

# Transit Bus and Rail Ridership Trends

By Al Sylvestre, Research Analyst, Department of Labor

With transit bus and rail ridership nearing pre-pandemic levels, the return of passengers to Connecticut's public transportation systems is on an upward trajectory. This stands in contrast to ridership trends from 2017 to 2020 shown in Charts 1 and 2. Chart 1 shows the number of unlinked passenger trips<sup>1</sup> for each of CT Transit's<sup>2</sup> divisions. Passenger trip decreases from 2019 to 2020 range from 7.2% in Waterbury to 17% in the New Britain division. The Hartford division that operates and manages 30% of the state's transit buses experienced a 17% ridership reduction. Pandemic-induced ridership declines in the nine transit districts outside of CT Transit's divisions (Chart 2) ranged from 63.3% for the Mashantucket-Pequot system to a low of 3.9% in the Northwestern Transit District (NWCTD). The two highest ridership districts, the Greater Bridgeport Transit Authority (GBT) with 4.2 million boardings in

2020, and the Norwalk Transit District with 1.1 million boardings had 20.2% and 18.1% fewer riders than in 2019. The outlier among these regions is the Windham Region Transit District whose nearly 25% ridership increase may be attributable to its concentration of employers whose operations depend on in-person work.

From a low of 5,100 or just 5% of its 2019 daily riders in late April 2020, Metro North Railroad's (M-N R) ridership<sup>3</sup> has been trending upward this year, particularly on weekends, as shown in Charts 3 and 4. Saturday and Sunday recovery rates of 96% and 92% show that passengers are returning to the train for leisure trips at a more robust pace than for commuter trips as Monday-through-Friday recovery rates range from 56% to 63% with Tuesday as the most popular commuting day of the week. On the days where ridership recovery rates peak

(Chart 4), the total number of Metro North passengers has its valleys as 148,000 to 164,000 strap hangers take the train Monday through Friday while 92,000 ride Metro North on Saturday and only 74,000 ride the rails on Sunday. Tuesday's (June 7) 163,800 passengers represent 81.9% of the average 2019 daily ridership. M-NR sustains its operations and maintenance budget through the pandemic with the help of a \$14 billion cash infusion from the federal government.

Passenger numbers on the Hartford Line, branded as CTrail, increased by 77,400 (27.6%) between

April 2020 and the end of 2021. While CTrail's passenger trip growth was significant, its 280,000 riders in 2021 is about half its 2019 ridership of nearly 600,000. Rounding out Connecticut's public transportation picture is Shoreline East's recovery from 1,399 monthly riders in April 2020 (16,800 annualized) to 14,576 (175,000 annualized) for a 942% increase by the end of April 2022.

Among all its modes of public transit, CTDOT says that rail ridership has risen to half of pre-pandemic levels, while seven out of 10 bus riders have returned. Nationwide ridership on bus systems increased 39% between January and December of 2021. Ridership on buses nationwide in January 2022 was 51% below its January 2020 level.

As federal funding has kept the state's transit bus fleet operating, CTDOT is making plans to bring riders back to mass transit. With \$1.3 billion for public transportation on its way to Connecticut from the federal infrastructure bill signed into law in 2021, CTDOT anticipates making significant investments in its rail and bus systems that include electrification, improved usability of bus stations by adding signage, seating and lighting, and the introduction of real-time bus tracking technology for users. CTDOT recently secured an \$11.4 million federal grant to support the purchase of 22 electric buses, bringing its statewide total to 34. In addition to offering a quieter and quicker ride, electric buses are long-term money savers as they are less expensive to operate and maintain than their internal combustion engine driven counterparts.

Increasing ridership—partly the result of rising gas prices and free bus rides through the end of November—together with the introduction of green technology that includes the replacement of diesel-powered trains with electric-powered rail cars on the Shoreline East rail line as well as the adoption of transit-oriented development in places as diverse as Stamford, West Hartford, Windsor, Windsor Locks, and Enfield augur

Chart 1. Passenger Trip Counts

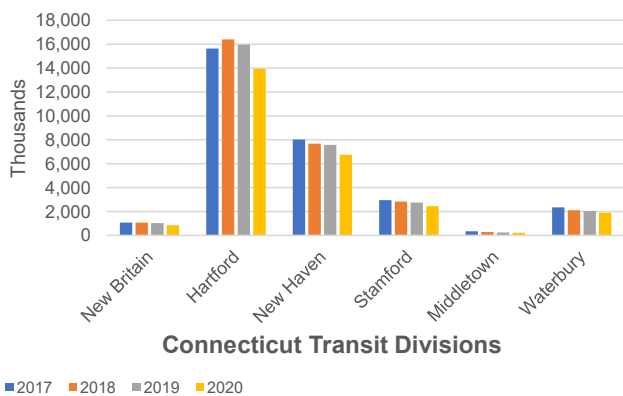


Chart 2. Change in Ridership 2019-2020

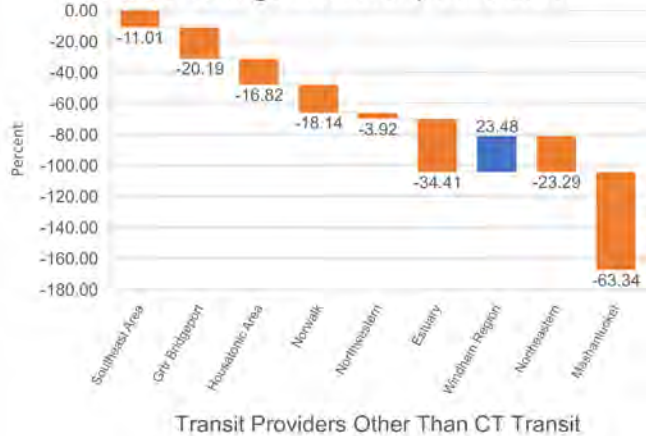


Chart 3.

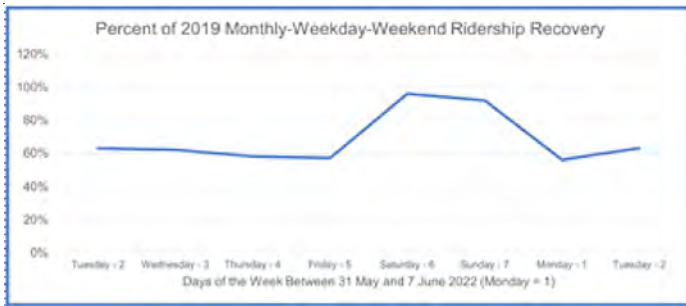


Chart 4.



well for the future of public transportation in Connecticut. While much work remains to be done to connect people with transit, particularly the development of micro-mobility infrastructure (protected bicycle lanes, walking trails, electric bikes, electric scooters, and more sidewalks), land use planners, real estate developers, state and local government, and regional planning

agencies are responding to growing public desire for the availability of alternatives to single-occupant motor vehicles. ■

- 1 Unlinked passenger trips represent the raw number of riders that board any given bus without regard to whether the boarding is the result of a transfer or for a single-seat ride.
- 2 The state transportation department (CTDOT) owns about 700 buses operated by First Transportation's HNS subsidiary that manages seven divisions in central and western Connecticut under the CT Transit name. Several additional contractors operate and manage 100 state-owned local and commuter buses through Connecticut's northwestern, and eastern areas.
- 3 Metro-North ridership is estimated by a model using monthly, weekly, ten-trip, and daily ticket sales. Percent change is calculated.

## GENERAL ECONOMIC INDICATORS

(Seasonally adjusted)	1Q		YoY CHG		4Q	QoQ CHG	
	2022	2021	NO.	%		2021	NO.
<b>General Drift Indicator (2007=100)*</b>							
<b>Leading</b>	111.8	103.4	8.4	8.1	106.2	5.5	5.22
<b>Coincident</b>	95.4	93.5	2.0	2.1	94.5	1.0	1.05
<b>Real Gross Domestic Product**</b>							
(Millions of chained 2012 dollars)							
<b>Connecticut</b>	250,201	240,712	9,489	3.9	251,071	-870	-0.3
<b>United States</b>	19,727,918	19,055,655	672,263	3.5	19,806,290	-78,372	-0.4
<b>New England</b>	1,025,942	979,373	46,570	4.8	1,026,499	-557	-0.1
<b>Per Capita Personal Income**</b>							
(Current \$, SAAR)							
<b>Connecticut</b>	82,918	83,671	-753	-0.9	81,870	1,048	1.3
<b>United States</b>	63,871	65,869	-1,998	-3.0	63,158	713	1.1
<b>New England</b>	77,381	78,377	-996	-1.3	76,178	1,203	1.6
<b>Philadelphia Fed's Coincident Index (2007=100)***</b>							
<b>Connecticut</b>	119.82	111.85	7.97	7.1	119.14	0.68	0.6
<b>United States</b>	134.19	126.58	7.61	6.0	133.75	0.44	0.3

Sources: \*Dr. Steven P. Lanza, University of Connecticut, <https://steven-landa.uconn.edu/the-connecticut-green-sheet/>  
 \*\*U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis \*\*\*Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia

**General Drift Indicators** are composite measures of the four-quarter change in three coincident (Connecticut Manufacturing Production Index, nonfarm employment, and real personal income) and three leading (housing permits, manufacturing average weekly hours, and initial unemployment claims) economic variables, and are indexed so 2007 = 100.

The **Philadelphia Fed's Coincident Index** summarizes current economic condition by using four coincident variables: nonfarm payroll employment, average hours worked in manufacturing, the unemployment rate, and wage and salary disbursements deflated by the consumer price index (U.S. city average).