

PUBLIC POLICY COMMENTARY



How to Think about the CATS Millage Renewal An analysis of 10 years past and future

By Trey Godfrey, Senior Vice President of Policy

Next month, the tax millage that funds the Capital Area Transit System (CATS) will go before voters in Baton Rouge and Baker. The 10.6-mill tax, which is due for renewal, creates \$17.6 million per year for the agency, representing nearly 60% of CATS' annual budget.

Economic modeling by the Blanco Center for Public Policy shows the transit system will contribute \$1.6 billion in economic impact to the Baton Rouge Area over the next 10 years. The study also notes that CATS' ability to leverage local funds to secure additional federal dollars brings considerable new capital to the area that circulates throughout the local economy. The economic model indicates that for every \$1 invested in public transportation, there's a \$7.40 return to the community.

CATS in the Past 10 Years: Promises (Mostly) Kept

In 2011, to address the future of the cash-strapped system, Mayor Kip Holden empaneled a Blue Ribbon Commission to evaluate revenue opportunities and operational improvements.¹ Among the 17-member panel's recommendations was a list of performance promises to the community about changes that the agency would make to enhance service. Here are those promises and how CATS has performed relative to each²:

Promise	Performance
Decrease peak-hour wait times between buses from the current average of 75 minutes to 15 minutes	Before the pandemic, 85% of routes had a 30-minute frequency during peak periods, and on-time performance improved to over 70%
Lay the foundation for a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system	Launched design phase of Plank/Nicholson BRT in 2020, with operations anticipated to begin in 2024
Replace "spoke" system with "grid" system	The route system was redesigned to a grid system
Increase routes from 19 to 37	Operated up to 31 routes pre-COVID
Overhaul bus stops, with new shelters and benches	Installed or refurbished 177 new bus shelters

¹ <https://www.businessreport.com/article/transit-commission-recommends-taxing-district-cats-overhaul>

² <https://www.wafb.com/story/17524381/cats-tax-information/>

Overhaul all signage for transit stops, providing detailed route and time information	Using various signage to relay information to customers at transit stops with route and time information
Add GPS tracking to fleet, with exact arrival times accessible on cell phones	Smartphone (RouteShout 2.0) app tracks bus arrival times Added public Wi-Fi and security cameras on buses
Increase peak-hour buses from 32 to 57	Currently operating 44 buses and has reduced the age of the fleet by 50% by adding new buses, including electric buses

As reflected in the chart above, the system has either achieved the performance goal or has substantially closed the identified service gap.

CATS also set a goal of attracting more “riders of choice” – higher-income people who own cars – by expanding to an O’Neal Lane park-and-ride and instituting a route between Downtown and the Mall of Louisiana.³ However, these routes suffered from low ridership and were subsequently cut. With the advent of ridesharing software like Uber and Lyft, which have proven to be preferable transit options for riders with greater financial means, CATS now finds added competition for choice riders.

CATS endured a spate of management and oversight challenges early in the millage cycle, from which it has regained its footing in the past several years. Notably on that front, BRAC worked with Together Baton Rouge and the EBR Metro Council on the formation of the Qualifications Review Committee, which established a panel that reviews and vets applicants to the CATS board and provides information to the members of the EBR Metro Council. CATS has worked together with this committee since its inception to improve oversight and governance.

[Click here](#) for CATS’ more detailed list of accomplishments since 2012.

CATS 2031 Promises, if the Tax Passes

As CATS 10-year millage renewal comes before the voters, its Board of Directors has approved a comprehensive strategic plan⁴, outlining its objectives and priorities around mobility and ridership, management and financial sustainability, capital investment, and community stewardship.

Highlights of the plan include:

Instituting Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) by 2024

- In 2019, Baton Rouge was awarded a \$15 million Department of Transportation grant through the federal government’s Better Utilizing Infrastructure to Leverage Development (BUILD) program to build the BRT along the nine-mile Nicholson Drive to Plank Road corridor. The BRT is a rapid transit mode for buses that delivers fast and efficient service with traffic signal priority and fewer stops. See the BRT route map and proposed stops [here](#).

Piloting Microtransit in Baker

- Drivers often observe large buses that frequently appear to be nearly or entirely empty of riders. A potential solution to the inefficiency of running large, near-empty buses is a mixed fleet of buses that includes smaller transit alternatives. Microtransit programs deploy smaller vehicles within designated zones where

3 https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/article_17190d6f-75a6-5d7e-bb45-be7a2dfd234d.html

4 https://www.brcats.com/assets/docs/Communications/3_2021_Strategic_Plan.pdf

customers can request trips, similar to popular rideshare programs. This tech-enabled shared transportation bridges the gap between traditional fixed-route transit and ride-hailing technology. In areas like Baker, where limited ridership eliminates the necessity of 30- and 35-foot buses, the microtransit service pilot will serve area customers while providing data about the efficacy of technology-assisted service.

Increasing annual On-Time Performance to 90%

- CATS plans to improve on-time performance to 80% by December 2021 and to 90% by December 2022.

Fleet Replacement

- CATS plans to continue to reduce the effective age of its fleet by adding 19 new buses, including 12 more electric buses.

CATS currently posts monthly performance measures on its website [here](#), although this data is currently lagging by five months and is currently only reporting on one of the four above “2031 Goals.” BRAC recommends that all metrics stated for the 2031 tax proposal strategic plan be tracked and published online monthly and aggregated annually for public release.

If the data from the Baker microtransit pilot are favorable, BRAC also recommends exploring all potential funding sources for a larger rollout of microtransit within targeted areas, and eventually throughout the entire service area.

Conclusion

CATS has steadied itself in recent years after a shaky beginning following the passage of its dedicated tax millage. The agency has witnessed some improvement over the last 10 years, although not fulfilling 100% of its previous goals set at the beginning of the tax plan. While CATS has adopted an ambitious new plan to better serve riders during the next 10-year tax cycle, we would be remiss if we did not underscore the necessity of strict transparency and accountability on all metrics and measures. The agency should create forward-facing dashboards to allow any citizen to track and analyze its actual performance versus these goals at any time.

Our way of life continues to be increasingly guided by technology and innovation. Those companies and agencies who understand and abide by this truism find new and inventive ways to serve their customers, while those who don't are met with increasing difficulty to survive. The world of mass transit is no exception. Especially after a steep decline in ridership caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, CATS must embrace innovative solutions to better serve its existing ridership and push harder to gain a larger, expanded population of riders.

While Bus Rapid Transit has shown promising results in some cities, the jury is still out on microtransit programs. They do, however, represent a departure from the status quo and, along with explorations into new models such as ride-share partnerships, present potential new directions for transit in Baton Rouge. This is encouraging to see from system management, as CATS aims to build a service that is as reliable as possible and that intelligently uses public tax resources to the fullest extent.

In the end, while no single data point analyzed above may be as significant as the tax millage's impact on the CATS budget or the region's economy, we believe it is vital for voters to make an informed decision based on as much information as possible.