

M15 Select Bus Service Progress Report

by the Office of New York State Senator Thomas K. Duane
August 2011



Introduction:

The M15 Select Bus Service (SBS) was implemented by the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority-New York City Transit (NYCT) in mid-October 2010 with the objective of improving bus speed and convenience on Manhattan's East Side.

As is typical of new services, M15 SBS implementation was marked by glitches. I and other elected officials received numerous complaints, particularly about ticket machines that frequently jammed or ran out of paper; ticket machines at certain stops which face the street and are too close to the curb, forcing purchasers to line up next to traffic; and overly aggressive enforcement. We relayed these complaints to NYCT and DOT and sought to have them rectified.

In July 2011, nine months after the M15 SBS program began, my office conducted a three-week study to assess its implementation and identify outstanding concerns. Between July 6 and July 19, at various times of the day, members of my staff and interns purchased tickets at every stop in the 29th Senate District (as well as the stops immediately outside the district that serve my constituents), and rode the M15 SBS throughout the district. In the process, they observed individual ticket kiosks, bus drivers and enforcement agents, and conversed with bus riders about their experiences to evaluate the state of the SBS line.

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My office found that progress has been made on some of the most pressing concerns about SBS implementation, yet there is more work to be done, particularly with respect to signage at SBS stops. I will continue to monitor DOT's and NYCT's progress in addressing these and other matters related to customers' SBS experience. As usual, please report any concerns about SBS to NYCT at (718) 330-1234 or to 311 and pass along your complaint numbers to my office at (212) 633-8052 so that we may ensure that they are addressed.

Sincerely,



Thomas K. Duane
New York State Senate
29th District

Complaint I: Non-Functioning Ticket Kiosks

Since the M15 SBS launched, most of the complaints that my office has received about the service relate to ticket machines that do not dispense tickets, generally because they are out of paper. SBS tickets cannot be bought on the buses, so if ticket kiosks at a given stop are not functional, prospective passengers may not legally board.

My office followed up with NYCT on its response to this problem throughout the first six months of the year. Over that period of time, the agency developed and rolled out a ticket machine software update to track machines that are running low on paper so that the agency could dispatch crews to refill them as soon as they are empty.

The software update appears to have had a positive impact. According to a February 2011 report on the M15 SBS by New York City Councilmember Jessica Lappin, on a single afternoon, 10% of all ticket machines in her district were out of service. The study conducted by my office in July found that of 30 machines at ten different stops, each of which was examined on four different occasions, the machines were working properly 95% of the time. In fact, on two days, 100% of the machines examined were in working order.

However, despite evident progress, improvements should still be made to correct several observed problems. For example, all the ticket kiosks at Second Avenue and Houston Street failed to work on the afternoon of July 6, when they erroneously indicated that MetroCards (even unlimited use cards) that were inserted to purchase tickets lacked funds. While the problem was resolved within 24 hours, its cause remains unclear and NYCT should monitor closely for recurrence at these or other ticket machines.

In addition, despite NYCT's software upgrade, several ticket machines were still found to be out of paper. These include one machine at First Avenue and 23rd Street on July 6, and one machine each at both Second Avenue and 23rd Street and Second Avenue and 34th Street on July 19. While the inconvenience caused by these paper shortages was mitigated by sufficient paper

supplies in other machines at these locations, they still presented an undesirable situation, especially when large numbers of passengers needed to purchase tickets during peak times.

Complaint II: Insufficient Space for Ticket Lines

Many complaints related to inadequate space between the ticket kiosks and the street when the machines are oriented so that customers must purchase their fares with traffic at their backs. DOT has already responded to requests from my office, other elected officials and community stakeholders, to turn two sets of kiosks, one at Second Avenue and 14th Street and another at Second Avenue and 34th Street, away from the street and toward the curb. At the remaining eight stops, where kiosks face the street, our inspections found sufficient space for lines to run along the sidewalk, parallel to the street, without endangering customers.

Complaint III: Missing or Illegible Signage



Currently, the most significant deficiency found at M15 SBS stops within the 29th State Senate District is illegible signage. Large lettering on each of the ticket kiosks at each stop alerts bus riders in both English and Spanish that they must purchase tickets prior to boarding and instructs prospective passengers how they may do so. However, extensive peeling, fading, or graffiti on many machines prevents users from reading these important instructions.

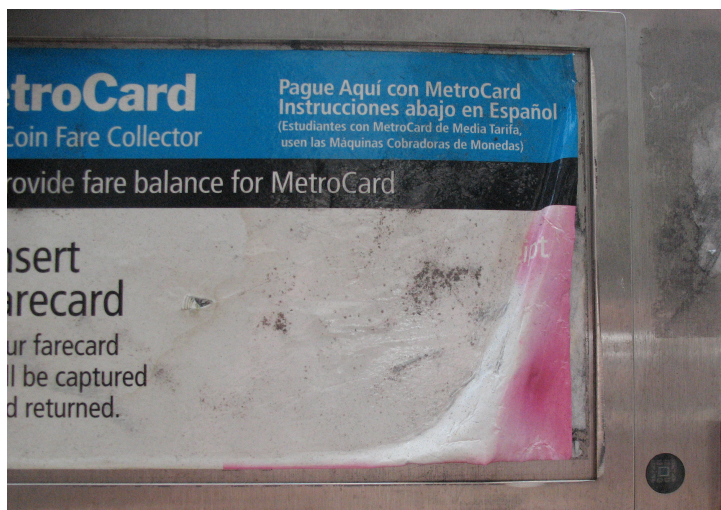


Six of the 30 machines observed were found to have peeling signage to a degree such that it prevented users from reading the instructions; eight more machines were found to have significant peeling that, if left unrepaired, would soon be illegible; and three other machines showed the preliminary signs of severe peeling. This leaves less than half of the kiosks with fully legible, intact signage.

Making matters worse, machines with peeling or illegible signage were concentrated at specific locations. For example, there was significant peeling on all three of the kiosks at First Avenue and 2nd Street; Second Avenue

and Houston Street; and Second Avenue and 23rd Street; and on two of the three machines at Second Avenue and 14th Street.

Without this signage, novice bus users might not be able to purchase bus tickets and, furthermore, might not even be aware that tickets must be purchased prior to boarding. Users will either be made aware of this requirement by the bus driver and then have to wait until the next bus comes (as observed several times), or board the bus and face a \$100 fine when unable to produce a ticket. DOT should consider the durability of the plastic instructional signage that covers Muni Meters, for example, and develop similarly durable signage for SBS ticket kiosks so that prospective passengers understand and can follow the proper instructions. This modification would likely reduce the temptation for vandalism and the need for maintenance.



Complaint IV: Overly Aggressive Ticket Enforcement

In the early months of M15 SBS implementation, after a grace period during which riders who did not have paper receipts were issued a warning that they would face \$100 fines in the future, a number of constituents and news media outlets recounted incidents of overly aggressive ticket enforcement agents. In November 2010, an elderly constituent who had not understood the SBS ticket system and boarded with her Reduced-Fare MetroCard, came to my office for help after an enforcement officer allegedly pulled out his handcuffs and threatened to take her to jail if she did not produce satisfactory identification. On November 28, 2008, *The New York Post* recounted the story of a woman who was allegedly given a summons by an enforcement agent because she was too slow in getting her SBS receipt out of her purse.

During the July 2011 study period, ticket enforcement was sparse. While riding different SBS buses for a net 28 stops, enforcement was observed at only two stops: First Avenue and 28th Street and Second Avenue and 34th Street. At each of these stops, enforcement agents inspected tickets as riders exited the bus, then boarded to examine all other riders' tickets. Agents worked

quickly and efficiently, checking all tickets before oncoming riders had finished boarding, thereby not delaying the bus; the agents were also courteous and patient. In addition to the enforcement agents, one bus driver was observed informing all riders that tickets must be purchased before boarding and asked riders to show their tickets. His tone was friendly and his intent clearly was to help riders. Two would-be bus riders did not board when informed that tickets had to be previously purchased and had to wait for the next bus. Bus drivers were routinely observed to be helpful and courteous, eager to help any confused riders.

Rider Feedback:

During the study period, staff members spoke with several M15 SBS riders both when purchasing tickets and riding the bus; most expressed satisfaction with speed improvements. Several expressed confusion regarding purchasing tickets beforehand. One individual indicated that he frequently rode both the M15 SBS and the regular M15, and sometimes forgot to purchase tickets before boarding the M15 SBS. Other complaints included the height of the bus step when it was not at the curb and that the buses travelled in 'clumps,' leaving significant time gaps between bus arrivals.

Conclusion:

The most significant outstanding problem with the implementation of the M15 SBS is the peeling signage. Significant peeling of vital instructions undermines system efficiency by causing riders who are not aware of the requirement to purchase tickets before boarding to either miss a bus, (if the driver informs them of the rule) or be liable for a summons (if they board and are unable to produce a ticket on request). Furthermore, improvements can be made in ticket paper replacement, as our report found three machines without the proper paper supply. Overall, our study found that the M15 SBS constitutes a significant improvement over the M15 Limited service it replaced. Nonetheless, efforts should continue to be made by NYCT and DOT, in consultation with rider focus groups, on-street and on-bus personnel, advocates, Community Board members and elected officials, to improve customers' experience.