After MATA gave the study team the final list of stakeholders, staff from Nelson\Nygaard or Trust Marketing contacted each organization to arrange a meeting. Interviews were set up as individual meetings, or in some cases the study team participated in a regularly scheduled meeting. At the onset of each meeting, the study team encouraged stakeholders to speak freely and assured them that any comments or ideas expressed in the interview would be anonymous. As a result, findings presented in this memo are not attributed to any individual or organization and instead summarized. In total, the study team met with representatives from 19 organizations and received input from nearly 40 individuals (see Appendix A for a full list of organizations interviewed).

While each interview was tailored to reflect the individual (or organization) perspective, the meeting focused around five primary questions:

- What is your experience with and perspective on MATA services?



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- Do your clients or constituents use MATA? How effectively do the existing transit services meet their needs?
- Are there things that MATA is doing well? What are they and how are they successful?
- Are there opportunities for MATA to improve? What are they and what are the challenges?
- What improvements do you think MATA should prioritize in the next 3 to 5 years?

This memo provides an overview of the comments received.

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The salient findings from the combined stakeholder interview process include:

- There is a strong level of support for MATA and public transportation among the stakeholders. Nearly every stakeholders interviewed wants MATA to succeed and feel the agency plays an important role in the community.
- Stakeholders also recognize that MATA operates in a challenging environment and Memphis is not a very transit oriented community. Most also acknowledge that MATA has not been funded sufficiently to meet all expectations in the community.
- Most stakeholders feel MATA does not have a strong focus about the type of service or agency it wants to be. Likewise, stakeholders had lots of strong opinions about the type of agency they want MATA to be, most want MATA to focus on serving people who have no other way to travel and for MATA to be at the forefront of Memphis and Shelby County's effort to become a more vibrant sustainable and youthful city.
- MATA has an image problem, especially with members of the community who are in leadership positions and especially with individuals who do not regularly ride the bus. These individuals feel MATA services are outdated, unreliable, complex and don't take people where they want to go.
- Many individuals, organizations and institutions would like to work more closely with MATA to improve transit services and help design a system that more closely meets their specific needs but also the community at large.
- Individuals with disabilities are a critical market for MATA. More than any other group, stakeholders representing individuals with disabilities expressed gratitude for MATA services, but also frustration about how challenging it was for them to rely on MATA as their primary source of transportation.



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### EXPERIENCE WITH/PERSPECTIVE OF MATA SERVICE

While a handful of the stakeholders are frequent MATA riders, most of the individuals who participated in the interview process do not regularly ride MATA buses, or they are only occasional riders. Among the people who ride MATA occasionally, nearly all of them reported using MATA's downtown trolley services and/or the special event shuttle services. In addition, a handful of the stakeholders said they had ridden the fixed-route bus service once or twice over the past several months and a few said they had grown up riding MATA. Consequently, with the exception of the frequent users, stakeholders' perspective on MATA bus service is primarily based on very limited experience and/or information provided by other people.

Perceptions of MATA varied considerably among the stakeholders but there were several consistent impressions of the agency and its services. While several of the impressions were consistent across several stakeholders, sometimes their impressions were contradictory.

In all cases, stakeholders acknowledged that providing public transportation is not an easy task, especially in Memphis. They consistently reported that there is a strong car culture in the South in general and Memphis in particular. This combined with the fact that traveling by car in and around Memphis is easy means there is very little incentive to use public transportation. As a result, transit has become a service that only people with no other option will use.

There was a balance of comments about MATA services – while several stakeholders were largely positive about MATA, others had negative perceptions. The stakeholders who were positive about MATA and their efforts tended to be those individuals who regularly ride the bus themselves or whose constituents rely on the service. These stakeholders expressed a strong appreciation for MATA and the availability of transit services. These individuals also tended to have positive comments about MATA staff and drivers and often felt that MATA is underappreciated for its role and service in the community.

Other stakeholders, however, were critical of MATA and felt strongly that there is potential for improvement. There was a strong sentiment that MATA has not kept pace with the changes in Memphis – including socio-economic and demographic changes regarding how the city is laid out, but also the type of city that Memphis is working towards becoming. Several individuals, for example, look to MATA to be an integral part of the broader efforts to strengthen Memphis' image as a dynamic, vibrant and young city. Many individuals with this sentiment also reported living in or visiting other American cities where public transit agencies are more active players in the development of community. As a result, they tend to look to MATA to adopt a similar approach and many are willing to work with MATA to help them achieve this goal. In addition, many of





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these same stakeholders suggested that several public agencies in Memphis have recently realized one or two highly successful projects (i.e., Greenline, new housing development or downtown parks), and as a result have earned public trust and respect. MATA, however, cannot as easily point to such a project, but would benefit from one.

Other stakeholders did not necessarily look to MATA to lead Memphis into the future but instead felt that MATA was not focused enough on its strongest customer base – those with no other option for transportation. These stakeholders were less likely to think Memphis would ever become a transit oriented community and tended to feel that MATA should identify its market base and focus its efforts on doing the best job possible getting these people where they need to go.

In both cases, however, there is a strong sense that MATA is not a dynamic and proactive agency that is actively looking to improve its services. Relevant stakeholder comments included:

- “MATA is in the doldrums.”
- “MATA doesn’t seem to be getting out in front of any issues.”
- “MATA feels like a utility – not friendly or dynamic, just a boring service.”
- “Perception that MATA is not doing many things correctly. There are a lot of big buses lumbering around empty.”
- “MATA is perceived as a poor person’s transportation service.”

### EFFECTIVENESS OF MATA SERVICES

Stakeholder attitudes with regards to the effectiveness of MATA services mirrors their perceptions of the agency overall. Stakeholders who regularly ride the bus or work closely with constituents who do are generally more positive and supportive of MATA services. These individuals tended to say the bus can get them where they need to go and that the drivers are helpful. They also feel that MATA staff, including drivers, is willing to work with them. Despite being generally positive, this group of stakeholders had several complaints about MATA services as well as specific ideas about how MATA could improve the bus service. These individuals are also very interested in supporting MATA as the agency improves its services.

Comments include:

- “The drivers are a huge plus for the system. They understand and know more about the system than anyone else and they will always help me when I ask.”
- “If you know the system, you can get around. And, people are glad to have it.”



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- “The management has been more willing to meet and work with us and listen to our needs than they used to. And, experience suggests they are more willing to take action on complaints.”

Stakeholders with less direct experience with MATA gave the agency much lower marks for their service. The main service components identified for improvement are: routes and service organization; service reliability; driver behavior; and marketing and information systems.

### ***Routes and Service Organization***

Stakeholders tended to feel as if the MATA transit service is cumbersome, overly complex, and it doesn't take people where they want to go. Many people felt the system is oriented around east-west travel and too focused on downtown. As a result, they felt if you aren't traveling downtown, riding the bus is very time consuming. These individuals also felt there are not enough routes available for north-south travel. Consistent with having too much service into downtown, stakeholders also felt there is not enough service to/from other major destinations, such as the airport, or neighborhoods with a strong need for service, such as Hickory Hill. These stakeholders were also generally less supportive of the trolley service.

Relevant comments include:

- “The system looks intimidating. It seems too complex.”
- “It is a mystery where the bus goes. The numbers and street names shown on the head signs don't seem to be associated with anything logical.”
- “About 10-15% of our workers ride the bus. It is not easy for them and many have to transfer 2-3 times to get here. This is hard because many of the jobs are minimum wage, part-time or both and taking a long bus to get to a job like this is not easy.”
- “(I) Love the idea of the trolley but it is not a success. It is not reliable, it is uncomfortable and it doesn't go anywhere. They are slow and can be out-walked.”

### ***Service Reliability***

Stakeholders had a strong perception that MATA is not a reliable service. Several people recounted stories of being on the bus when the bus pulled over, the driver got out without explaining anything to the passengers and they were all expected to wait several minutes for the driver to get back. Stakeholders with a disability in particular also had complaints about service reliability, with many complaints about buses breaking down and/or having equipment that was not in working order.



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Comments include:

- “The bus is not reliable – when you use MATA, you can’t be sure you will get to your destination in a timely way.”
- “I can’t tell you the number of times I have been on a bus when the driver pulls over and hops out to get a coke.”
- “MATA’s maintenance is terrible. It seems like something is wrong - the ramps don’t work or the (wheelchair) tie-downs are missing - at least half the time.”

### ***Driver Behavior***

Stakeholders also felt drivers do not have a strong customer focus. While many people had encountered helpful drivers, most could also report a negative experience. For example, several stakeholders who ride the trolley felt the trolley drivers were not very helpful or customer focused. They felt this was very disconcerting given their impression was the trolley drivers were the most customer-oriented drivers in the system.

Stakeholders with a disability reported mixed experiences with the drivers. Several of the stakeholders said they recognize a passenger with a disability requires more work for the driver, and despite this, many are very kind and accommodating. However, stakeholders also said they know the drivers have been trained. Despite this, nearly every one of the stakeholders with a disability had examples of other drivers who were not polite or did not follow the rules. For example, they will tell passengers the ramps are not working when they are; and they often forget to call out the stops or call out the cross streets but not the transfers. Some individuals with a disability also said drivers are sometimes visibly grumpy when they see a passenger in a wheelchair waiting at the stop.

### ***Marketing and Information Systems***

Stakeholders were in near agreement in their sentiment that MATA could do a better job communicating with the public about the service available. Frequent riders said the schedules are not easy to read or understand and often contain inaccurate information. Infrequent riders said there is not enough information available at the bus stops and the web-site is not very helpful, so they don’t really know what they need to know to use the bus. Many feel as though MATA should totally rebrand their service so they can have a clean image with the public. Stakeholders also expressed concern because they felt these issues had been raised with MATA, but they did not feel MATA was listening. Some of the pertinent comments include:





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- “Waiting for the bus is not comfortable. There is not enough information and you feel stranded and unsure waiting for the bus, “Is it going to come? When will it come? Where will the bus go when it comes?”
- “MATA has an image problem and it doesn’t seem to care. They don’t promote their services very well.”
- “There is a perception that MATA caters to poor people and there is a sense that MATA doesn’t even care about this. The brand is dead.”
- “I know there are competent people at MATA, but if we wanted the agency to help provide some service, we’d ask them to do it under a different name.”

### MATA SUCCESS

In general, despite complaints about MATA service, there is strong support among the stakeholders for MATA as an agency. There was a sense that MATA has good staff and has a strong Board that can help them overcome some of the challenges facing the agency. Most stakeholders hope that MATA can agree on a direction and goals and start making progress.

When asked about what MATA is doing right, the majority of the stakeholders pointed to the downtown trolleys and/or the Grizzlies and game day shuttles. Several stakeholders also said that the MATA infrastructure looks good, especially the buses. Others also said they appreciated that MATA provided bike racks on their buses. Other stakeholders praised the MATA drivers, but this was not consistently reported (see above).

#### ***Game Day Shuttles***

Many stakeholders felt that MATA does a great job with the special event shuttle services, such as the Tigers and Grizzlies basketball shuttles and game day services to the Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium. As part of this process, the study team encountered several stakeholders who had never ridden a “regular” MATA bus, but took the game day shuttles and were very positive about the services.

#### ***Trolley Services***

Although the comments on the trolley were mixed overall, there is considerable support for the trolley system with many of the individuals interviewed reporting that the trolleys look good, arrive frequently and has made a positive impact on downtown revitalization.

- “Because I work downtown, I like the trolley. I think the trolley provides a useful service for everyone who works downtown. “



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- “The trolleys are much more reliable now. I think MATA now better understands that frequency is it.”

### ***Buses and Capital Facilities***

Several stakeholders feel that MATA is doing a good job with their capital facilities, especially the buses, trolleys and trolley stops. There was a lot of support among the stakeholder community for MATA’s initiative to put bike racks on buses and the hybrid vehicles. A few people also felt strongly that taking the “green” approach will help MATA.

- “They buy big, beautiful buses. The fleet looks wonderful. I think they have been energetic and successful with the capital improvement money that comes their way.”
- “MATA is having success with their bike racks on the buses. They get people where they want to go to begin their (bike) rides. The hybrid, electric buses are great too and promote an environmental friendliness and consciousness.”
- “The trolley stops are a definite bright spot in the system.”

## MATA CHALLENGES

In general, stakeholders are sympathetic to MATA and the challenges facing the agency as it operates public transportation services in Memphis. Stakeholders most frequently articulated the challenges facing MATA as associated with the operating environment, public mindset, and funding.

- Memphis is not a high density city and is becoming less dense as development spreads further out. This makes it harder to create a “mass transit” system that can efficiently serve a large number of people.
- There is local resistance to using public transportation. People in the Memphis area love to drive and don’t really see a compelling reason why they shouldn’t.
- MATA has never really been funded at a level that matches people’s expectations for how the service should operate. Likewise, they don’t have enough staff to do the job they were asked to do.
- Consistent with the funding challenge is the fact that MATA is a poor city and funding will always be constrained. It is difficult to imagine a scenario where MATA will have enough money to do what it needs to do to be successful.



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### PRIORITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Stakeholder comments did gel into a clear set of priorities for how and where MATA should focus their resources and efforts. As discussed, several stakeholders had different and inconsistent ideas about the type of agency MATA should be – some felt MATA should provide transportation for people with no choice, while others want MATA to play a strong role in the development of Memphis. There was also a sense that MATA, as an agency, doesn't have a clear sense internally about what kind of agency it would like to be.

In terms of stakeholder priorities for how MATA should improve its service and concentrate its resources, there was a variety of ideas. The most frequently identified priorities include:

- There was a strong sense that MATA needs to do more in terms of **marketing and communication**. Stakeholders asked for two things with regards to marketing (1) They want to know more about what MATA is doing and what MATA is doing well. These stakeholders, for example, were surprised that MATA operated game day shuttles and didn't know about the new hybrid buses. (2) Stakeholders also want MATA to do a better job telling people how the service works. There is a strong sense that MATA service is confusing and the agency needs to find a way to communicate the bus network to the public.
- Many stakeholders felt strongly that MATA needs to **prioritize its customers**. There is a strong sense that MATA does not have a strong customer orientation – both in terms of really trying to meet the needs of its existing customer base but also in terms of working to understand who their strongest markets are and how to best serve them.
- Similar to adopting a customer orientation, stakeholders also said MATA would benefit from focusing on the basics of transit service, such as timeliness, cleanliness, safety and affordability. People need to think of MATA and immediately think “**on-time, clean, safe and affordable**.” Stakeholders who expressed this perspective, felt achieving these service attributes would help solve a lot of MATA's other problems.
- A lot of stakeholders also want MATA to adjust services to reflect the current pattern of development. These individuals and organizations want to see MATA **improve service to the region's largest and most important employment areas**, such as the airport as well as to the suburban employment markets.
- Stakeholders also said they hoped MATA would start to **offer more different types of service and more flexible service**. These included suburban park and ride lots, express buses, and bus rapid transit. These stakeholders were interested in seeing MATA



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try new and different service models to better match the local need and changing employment markets.

- Several stakeholders also see MATA as a key part in Memphis' efforts to become a greener and more sustainable community. Many of these stakeholders are willing to work with MATA to achieve this goal. They hope MATA can build on the successes achieved by other local agencies and efforts, such as the Greenline to help change the way people in Memphis travel and live.



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### APPENDIX A: LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED

#### City of Memphis

- Division of Housing and Community Development
- Mayor's Office
- Memphis Housing Authority
- City Council

Urban Land Institute – Memphis Chapter

Shelby Farms Park

Citizens for Better Service

Community Development Council of Greater Memphis/Livable Memphis

Memphis Center for Independent Living

FedEx

Memphis Area Women's Council

Memphis City Schools

Representatives from Memphis Medical Center hospitals

The University of Memphis

Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau

Memphis Chamber of Commerce

- Chamber Staff and Major Roads Task Force

Black Business Association

MPACT Memphis

City of Germantown

DeSoto County Planning Commission

Latino Memphis

Shelby County Mayor's Office

Memphis-Shelby County Airport Authority

Memphis Medical Center