



Quarter 1: September - November 2022

What is the R-Line Fare-Free Pilot Program?

The R-Line is RIPTA's most frequent and highest ridership route. In mid-2022, the R-Line carried an average of about 5,500 passenger trips each weekday, or 16% of RIPTA's statewide bus ridership.

The R-Line was chosen as a pilot for fare-free service due to its high ridership. The Rhode Island General Assembly invested \$2.5 million toward a one-year pilot that began on September 1, 2022. These funds will replace unrealized R-Line fare revenue and will also be used to study the overall costs and benefits of fare-free service. This will inform future decision-making around fares.

The R-Line fare-free pilot is intended to increase transit ridership and improve access and mobility for low-income people. It is also an opportunity to advance the conversation about how best to assist with climate goals and offer equitable and expanded transportation choices in Rhode Island.

This project was supported, in whole or in part, by federal award number SLFRP0136 awarded to the State of Rhode Island by the U.S. Department of Treasury.

How will we assess the benefits and impacts of the fare-free pilot?

Fare-free service is proven to increase the number of people using transit and the number of trips they take. However, fare-free service may not be a one-size-fits-all approach for achieving transit agency and community goals. Monitoring changes will inform our understanding of the long-term investment required to provide fare-free service.

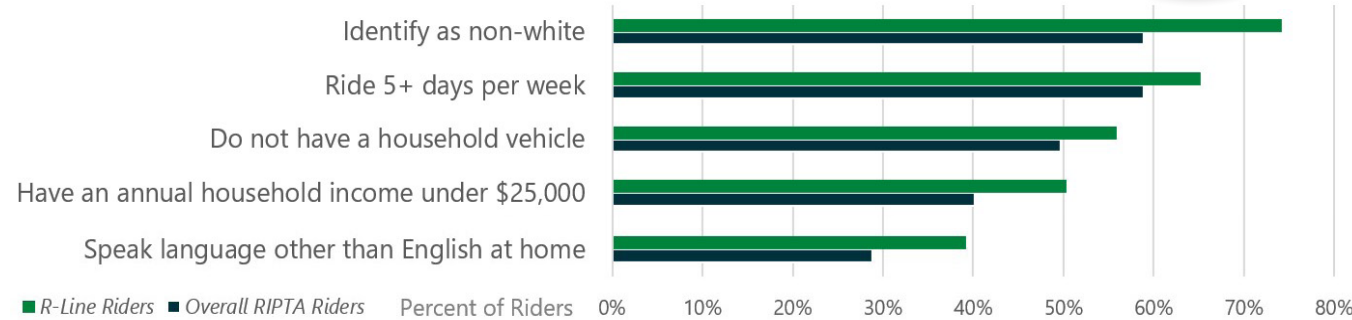
Using data from RIPTA vehicles, we will monitor ridership and service reliability on the R-Line, other nearby bus routes, and systemwide. Through surveys and interviews, we will also see if there are changes in customer satisfaction or travel patterns, or to the safety and security of riders and bus operators.



R-Line vs. Systemwide Rider Characteristics

R-Line riders are more likely to:

- be regular riders
- be low-income
- depend on transit
- speak English as a second language



Source: 2021 RIPTA On-Board Survey

EVALUATION METRICS

The R-Line Fare-Free Impact Study will evaluate a broad range of impacts to understand how the fare-free pilot affects riders, RIPTA, the environment, and the community at large:



Rider Access, Mobility, and Equity:

Understanding how the fare-free pilot changes mobility and access is one of the most essential parts of this study. The study will monitor ridership and analyze changes in travel mode, trip purpose, and customer satisfaction, all with an eye towards social equity.



Operational Efficiency:

Fare-free service can change how quickly people board a bus, how many people ride, and what type of support services are required. To understand how the pilot impacts operations, the study will analyze changes in on-time performance, crowding, and bus operator satisfaction.



Financial Health:

Offering fare-free service reduces the amount of revenue RIPTA earns to offset costs, and may even increase costs if market demand creates overcrowding that requires more service. To understand the overall financial impact, the study will examine changes in fare revenue and operating resource requirements.



Community Benefits:

Offering fare-free bus service can influence where people shop, when they travel, and what services they access. It may also remove cars from the road and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. To understand these impacts, the study will speak directly with riders and local businesses.

QUARTERLY UPDATE

September-November 2022

RIPTA is tracking and measuring key impact measures to develop quarterly reports over the course of the pilot.

In Q1, we saw...

Paratransit ridership in the R-Line zone increased at a rate **six times** greater than the systemwide rate, or by about **240 more trips per month**.

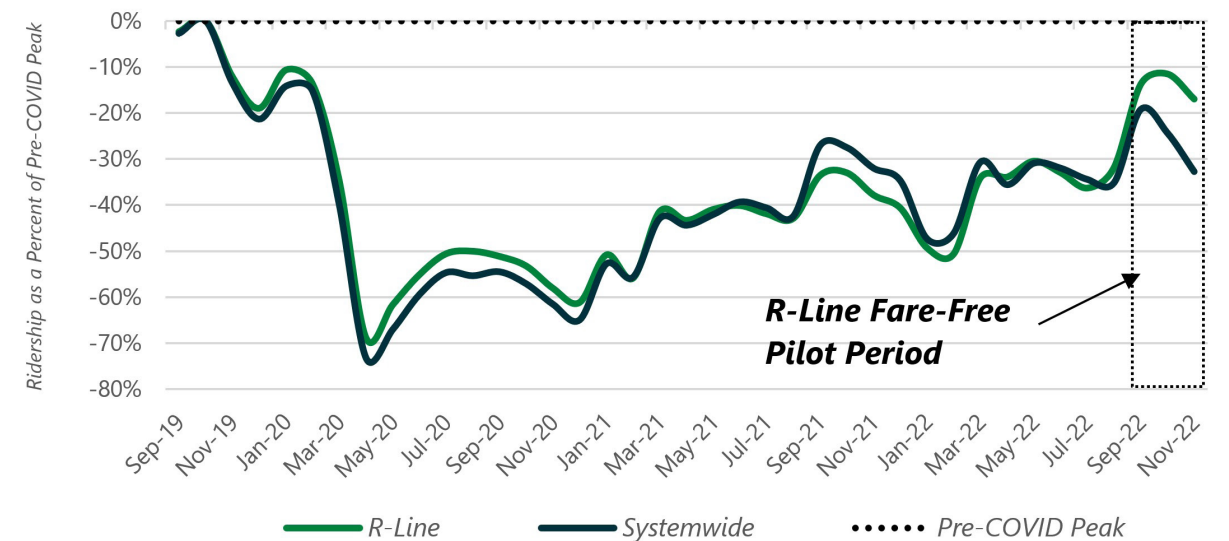
On-time performance on the R-Line declined by about 4% compared to last year, while systemwide on-time performance declined by only 2% compared to last year.

If the R-Line riders during the pilot had been paying the \$2 bus fare, **RIPTA would have earned about \$400,000 each month**. This is the annual equivalent of almost 5% of the entire RIPTA fixed-route bus operating budget.

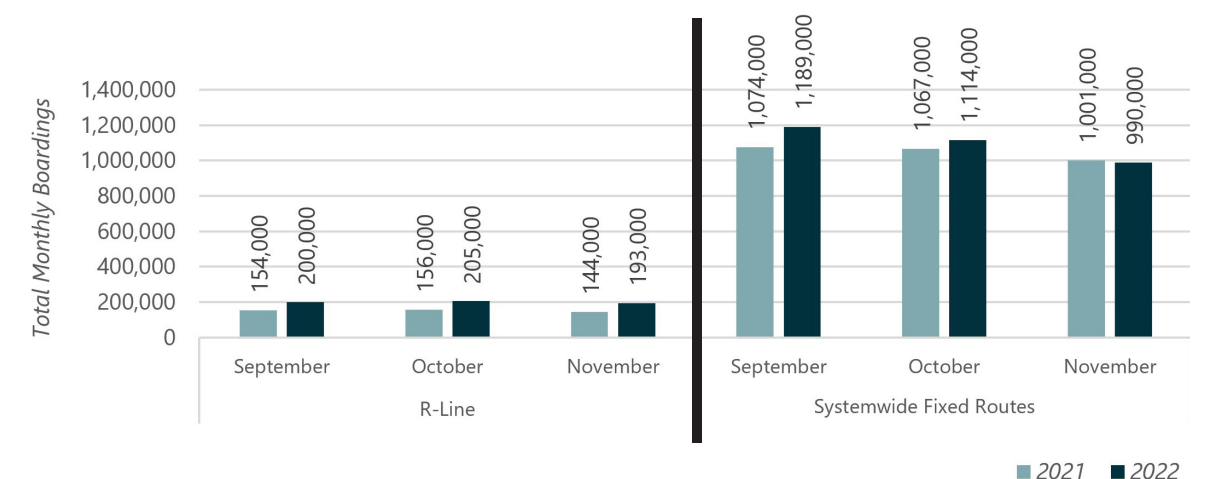


R-Line ridership **increased by 32% compared to last year**, which is a greater increase than systemwide fixed-route ridership, which grew by 5%.

Monthly Fixed-Route Ridership, Pre-COVID to Current



2021 vs. 2022 Ridership




RIDER & EMPLOYEE OUTREACH

To better understand how everyday riders and bus operators are experiencing the fare-free pilot, the study team conducted rider focus groups and RIPTA employee drop-in sessions with customer service staff and bus operators.

Riders


The study team engaged almost 2,000 riders through surveys and focus groups.

Riders appreciate fare-free service on the R-Line. Many have changed how often they ride or where they ride due to the pilot. Riders reported riding more often on the R-Line and some have changed their travel patterns or destinations so they could use the R-Line.




“I shop along the R-Line more than I used to, and I don’t worry about making a trip to pick up one or two things, because it’s free.”

Riders estimate they save between \$15 and \$30 a week on bus fares, which they put towards food, bills, and other day-to-day essentials.



“By the end of the week it adds up to a lot of savings – over \$20. With that, I was able to buy some winter clothes.”

When asked where fare-free service falls in their list of possible transit investment priorities, however, riders believed more frequent service and systemwide low-income discounts were a better use of RIPTA’s funds than fare-free service on a single line. Many riders also feel it is unfair that one route receives free fares when other routes do not even have frequent service.




“RIPTA should help all low-income riders, expand frequency in lower-income areas, and publicize: “Here’s where your \$2 goes – \$0.15 goes to support riders in need.” If I saw this I would feel good about paying for my ride and it would inspire me to use the bus more.”

RIPTA Employees


The study team engaged over 80 RIPTA employees through quick surveys, interviews, and office hours.

Most operators reported that driving is easier without having to collect fares; riders no longer spend time paying fares or need help with Wave card readers, fare-payment conflicts are eliminated, and the boarding process is faster. In short, it is easier to focus on driving the bus.



“It is faster for people to get on and off the bus, but more people are riding, so overall boarding time might be about the same.”

Employees also reported challenges with the fare-free pilot, especially on Broad Street, which is congested and narrow. Many people now see the R-Line as a “hop on, hop off” service: they try to board buses in between stops and make short one- or two-block trips, potentially offsetting faster boarding times. Operators and customer service agents also report customer confusion and dissatisfaction about fare payment on other routes.



“People say that the R-Line already has the best service, and ask why people on that line now also get free fares.”



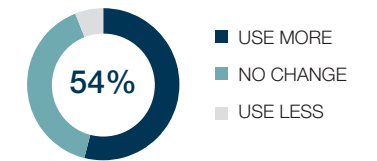
SURVEY RESULTS

To better understand impacts of the R-Line fare-free pilot, the study team surveyed RIPTA riders in October 2022 using in-person surveyors on R-Line buses, and by soliciting online responses. The survey included questions about travel behavior, RIPTA usage, and demographics.

A second survey will be conducted near the end of the one-year fare-free pilot to follow up on rider behavior changes and other impacts.

Key results from the first survey provide early insights into how the R-Line fare-free pilot is impacting travel behaviors:

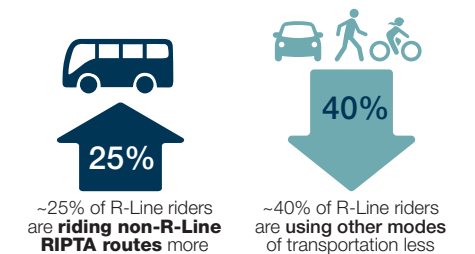
More than half of R-Line riders are **riding more often** since the route became fare-free.



Among R-Line riders who began riding in September and October, **about half started riding** because of the fare-free pilot.



Since the fare-free pilot started, many R-Line riders **have been riding RIPTA more** and using other modes of transportation less.



Among riders who are riding non-R-Line routes less, about 70% were **replacing trips** on those other routes with the fare-free R-Line.



Almost half of respondents have **changed some of their travel destinations** because of the fare-free pilot.



What’s next? The R-Line Fare-Free Pilot Program will continue through August 2023. During this period, the fare-free impact study team will continue to collect data, and will prepare for a second survey on rider travel behavior changes. Stay tuned for future updates.