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**To:** [Larson, Aidan](#)  
**Subject:** Fwd: Something Surprising Happens When Bus Rides Are Free [a NYC public defender's perspective on Fare Free Public Transit]  
**Date:** Monday, February 16, 2026 3:10:58 PM

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Hi, Aidan. I received this email, but I am not certain if it also went to the TC email address as well. Please save this under #1 on the 2/18 TC agenda.

Thanks,  
Ann

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**From:** **Jon Becker** <[jonbecker@aol.com](mailto:jonbecker@aol.com)>  
**Date:** Mon, Feb 16, 2026 at 9:22 AM  
**Subject:** Something Surprising Happens When Bus Rides Are Free [a NYC public defender's perspective on Fare Free Public Transit]  
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**Cc:** [sparkman@countyofdane.com](mailto:sparkman@countyofdane.com) <[sparkman@countyofdane.com](mailto:sparkman@countyofdane.com)>, [kkumar@cityofmadison.com](mailto:kkumar@cityofmadison.com) <[kkumar@cityofmadison.com](mailto:kkumar@cityofmadison.com)>, [tsaqqaf@cityofmadison.com](mailto:tsaqqaf@cityofmadison.com) <[tsaqqaf@cityofmadison.com](mailto:tsaqqaf@cityofmadison.com)>, [julies.majerus@wisconsin.gov](mailto:julies.majerus@wisconsin.gov) <[julies.majerus@wisconsin.gov](mailto:julies.majerus@wisconsin.gov)>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/13/opinion/free-bus-rides-mamdani.html>

#### ARTICLE

By Emily Galvin Almanza

Ms. Almanza is the executive director of Partners for Justice, a nonprofit organization that seeks to transform public defense.

Free buses? Really? Of all the promises that Zohran Mamdani made during his New York City mayoral campaign, that one struck some skeptics as the most frivolous leftist fantasy. Unlike housing, groceries and child care, which weigh heavily on New Yorkers' finances, a bus ride is just a few bucks. Is it really worth the huge effort to spare people that tiny outlay?

It is. Far beyond just saving riders money, free buses deliver a cascade of [benefits](#), from easing traffic to promoting public safety. Just look at [Boston](#); [Chapel Hill](#), N.C.; Richmond, Va.; [Kansas City, Mo.](#); and even [New York itself](#), all of which have tried it to excellent effect. And it [doesn't have to be](#) costly — in fact, it can come out just about even.

***As a lawyer, I feel most strongly about the least-discussed benefit: Eliminating bus fares can clear junk cases out of our court system, lowering the crushing caseloads that prevent our judges, prosecutors and public defenders from focusing their attention where it's most needed.***

***I was a public defender, and in one of my first cases I was asked to represent a woman who was not a robber or a drug dealer — she was someone who had failed to pay the fare on public transit. Precious resources had been spent arresting, processing, prosecuting and trying her, all for the loss of a few dollars. This is a daily feature of how we criminalize poverty in America.***

Unless a person has spent real time in the bowels of a courthouse, it's hard to imagine how many of the matters clogging criminal courts across the country originate from a lack of transit. Some of those cases result in fines; many result in defendants being ordered to attend community service or further court dates. But if people can't afford the fare to get to those appointments and can't get a ride, their only options — jump a turnstile or flout a judge's order — expose them to re-arrest. Then they may face jail time, which adds significant pressure to our already overcrowded facilities. Is this really what we want the courts spending time on?

Free buses can unclog our streets, too. In Boston, eliminating the need for riders to pay fares or punch tickets cut boarding time [by as much as 23 percent](#), which made everyone's trip faster. Better, cheaper, faster bus rides give automobile owners an [incentive](#) to leave their cars at home, which makes the journey faster still — for those onboard as well as those who still prefer to drive.

How much should a government be willing to pay to achieve those outcomes? How about nothing? When Washington State's public transit systems stopped charging riders, in many municipalities the state came out more or less even — because the money lost on fares was [balanced](#) out by the enormous savings that ensued.

Fare evasion was one of the factors that prompted Mayor Eric Adams to [flood New York City public transit](#) with police officers. New Yorkers went from shelling out \$4 million for overtime in 2022 [to \\$155 million in 2024](#). What did it get them? In September 2024, officers drew their guns to shoot a fare beater who was wielding a knife and two innocent bystanders ended up [with bullet wounds](#), the kind of accident that's all but inevitable in such a crowded setting.

New York City tried a free bus pilot program in 2023 and 2024 and, as predicted, ridership increased — by 30 percent on weekdays and 38 percent on weekends, striking figures that could make a meaningful dent in New York's chronic traffic problem (and, by extension, air and noise pollution). **Something else happened that was surprising: Assaults on bus operators [dropped 39 percent](#).** Call it the opposite of the Adams strategy: Lowering barriers to access made for fewer tense law enforcement encounters, fewer acts of desperation and a safer city overall.

If free buses strike you as wasteful, you're not alone. Plenty of the beneficiaries would be people who can afford to pay. Does it make sense to give them a freebie? Yes, if it improves the life of the city, just as free parks, libraries and public schools do. Don't think of it as a giveaway to the undeserving. Think of it as a gift to all New Yorkers in every community. We deserve it.

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