6 Key Choices
RideKC Next is a unique opportunity to rethink the purpose of the transit network in Kansas City, and how transit relates to other ways of getting around such as walking, cycling and driving.

However, because we are looking at changes that can be made in the next two years, we can’t assume that any new resources are available. This means some hard choices are required. This does not mean that KCATA thinks that the resources available to provide transit service in KCMO or any other parts of the region are adequate.

We would like the community to help us decide on the highest and best use with the funds currently provided by the City of Kansas City, Mo. Beyond this, KCATA sees great value in identifying new regional funding sources for transit and increasing the number and scope of partnerships with local jurisdictions and private sector partners. RideKC Next will identify areas where such partnerships should be pursued.

How are KCMO resources used now?
The most basic choice is the degree to which the transit system should be pursuing ridership or coverage. As we saw in Chapter 2, planning for high ridership or high coverage leads to substantially different outcomes.

At the moment, about 50% of transit service in KCMO is oriented toward ridership, and 45% is oriented to extending coverage to as many areas as possible. A further 5% of service is on routes that are very close to one another; we called this duplication in Chapter 4, but this is also a different form of coverage: getting as close as possible to people’s front door within the areas served.

There’s nothing technically wrong or right about this balance. Rather, it’s a question of values: what is more important to you? In a fixed budget, the transit network won’t change much if the balance doesn’t shift. Any decision to invest more in ridership is a decision to invest less in budget, the transit network won’t change much if the balance doesn’t shift. Any decision to invest more in ridership is a decision to invest less in budget, the transit network won’t change much if the balance doesn’t shift.

Why shift toward more Ridership?
Designing a transit system for high ridership serves several popular goals, including:

- Giving large numbers of people more personal and economic freedom by expanding the range of trips for which transit is a useful option.
- Limiting growth in car traffic as the region develops, and the related growth in congestion, pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Making more effective use of tax dollars by reducing the public subsidy required for each rider.

Planning for high ridership means focusing service on places where many people go, and designing service so the bus is always coming soon. This means designing a connected network of frequent routes, with buses coming every 15 minutes or better all day, and where service remains as frequent as possible on evenings and weekends.

Why shift toward more Coverage?
On the other hand, many other popular goals for transit don’t require high ridership. Coverage goals are achieved when transit service is designed to reach as many places as possible. Ideally, they include:

- Ensuring that every neighborhood has access to the transit system.
- Providing lifeline access to critical services.
- Providing service to people with severe needs

Planning for high coverage means spreading a basic level of service over a very large area. But the more service is spread out, the more it must be spread thin. Most bus routes in a transit system focused on coverage would operate every 60 minutes at best.

As a result, service designed only for coverage isn’t provide a viable transportation option for many people. Most people near a “coverage” route won’t consider transit an option when deciding how to get around.

What would shifting toward more ridership look like in Kansas City?
Because frequent service with long hours is expensive to provide, it can’t be available everywhere. If the RideKC network in KCMO were to shift in the direction of seeking higher ridership with no additional resources:

- There would be more frequent service in core areas, especially north of 63rd Street and west of I-435.
- There would be more frequent cross-town routes to allow easier access to a wider range of destinations outside Downtown.
- There would be less service in very low-density and isolated areas such as large parts of the Northland, as well as areas south of 85th Street, and east of I-435. That could mean lower frequencies, fewer routes and areas served, or both.
- There would be fewer peak-only routes.
- Frequent routes might see service improvements on weekends, especially on Saturdays.

What would shifting toward more coverage look like in Kansas City?
When frequencies are low enough, small amounts of service can be deployed over a huge area. If the RideKC network were to shift in the direction of expanding coverage with no additional resources:

- There would be fewer frequent routes. It’s likely that only existing and committed MAX routes would remain frequent (Main, Troost, Prospect, Independence). Weekday service on MAX routes might be downgraded from every 10 minutes to every 15 minutes.
- More bus routes would run only once every hour.
- More bus routes would have limited evening and weekend service. Many routes might have no service after 7 PM or on Sunday.
- There would be more service in very low-density and isolated areas, especially in the Northland, south of 85th Street and east of I-435. Some of this service may be demand-responsive, similar to the existing FLEX, Freedom On-Demand or Microtransit programs.

Key Question
- What portion of our transit service should be oriented toward:
  - Ridership: frequent service for long hours in places that will attract the most riders (ridership)
  - Coverage: getting a little bit of service as close as possible to every possible place (coverage)
Ridership vs. Coverage: a visual example

Imagine you are the transit planner for this fictional town.

The dots scattered around the map are people and jobs.

The 18 buses are the resources the town has to run transit.

Before you can plan transit routes, you must first decide: What is the purpose of your transit system?

Figure 58: Within a limited budget, an agency cannot both pursue high ridership and provide total coverage. A transit plan cannot optimize for these two competing goals, but it can strike a deliberate and informed balance between them. What is the adequate balance in Kansas City, Mo.?
Walking vs. Waiting

Another way to think about the question of ridership and coverage is to think specifically about how far a person should have to walk to reach a bus stop, and how long they should have to wait, on average, before the next bus comes.

Walking and waiting are important to consider on their own, because both of these activities add time and inconvenience to any transit trip, and different people have a wide variety of preferences regarding each.

For example, a young and fit person in a hurry might have no problem walking over a half-mile to a bus stop if the bus is always coming soon. An older or differently-abled person might prefer to have a bus stop much closer to their front door, even if it means they need to memorize the bus schedule or risk waiting a long time.

Many routes, or frequent routes?

As an example, consider the existing network between Independence Avenue and Truman Road in Northeast Kansas City, as shown in Figure 59. There is lots of bus service in this area, operating on different streets, but all heading downtown. From north to south:

- Route 24 runs every 15 minutes on Independence Ave.
- Route 9 runs every 30 minutes on 9th Street.
- Route 12 runs every 30 minutes on 12th Street.
- Route 15 runs every 30 minutes on Truman Road.

Routes 9, 12 and 15 each operate every 30 minutes. Because they have different lengths, their schedules could at best be coordinated for staggered departures every 15 minutes in one direction only. So they can’t provide a higher combined frequency to Downtown KCMO, even if every possible passenger could consult real-time arrivals and were willing to walk to a different street to catch the bus coming soonest.

As a result it’s a very short walk from anywhere in this area to a bus stop going to Downtown KCMO, but you might have to wait a long time for the actual bus. This limits the number of people who will ride transit. Many people making shorter trips will walk or cycle, and most of those with longer trips will probably drive if they can.

This illustrates a fundamental truth: a transit system designed to minimize how far people walk requires many routes near each other—That means most of these routes will be infrequent.

Conversely, a transit system with short waits requires high frequencies. That means many people will need to walk longer distances to reach service. For the average wait to be 5 minutes, a bus has to come every ten minutes. Service every 10 minutes is expensive to provide, and can only exist on a limited number of streets.

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1 This list does not include Route 28, because it does not stop in this area; it is running on I-70.
The second critical question in this process is about the purpose of coverage service. Transit service designed to maximize coverage can serve different purposes, including:

- Serving people in need, who have limited transportation options.
- Serving as many people as possible.
- Serving every neighborhood or council district.
- Serving recent and future suburban development.

In all cases, coverage-oriented transit seeks to meet these purposes even when that means providing service in places that can’t be expected to generate high ridership. But a network plan’s coverage component will look very different depending upon which purposes are the focus.

### Service for People Who Need It

Serving people in need is about what people often call the social service function of transit: providing a transportation option to people with few other choices, and who are located in places where high-ridership service would not go. This could include:

- Isolated lower-income communities where vehicle ownership rates are low;
- Senior living communities in suburban areas; and
- Destinations like employers, schools, community colleges or social service agencies in suburban areas or on isolated sites.

These are all places where some people need the service badly, but this doesn’t mean that many people would use the service compared to higher-density areas that are more efficiently integrated into the rest of the transit network. **Coverage service focused on this goal would identify the factors most associated with critical mobility needs, and design services targeting those places.**

That means responding to the density of seniors, zero-vehicle households, lower-income people, suburban and exurban employment and retail. It should also include special consideration for the location of specific facilities like medical clinics, social service facilities, sheltered workshops for people with disabilities, schools, and other destinations in places that would not be served the transit were ridership the only goal.

### Service for Everyone Who Pays Taxes

Everyone who pays KCMO sales taxes might expect some benefit in return. By extension, we could also say that every area, neighborhood or council district pays in to the system, and should receive some transit service. This is the second common argument for coverage services; many agencies define a minimum coverage standard in response to this goal.

For example, service could be designed to try to ensure that 90% of KCMO residents are within 1/2 mile of a bus stop. This would require a significant expansion in the number of routes and areas served, since bus stops in the existing network reach about 65% of KCMO residents (see page 42).

**Coverage service designed around this goal would be focused on reaching as many people in KCMO as possible, regardless of location or need.** It would seek to draw lines that go to as many places as possible, even if frequencies are very low.

This goal can also be interpreted as responding to current and expected future development patterns. Coverage service designed around this goal might seek to offer a transit service in places where population and employment are growing, regardless of whether the form that growth is taking supports high transit ridership.

A service plan designed to support future development would be designed in response to information on where that development is likely to occur. That could include future land use projections, real estate market activity data, unbuilt zoned capacity, and other indicators.

### Key Question

- To the extent we are prioritizing coverage, which of the following is more important:
  - Serve as many people who aren’t able to drive as possible, even if that means some areas get left out?
  - Serve as many places and people as possible, regardless of how much they may need the service?