

Public Transit Study Report



Cover photo courtesy of BeHeard, Go COMO

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1 Background

Public transportation is one of the most important services the City of Columbia, Missouri, has provided since 1965. The City’s public transit system (Go COMO) includes a fixed-route bus service, a paratransit program, and the University of Missouri’s Tiger Line bus routes. Tiger Line route runs through the university’s campus shuttle, operated by the City of Columbia, running seven¹ days a week during the academic year, with adjusted routes and times during breaks.

At its peak in 2009, Go COMO once served over 2 million passengers annually. By the mid-2010s, combined ridership had declined to approximately 1.5 million per year, reflecting broader challenges even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, Go COMO suspended its \$1.50 fare collection as an emergency measure and has remained fare-free since, using federal CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) and ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) grants and local funds to offset lost fare revenue. With the City’s population steadily rising by 1.0%² per year since 2020, Go COMO is struggling to meet the increasing needs. Go COMO ridership is continuously declining despite being fare-free.

Figure 1. Map of Go COMO (City route) Routes

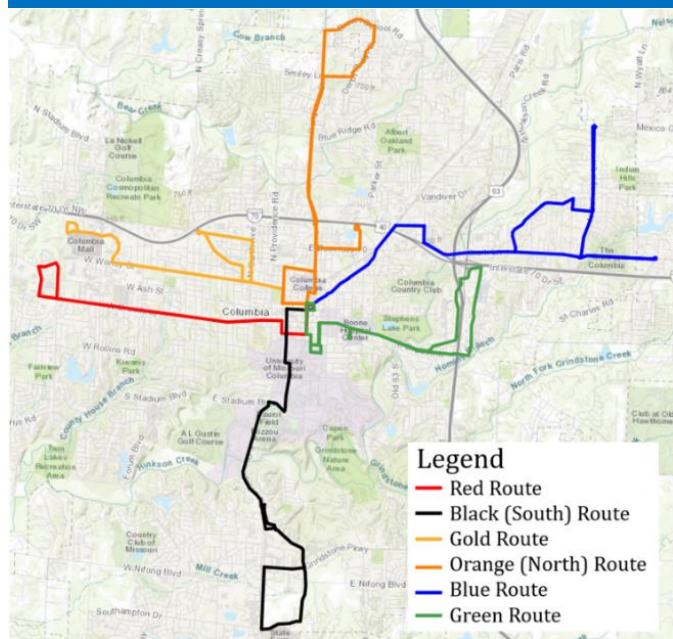
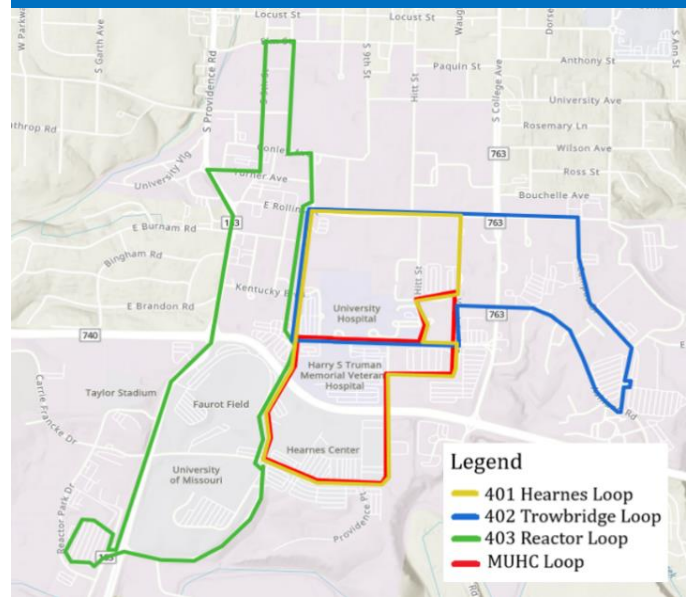


Figure 2. Map of Tiger Line (off-campus) Routes



Until August 2023, each fixed route operated on a 45-minute loop. However, due to a shortage in bus drivers, the City reduced the number of buses in daily operations, which doubled the wait time to 90 minutes and reduced the transit system’s coverage area. In the months following this change, fixed-route ridership dropped by about 40% compared to the previous year. The City has committed local sales tax and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) grants to keep the transit running fare-free.

¹ Only 405 Campus Loop runs on Saturday and Sunday 12pm-8pm. Other loops run on the weekdays.

² Population growth rate in Columbia MO, Census

2 Knowing the City of Columbia’s Transit System

Columbia has two types of transit systems: (1) public, and (2) paratransit. Currently, all forms of services provided are fare-free. Serving 20,000-30,000 riders per month, the City has around 11-30 active bus drivers in total.

2.1 Public Transit

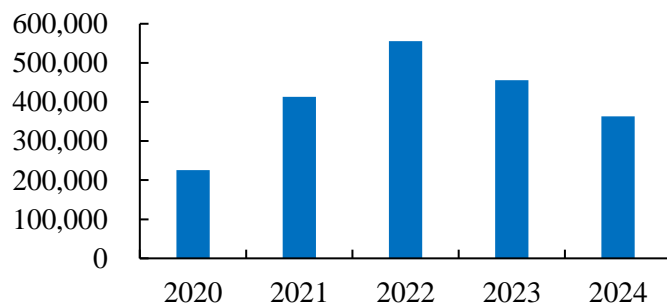
The City’s public transit system operates two routes: (1) Go COMO (City route) and (2) Tiger Line (on-campus). Additionally, bus drivers are required to have a CDL (Commercial Driving License). These CDL bus drivers' wages range between \$21 and \$23 per hour.

2.1.1 Go COMO

Go COMO is Columbia’s fixed-route bus service. In recent years, Go COMO ridership experienced a dramatic decline, followed by a partial rebound.

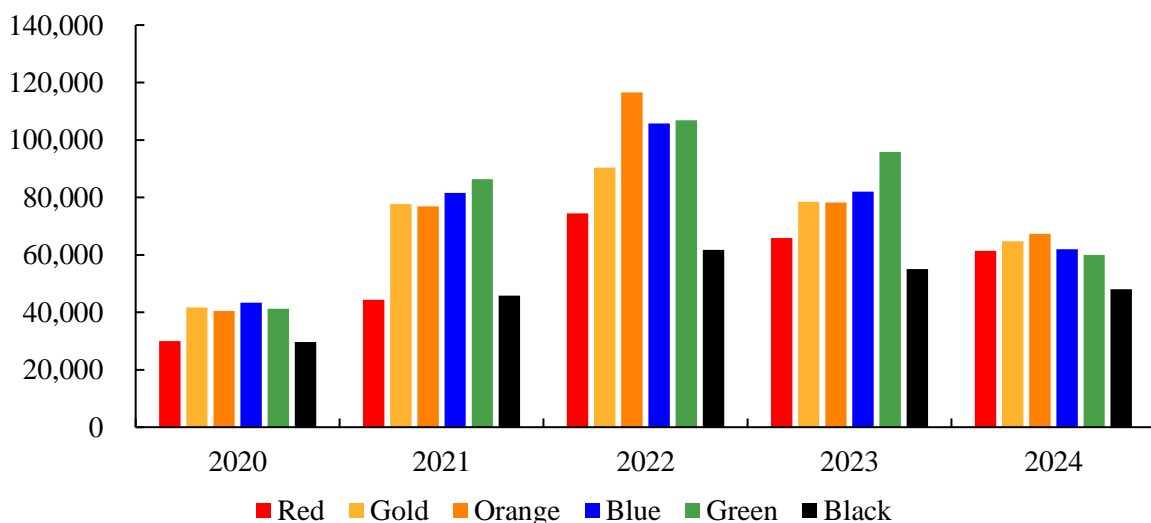
In 2020, total ridership declined to approximately 226,000 rides due to the pandemic. In 2021, ridership doubled, then peaked at about 556,000 visits in 2022.

Figure 3. Go COMO Total Bus Ridership



However, recovery stalled from this point onwards. In 2023 and 2024, there were only 455,000 and 363,000 rides, respectively. This decline is mainly due to a reduction in the frequency of the buses on each route – consequently, the route cycle duration increases from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. Thus, if recent trends continue, the City of Columbia expects the public bus operations to remain 35%–40% below pre-pandemic levels for the next few years.

Figure 4. Total Bus Ridership by Routes

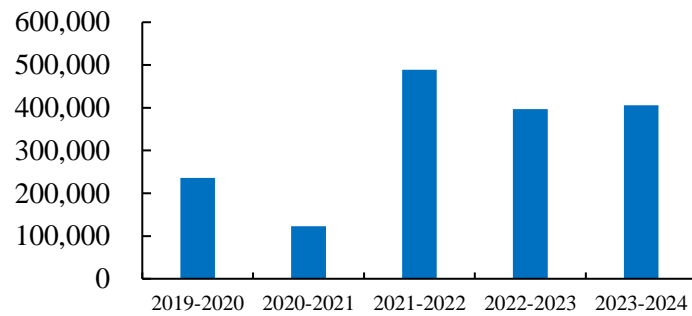


2.1.2 Tiger Line

By contrast, the Tiger Line campus shuttle, operated by the University of Missouri, exhibits a different ridership trend from Go COMO's.

Early on in the pandemic, Tiger Line provided around 235,000 rides in the 2019-2020 academic year. At the height of the pandemic, shifts to remote learning in the 2020-2021 academic year led to a substantial decrease in ridership to just 123,000.

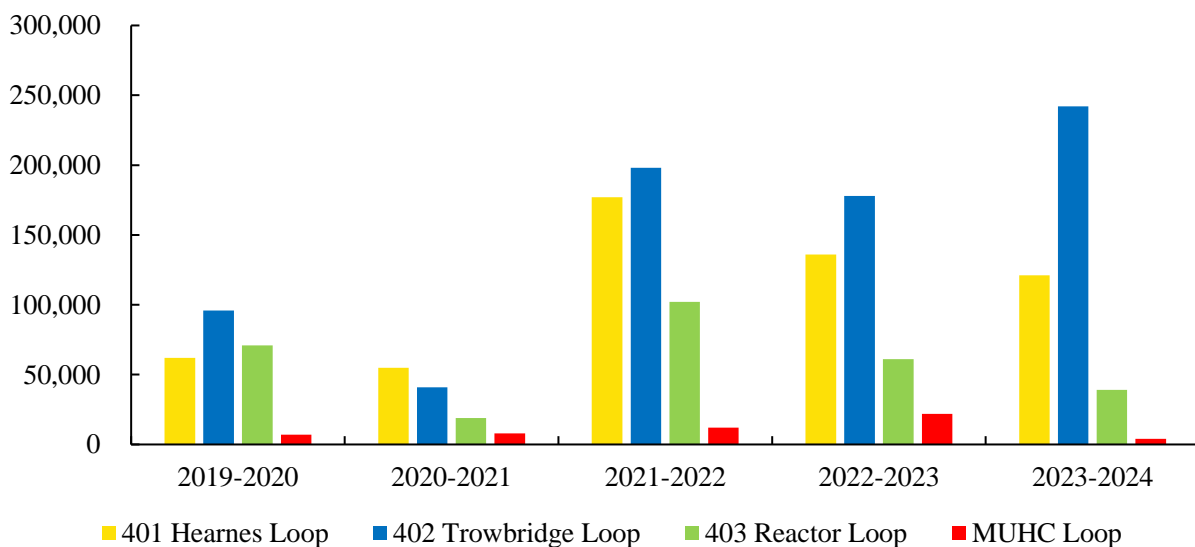
Figure 5. Tiger Line Total Bus Ridership



However, unlike Go COMO, Tiger Line's ridership recovered rapidly after the pandemic. As the university resumed in-person operations, Tiger Line ridership surged. In the 2021-2022 academic year, ridership reached 488,000, which is more than double the total in the 2019-2020 academic year. In the next two academic years, Tiger Line ridership stabilized at a higher level. Notably, the 402 Trowbridge Loop has the highest ridership, likely due to its route through on-campus student residence halls. The 401 Hearn's Loop has the second-highest ridership across recent years. Other loops have smaller ridership shares.

Running every 10 minutes in the morning and every 20 minutes for the rest of the day, it is evident that the Tiger Line operates at a much higher frequency than Go COMO. The Tiger Line has seemingly become more reliable and desirable than other bus services in the city.

Figure 6. Tiger Line Ridership by Academic Years



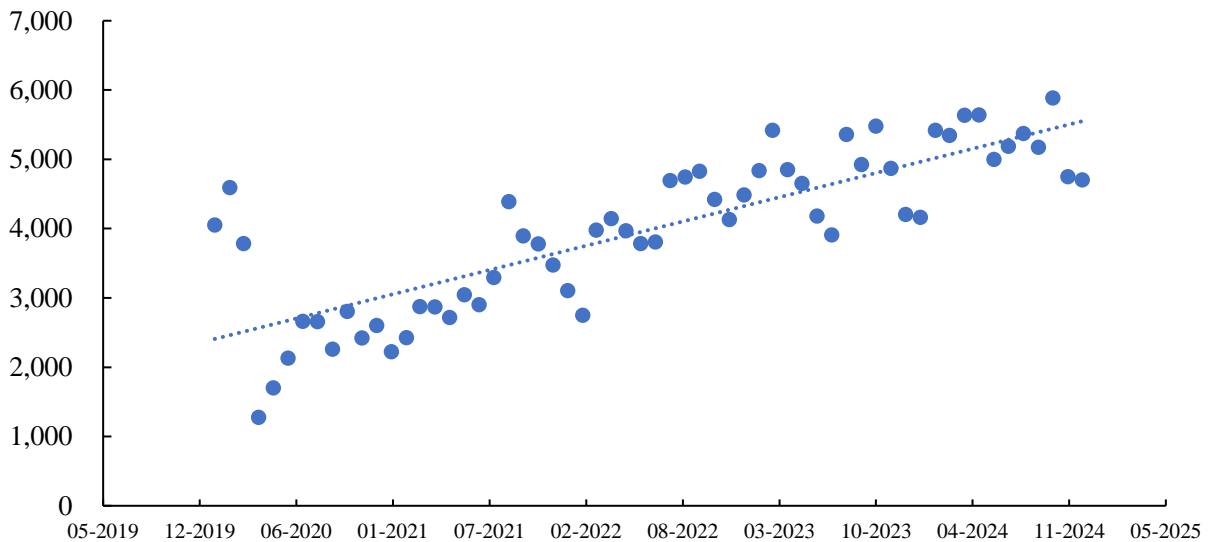
2.2 Paratransit

The paratransit service is a complementary, on-demand service guided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Currently, Columbia operates a fleet of 11 lift-equipped vans beyond the federally required 3/4-mile radius of the fixed routes during operating hours, providing door-to-door service upon booking for riders who qualify under the ADA. As with public transit, all paratransit fares³ were removed due to the pandemic. Additionally, unlike public transit bus drivers, paratransit bus drivers earn between \$15 and \$17 per hour as they are not required by law to have CDLs.

Over the past few years, ADA paratransit service has experienced steady growth in ridership demand. Specifically, the paratransit service provided about 62,286 rides in 2024, a considerable increase from the pre-pandemic annual average of 52,601. This upward trend indicates an increasing reliance on paratransit among Columbia’s seniors and residents with disabilities. Further, this might also highlight broader factors, such as an aging population, limited alternative transportation options for riders with mobility impairments, or simply that more riders are utilizing the fare-free paratransit services.

With annual rides averaging 5,000 per month, the number of buses and paratransit drivers is approaching their practical limits. Even with pre-booked rides, the increasing demand for paratransit has resulted in longer waiting times and difficulty accommodating ride requests.

Figure 6. Paratransit Ridership



3 Funding Structure

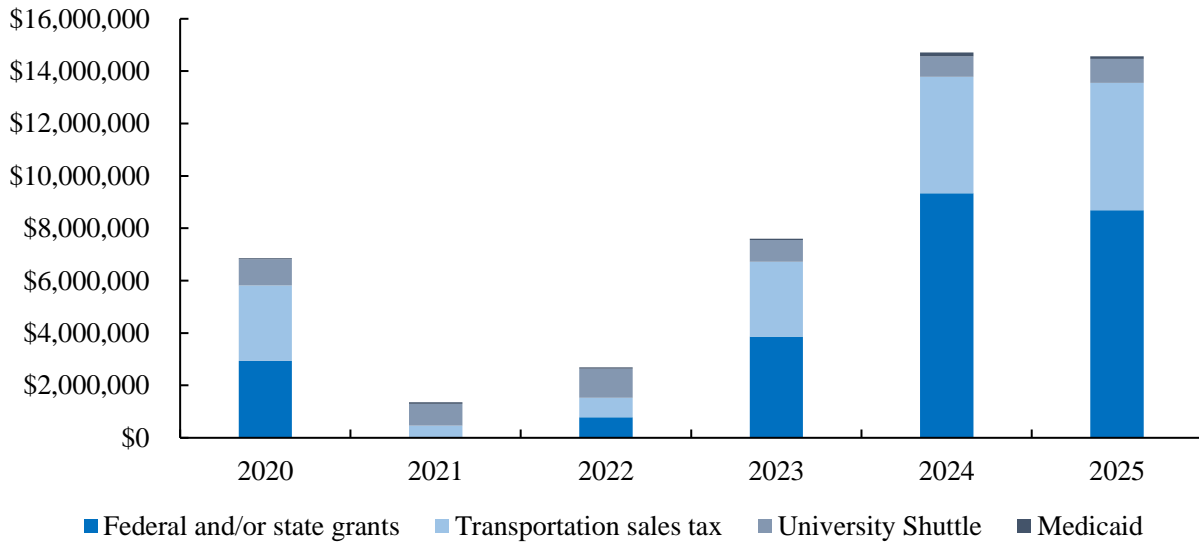
Historically, the public transit funding structure has undergone several changes. During the pandemic, emergency fund relief from the ARPA has helped sustain Columbia’s public transit system substantially. Currently, major funding sources include federal grants (48%) and local tax revenue (38%). However,

³ Prior to the pandemic, a one-way ride used to cost \$2.

the City will not be receiving any COVID-related federal funding, including ARPA, from 2026 onwards.

Additionally, Columbia has an annual agreement for on-campus bus services with the University of Missouri-Columbia. Tiger Line’s expenses are split between the University of Missouri and the City. As per the City of Columbia’s Transportation Department, only around 75% of the costs are covered by the university, while the city contributes the rest.

Figure 7. Columbia’s Public Transit Funding Structure





4 Conclusion

Evidently, the City of Columbia’s public transit system is facing several post-pandemic challenges. Firstly, Columbia’s fixed-route public transit, Go COMO, has struggled to recover ridership and is now seeing declining ridership demand. Additionally, the shortage of bus drivers has lengthened routes and increased wait times, making Go COMO rides less attractive. On the other hand, Tiger Line ridership has increased since the pandemic, making Tiger Line the more popular option. This suggests that the extension of the Tiger Line to shopping centers would better serve the community's needs.

Besides that, current bus drivers are struggling to keep up with the increasing demand for paratransit services, which predates the pandemic. Lastly, COVID-related federal funding will be completely exhausted by 2026. Given the City’s heavy reliance on such funding for operating the transit system, seeking other revenue sources, including 100% cost recovery for the Tiger Line, is important to ensuring consistent, high-quality public transit services. Thus, it is imperative for the City to take pragmatic actions to overcome these challenges to serve the Columbia community better. The City may also reconsider the para-transit service route going beyond the federally required distance.



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