

‘RIGHT DIRECTION’

OKC transit ranks last in the nation, but change is underway, city says

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Embark offers free rides on its streetcar in Oklahoma City on June 23. NATHAN J. FISH/THE OKLAHOMAN

Oklahoma City’s public transportation system was ranked the worst among the nation’s 50 largest cities in a new study, a finding city leaders say underscores both the city’s longstanding challenges and the urgency behind a series of major transit improvements already underway.

ConsumerAffairs, a customer review and consumer news platform, released the report Sept. 16, which evaluated public transit systems based on affordability, operational safety, usefulness and accessibility.

Oklahoma City scored 31.36 out of 100 points, the lowest among the nation’s 50 largest cities.

OKC Mayor David Holt said the ranking reflects challenges the city has acknowledged for years but argued it comes as Oklahoma City expands service, upgrades bus stops and plans additional rapid transit routes.

“Our momentum is heading in the right direction. But this ranking is a reminder of how far we still have to go. We can’t expect to realize our aspirations as a city with a ranking like that,” Holt said in a statement.

Recent expansions, Holt said, including Sunday and holiday service, the city’s first bus rapid transit line and hundreds of planned bus stop upgrades, are intended to reverse those shortcomings.

“This ranking captures why I devoted so much of my State of the City address this summer to the topic of our city’s transportation system,” Holt said. “The work of ONE Transit, our regional transit authority, is almost ready for public consideration, and this ranking is a reminder of the urgency we should feel.”

Inside OKC public transit ranking

In the ranking, ConsumerAffairs noted that Oklahoma City recorded the lowest usefulness and accessibility score of any metro, which greatly contributed to its ranking at 50th. Other low-scoring cities include Memphis, Tennessee; Columbus, Ohio; Indianapolis, Indiana; Buffalo, New York; and Jacksonville, Florida.

According to ConsumerAffairs, they found that the average resident boarded transit just 3.4 times in 2024. Looking at Oklahoma City’s official information, the number of bus passengers each year has not met the yearend target since fiscal year 2019-20.

While ridership has rebounded slightly from the pandemic-related drop, it has consistently dropped since fiscal year 2023-24.

While ridership numbers have lowered for the bus system, the city does report positive growth for the streetcar since the pandemic.

In regard to affordability, OKC’s transportation system did get very positive remarks for the average fare, making it the 22nd best in the nation, which reflects efforts the city has made each year to make transportation more affordable.

As for the highest ranked cities, ConsumerAffairs analysts said the best transit systems scored well in reliability, safety and customer service.

However, no city led the pack in every category. San Francisco-Oakland, the highest-ranked city overall, does not have the cheapest fares; New York has the highest ridership, but is far from being the safest; and Raleigh, North Carolina, posts top affordability and safety scores, but has low ridership.

Projects en route to OKC transportation system

In recent years, Oklahoma City has taken on a number of initiatives to improve public transportation.

MAPS 4 has dedicated \$97 million toward the public transit system, with plans to improve the system throughout Oklahoma City, with developments including more buses and improving 500 of the city’s 1,400 EMBARK bus stops. The city is moving forward with its second bus rapid transit corridor on the northeast and south sides. The hope is to serve key destinations and communities while expanding options for travelers.

The city is getting inspiration from Salt Lake City’s FrontRunner commuter rail system. The Utah city is much like OKC: a car-centric population, according to Holt. In creating the line, OKC will be able to alleviate traffic problems.

“And with our rapidly growing population, we can’t expect to preserve our quality of life if we don’t have transit options to alleviate the traffic congestion that is already worsening,” Holt said.

The rapid transit line has already proven successful in its three years of operation, reaching a million riders at the end of 2025. Since December 2023, EMBARK says that a daily average of 1,400 riders have used RAPID NW to commute to work, shop for groceries, eat at local restaurants, and attend NBA Thunder games.

“The success of RAPID NW within such a short time frame is a testament to the hard work of our EMBARK team and the dedicated patronage of riders and the OKC community,” Jesse Rush, director of EMBARK, said in a news release at the time. “RAPID NW has transformed public transit in central Oklahoma, enhancing connectivity and accessibility and providing riders with more options for travel sustainability.”

The upgrades to the bus stops will cost an estimated \$11.2 million, with improvements including new ADA-accessible shelters, bicycle racks and lighting. More buses are included in the plan, which will cost \$13.4 million.

Future plans and land acquisition efforts are also included, which will cost over \$5 million, partially to acquisition of land adjacent to the existing EMBARK Operations Center on South May Avenue and planning studies to build the system.

This article contains reporting from Jessie Christopher Smith and Maria Guinnip, The Oklahoman.