



# FINAL REPORT

## At A Glance

RIPTA suspended fare collection on the R-Line, our most frequent and highest-ridership route.

- Pilot program ran September 2022 through September 2023
- Ridership increased on both fixed-route and paratransit
- Riders appreciated fare benefits but also desire frequent, high-quality service
- Partially funded by American Rescue Plan Act
- Net loss of \$2.7M in operating revenue

## Key Findings

**Sustainability:** Waiving fares takes revenue out of RIPTA's budget—revenue that is needed to pay bus operators, clean and maintain buses, provide shelter and seating at bus stops, and operate frequent, reliable service. Despite revenue replacement funding from the state, RIPTA lost about \$2.7 million in fare revenue over the course of the pilot. This funding could have been used to support needed service and/or capital improvements to the RIPTA system.

**Customer Satisfaction:** Nearly all surveyed R-Line riders indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to ride the route fare-free. When asked specific questions regarding their satisfaction with R-Line service, however, responses were not overwhelmingly positive. Affordability is just one of many factors impacting customer satisfaction. RIPTA

continually strives to provide excellent transit service that meets the travel needs of our customers, and this will always involve balancing affordability with the frequency and reliability that riders need and demand.

**Ridership Growth:** Ridership can be measured in different ways. In terms of the total number of trips taken on a route, waiving R-Line fares encouraged riders to ride more often, take shorter trips, and favor the R-Line over other nearby routes. In terms of attracting new riders away from other modes such as driving, however, gains were limited. In the coming months, RIPTA will work with the RI Department of Environmental Management, the Division of Statewide Planning, the Office of Energy Resources, and the Department of Transportation to develop and test strategies for growing transit mode share – encouraging people to use transit instead of their cars – as a means of addressing Rhode Island's climate goals.

**Equity:** Many R-Line riders have very low incomes, and waiving R-Line fares provided a clear benefit for those riders. However, many other low-income RIPTA riders who travel in areas not served by the R-Line were unable to benefit from this pilot program. Transportation is a key social determinant of health, enabling individuals to access work, education, medical care, recreation, and social interaction. With this in mind, RIPTA already has one of the nation's most robust benefit programs, providing fare-free travel to low-income seniors and people with disabilities, and is currently piloting a new effort to support low-income riders who do not qualify for this program.

Have questions? Want to see past study reports? Visit [RIPTA.com/rlinepilot](https://www.ripta.com/rlinepilot)

## What was the R-Line Fare-Free Pilot Program?

- From September 2022 through September 2023, RIPTA suspended fare collection on the R-Line at the direction of the Rhode Island General Assembly, which allocated \$3.25 million in one-time federal America Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) monies in support of the pilot.
- During the pilot, customers in RIPTA's RIDE paratransit program also rode for free when their trips started and ended within ¼ of a mile of the R-Line.
- Other RIPTA services still required fare payment.
- The program has now ended and fare collection has resumed on the R-Line.
- RIPTA collected qualitative and quantitative data over the course of the pilot, using that information to analyze pilot performance.

## Community Engagement

RIPTA conducted two rounds of community engagement, first in fall 2022 and again in spring 2023. This extensive outreach consisted of:

- 2 rider surveys conducted on-board and online (4,145 completed surveys total including 1,562 R-Line riders surveyed). The surveys included questions about travel behavior, RIPTA usage, and rider demographics
- 2 rider focus groups – One in English, one in Spanish
- 8 interviews with elected officials, RIPTA Board members, and other state leaders
- 2 advisory discussions held – Accessible Transportation Advisory Committee and Human Services Transportation Coordinating Council
- 7 months of RIPTA customer service logs reviewed
- 10 hours of pop-up events held at five different locations along the corridor
- 11 social service organizations surveyed
- 29 local businesses visited along the R-Line
- 135 RIPTA front-line employees interviewed

## Measuring the Impact of the Pilot

In an effort to understand how the fare-free pilot affected transit customers, R-Line corridor stakeholders, and RIPTA front-line employees, RIPTA gathered quantitative and qualitative data throughout the study period. Specific focus areas included:



**Rider Access, Mobility, and Equity:** To understand benefits and social equity implications of the pilot, the study analyzed changes in ridership, travel mode, trip purpose, and customer satisfaction.



**Financial Health:** To understand the overall financial impact of the pilot to RIPTA, the study examined changes in fare revenue and operating resource requirements.



**Operational Efficiency:** To understand how the pilot affected operations, the study analyzed changes in on-time performance, crowding, and bus operator satisfaction.



**Community Benefits:** The study engaged directly with riders and local businesses to understand how the public perceived the program and its benefits.

## RIPTA Riders

The study team engaged thousands of riders through pop-up events, in-person and online surveys, and advisory committee discussions.

- Riders appreciated the fare-free service and many were pleased to save money that they would otherwise spend on fares.
- Some riders using other routes were frustrated that the R-Line was fare-free but their route was not.
- Some riders, including those that appreciated fare-free service, thought it would be a better investment if RIPTA developed a reduced-fare program for all routes or focused on improving service.
- Some riders with disabilities reported that they experienced crowding on the R-Line which sometimes made it more difficult to use mobility devices on buses.
- About 26% of surveyed R-Line riders reported that they were new to the R-Line; of these, about 40% chose to start riding the R-Line because of the fare-free pilot.
- 74% of surveyed R-Line riders reported that they had already been riding the R-Line before the pilot began; of these, about 65% reported riding more often.
- Compared to all RIPTA riders, R-Line riders reported that they were driving, walking, biking, and using ride-hailing services less since the R-Line pilot started and were using other RIPTA routes more.
- When asked to rank priorities, surveyed riders chose increasing frequency over fare-free service.



*“Offer discounts to people who are on SSI or people such as students who are on the edge and need help for a short time.”*



*“Make other routes run more often instead of making the R-Line free.”*



*“I shop along the R-Line more than I used to, and I don’t worry about making a trip to pick up just one or two things, because it’s free.”*

## RIPTA Employees

The study team engaged over 80 RIPTA employees, including more than 50 bus operators, through surveys, interviews, and office hours.

- R-Line operators reported that riders were happy to have free bus service.
- Operators noted an increase in people using the R-Line as a “hop-on, hop-off” service.
- Operators and customer service agents reported some customer confusion and dissatisfaction about fare payment on other routes. Some customers asked: “The R-Line already has the best service, why should people on that line now also get free fares?”

## Community Organizations and Businesses

The study team walked the R-Line corridor and talked to 29 local businesses to get their feedback on the pilot. The team also received feedback from 11 social service agencies and community organizations.

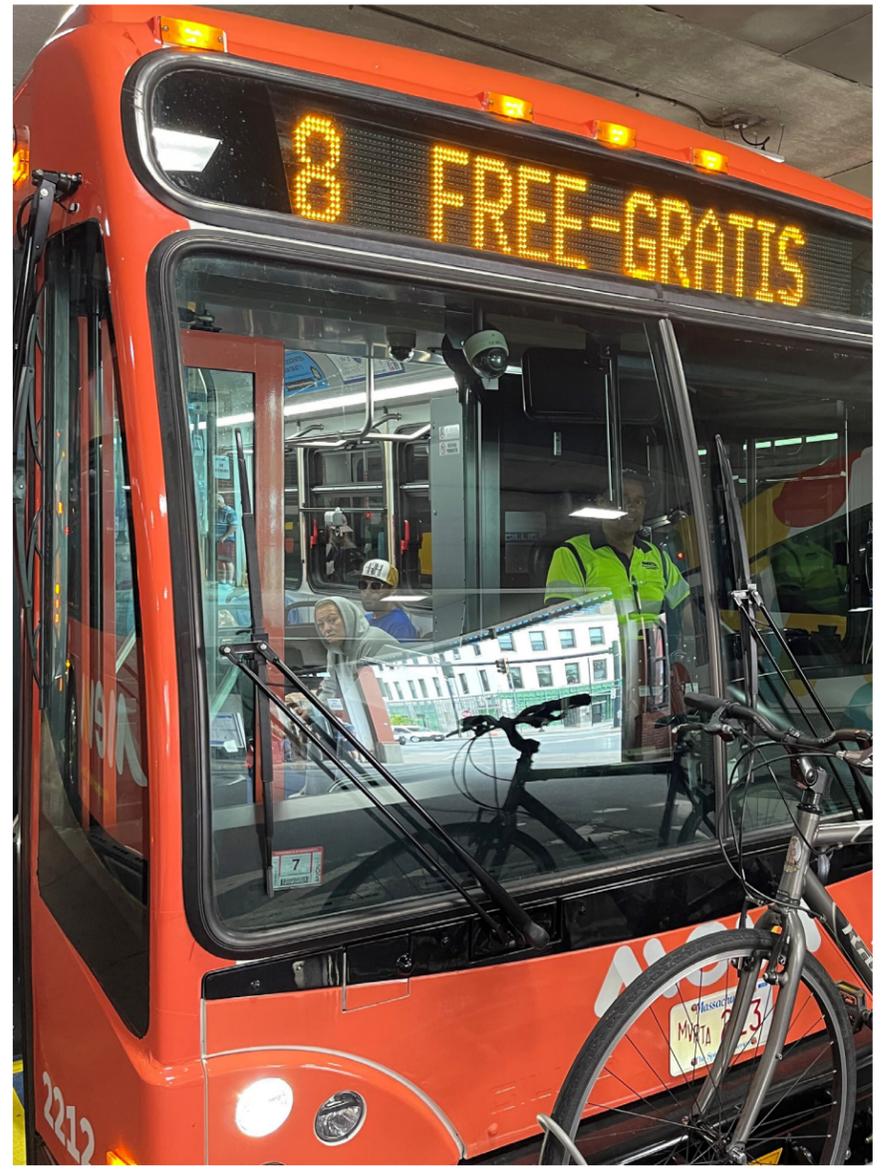
- Most businesses reported that the fare-free pilot had little impact on their bottom line. They heard about it from customers but didn’t notice an increase in revenue that they could attribute to the pilot. Conversely, they did not note any negative impacts. In general, business owners said they felt that good transit service is a valuable community asset.
- Social service agencies acknowledged the benefit that fare-free service has, especially for clients with limited financial means. Most social service agencies felt that fare-free or discounted service should be targeted only to those who need it, and not provided to all riders.

## What Are Peer Agencies Doing?

Fare-free transit is not a new idea—several U.S. systems have been operating fare-free for years as a way to support ridership, improve mobility, and advance social equity. Fare-free service gained widespread attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many transit agencies in North America stopped charging a fare to reduce operator-passenger interactions. Although most of these agencies have returned to charging a fare, at least a dozen U.S. transit systems remain fully fare-free, while many others have piloted fare-free routes or services, like RIPTA.

Among medium and large-sized transit agencies, only Kansas City Area Transit Authority (KCATA) has taken steps to become permanently fare-free. Most agencies that experimented with fare-free service returned to charging fares after being unable to find permanent, sustainable funding replacement revenue. Among the few agencies that have remained fare-free, including KCATA, alternative revenue sources were secured, including increased sales taxes, utility taxes, local government contributions, and partnerships with major institutions.

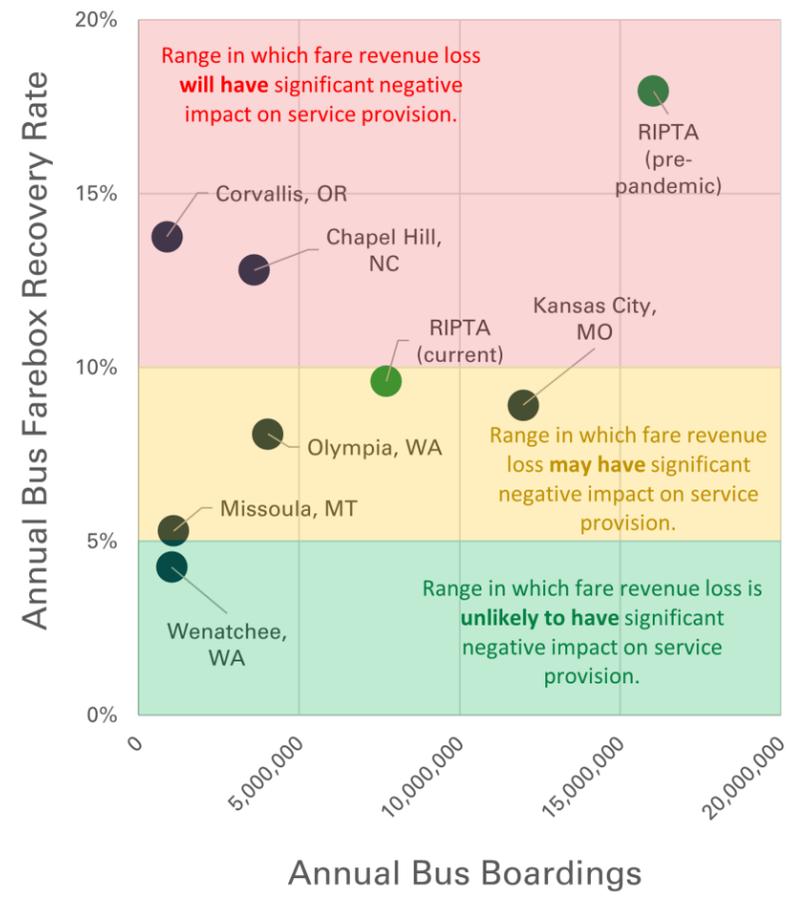
- In the **Boston** area, the MBTA (Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority) is providing fare-free service on three bus routes through March 2026. The City of Boston is reimbursing the MBTA for lost fare revenue with one-time pandemic relief funds.
- Bus service in **Worcester, MA** has been fare-free since the start of the pandemic and will continue to be fare-free until June 2024. WRTA (Worcester Regional Transit Authority) is replacing lost fare revenue with one-time pandemic relief funds.
- The **Lawrence, MA**-area transit agency, MEVA, is halfway through a two-year fare-free pilot on local bus service. MEVA is replacing lost fare revenue with one-time pandemic relief funds.
- From April 2022 through March 2023, the **Connecticut** Department of Transportation offered free fares statewide on local buses, replacing lost fare revenue with one-time pandemic relief funds. The agency has since resumed charging fares.



## Where Fare-Free Works

During the R-Line pilot, RIPTA waived approximately \$5.1 million in fare revenue—a substantial percentage of its overall operating budget. Transit agencies that have successfully gone fare-free have been less dependent on fare revenue than RIPTA and received commitments of sustainable subsidies in the form of sales tax or other revenue. These agencies are generally smaller than RIPTA as well, providing thousands rather than millions of trips annually and thus needing less replacement revenue to offset farebox losses.

This chart shows how RIPTA compares to agencies that have replaced their farebox returns with other revenue sources.



Note: Figures shown in chart are from the year before each agency went fare-free.

### Replacement Revenue Sources

- **Chapel Hill** Transit, in North Carolina, receives financial support from municipalities and the University of North Carolina.
- Fare-free service at **Corvallis** Transit, in Oregon, is funded through a citywide utility tax.
- **Olympia**, Washington increased the sales tax to fund Intercity Transit's zero-fare service.
- **Kansas City** Area Transportation Authority in Missouri and Kansas receives contributions from local government.

- Throughout the pilot, the R-Line outperformed the RIPTA system overall in terms of ridership growth. As noted on Page 1, the growth in ridership was partially due to new transit riders switching from driving or other modes, but more substantially due to existing riders taking more trips, taking shorter trips, and favoring the R-Line over other nearby routes.
- Over the course of the pilot, paratransit ridership in the R-Line zone increased at about two times the rate of systemwide paratransit ridership.
- If the \$2 fare had been collected for each trip taken on the R-Line during the pilot, roughly \$5.1 million would have been available to support service and/or capital improvements to the RIPTA system.

## Beyond Fare-Free: Growing Ridership, Meeting Climate Goals

### Supporting Low-Income Riders through Fare Benefit Programs

Although the R-Line pilot has ended, RIPTA continues working to strengthen its fare benefit programs and partnerships to ensure that all Rhode Islanders can afford to take the bus, regardless of income.

To strike the balance between fare-free goals and securing vital revenue, RIPTA, like many other transit systems around the nation, offers fare benefits to low-income seniors and people with disabilities, and partners with educational institutions and community organizations to offer benefits to students, veterans, and others in need. RIPTA's Reduced Fare Pass Program for Seniors and People with Disabilities has long been a national model and is one of the most generous programs of its kind.

During the pilot, RIPTA and Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates spoke with stakeholders of all kinds who expressed that fare discounts should be applied systemwide, targeted to those individuals who need them most. Riders, members of RIPTA's Accessible Transportation Advisory Committee, and social service organization staff all noted that offering income-based fare discounts would be the most equitable approach to incentivizing transit ridership.

In October 2023, RIPTA's Board of Directors authorized a pilot program through which RIPTA and community organizations will partner to provide fare products to 775 low-income riders statewide, which can be used on any RIPTA fixed route service. Although the number of beneficiaries will be limited, the program is scalable and, as program sponsorship grows, more individuals will be able to ride free.

### Growing Ridership through Fare Partnerships

During the R-Line pilot, one rider stated: "I shop along the R-Line more than I used to, and I don't worry about making a trip to pick up just one or two things, because it's free." This statement addresses an important truth about transit: not paying by the trip equals freedom. The most valuable fare product RIPTA offers is a renewable monthly pass, which allows unlimited travel throughout the network without the stress of paying a fare for each trip.

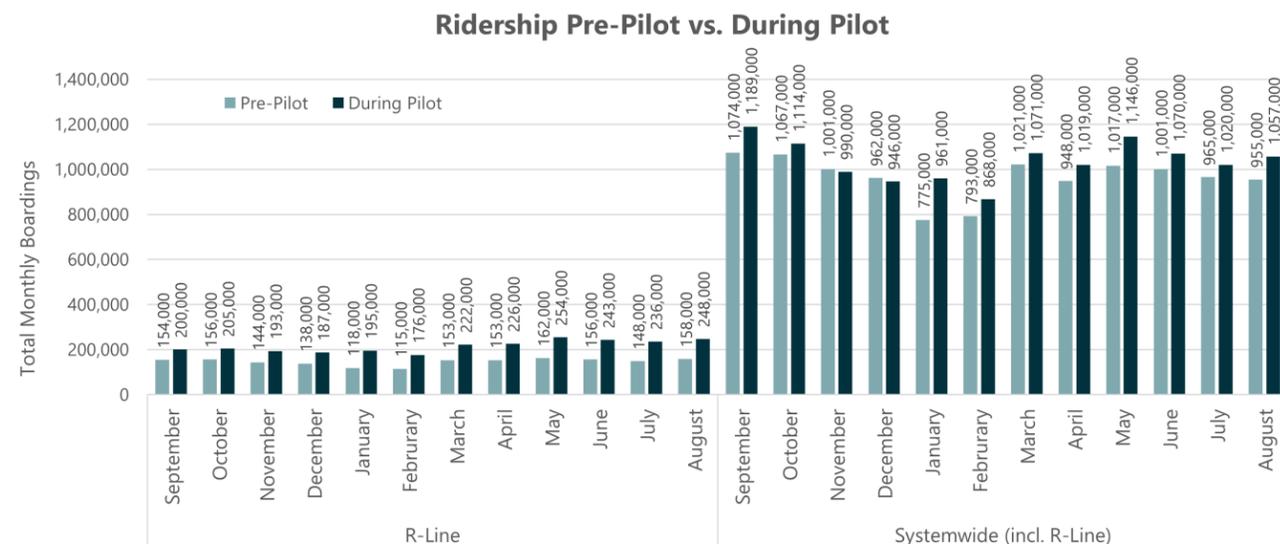
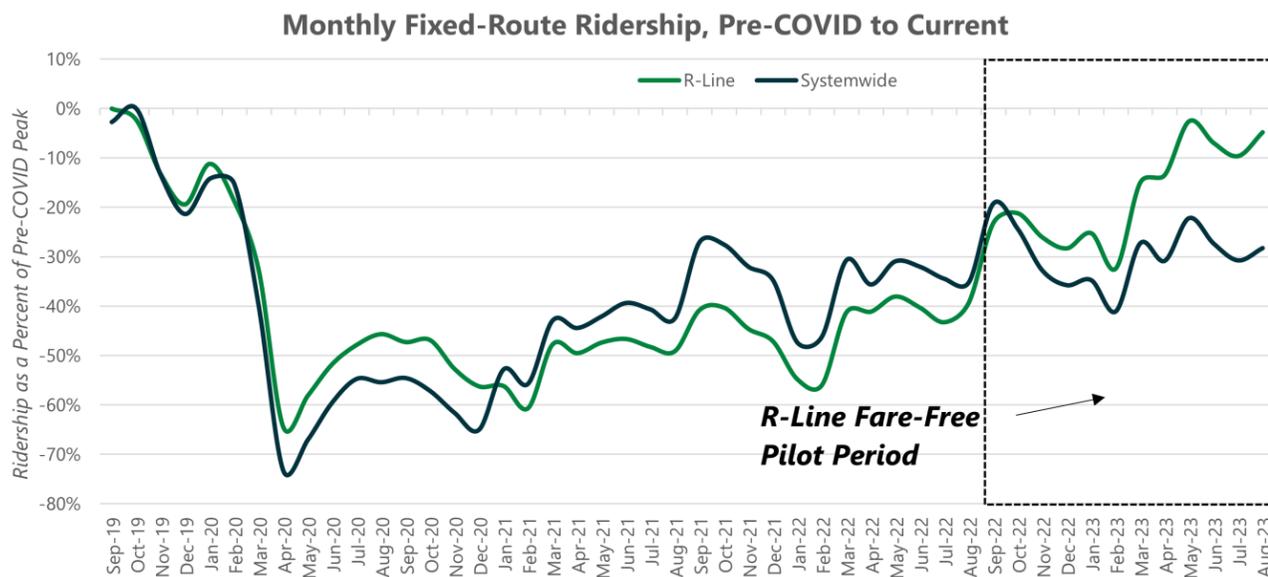
Through RIPTA's U-Pass and Wave to Work (formerly EcoPass) programs, participating schools and employers subsidize transit fares for students, faculty, staff, and employees, enabling thousands of Rhode Islanders to travel worry-free and fare-free. Similarly, participants in state benefit programs such as RI Works also receive free fares throughout their time in the program. The low-income pilot authorized by RIPTA's Board of Directors in October will extend this model to low-income individuals not otherwise covered by existing programs. As these fare partnerships grow, the number of Rhode Islanders traveling stress- and fare-free will grow as well.

### Meeting Climate Goals by Gaining New Transit Riders

Mode shift is a key pathway toward achieving the GHG emissions reduction goals set by Rhode Island's Act on Climate in 2021. And while electrifying RIPTA's fleet will decarbonize public transit in Rhode Island, transit only accounts for 0.01% of transportation-related GHG emissions in our state. While greening RIPTA's fleet will reduce roughly 14,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (MTCO<sub>2</sub>e) from the atmosphere, gaining new transit riders through mode shift has the potential to reduce more than 16 times that amount – 231,000 MTCO<sub>2</sub>e.

Measuring mode shift is challenging, and the tools for doing so accurately were not available during the R-Line pilot. In the coming months, however, RIPTA will work closely with the Department of Environmental Management, the Division of Statewide Planning, the Office of Energy Resources, and the Department of Transportation to develop and test strategies for growing and measuring transit mode share as a means of addressing Rhode Island's climate goals.

While the challenges are significant, the benefits of mode shift abound. Moving from an automobile-based transportation system to one where options such as walking, biking, ridesharing, and using transit are plentiful and easy to use leads to lower public health costs, fewer auto-related injuries and deaths, greater access to work and health care, and an equitable allocation of transportation resources. When all Rhode Islanders can get where they need to go on any day, everybody wins.





# THANK YOU!

**We appreciate everyone who contributed to this study, particularly survey and focus-group participants, local businesses and community organizations, and RIPTA operators, supervisors, and customer service staff who shared their time and feedback. Thank you!**

Have questions? Want to see past study reports? Visit [RIPTA.com/rlinepilot](https://www.ripta.com/rlinepilot)