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These 4 big transit issues await whoever takes over as the next CATS leader

By **Gordon Rago**

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Whoever succeeds John Lewis as the next CEO of Charlotte's beleaguered transit system will face a number of big issues from the very outset of the job in one of the fastest-growing regions in the country.

On Thursday, John Lewis said he was resigning from the Charlotte Area Transit System as of Nov. 30.

Chief among the concerns facing the new boss will be what to do with a [\\$13.5 billion proposed plan](#) to expand the city's light rail, bus system and other mobility plans.

The roughly two-year-old plan faces major questions about funding and a transit sales tax that would need approval from the General Assembly to get it on the ballot.

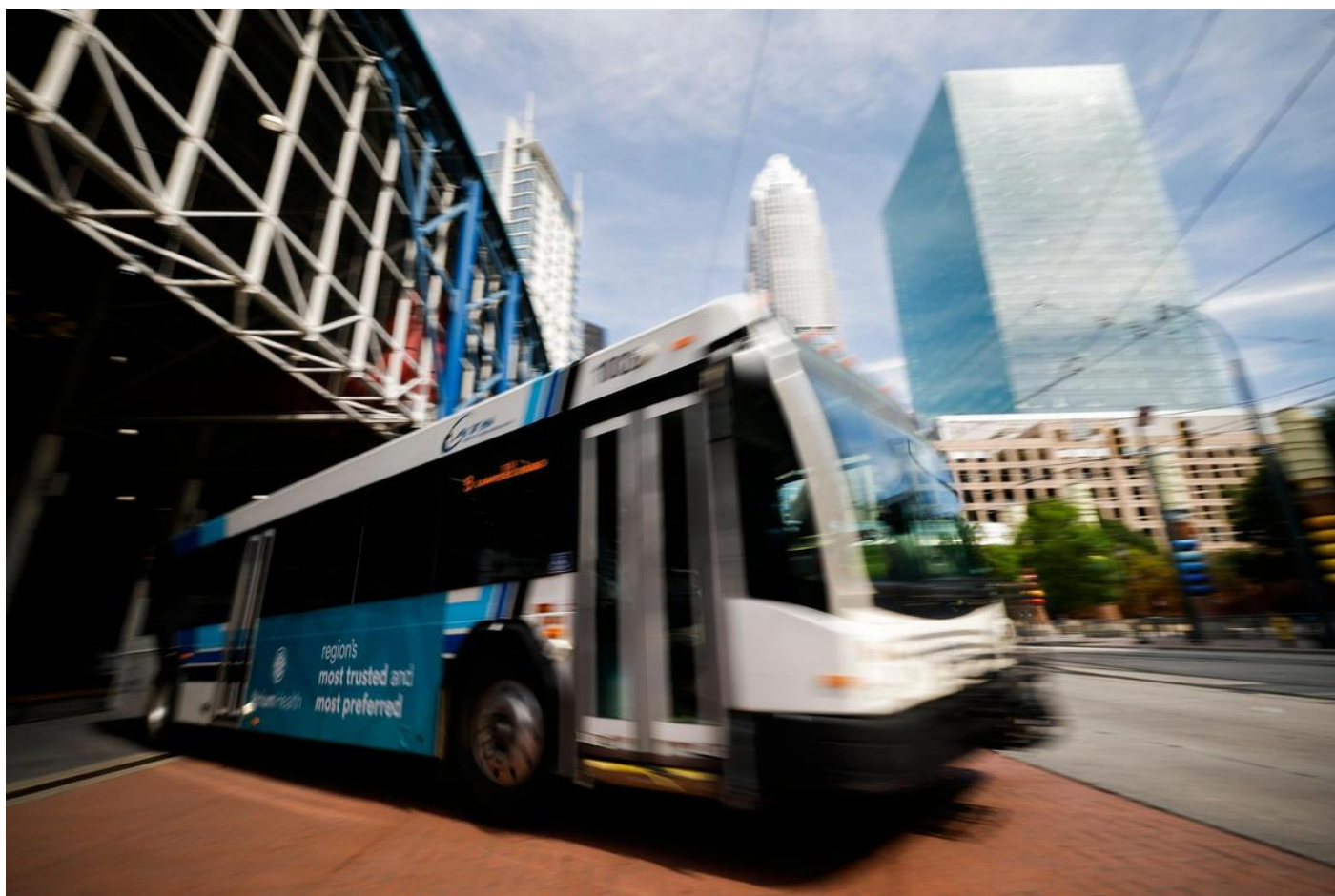
And like other transit agencies in the country, CATS is faced with lagging ridership numbers coming out of the pandemic. It also has seen instances in the past year of bus driver safety.

Lewis' departure presents an opportunity for the city to get someone who's a visionary and sees the needs of the region from a transit perspective over the next 20 to 30 years, said Julie Eiselt, who previously served on Charlotte City Council since 2015, most recently as mayor pro tem.

The focus needs to be on the system as a whole, Eiselt said, but it all starts with having a strong, reliable bus system.

"Without it, nothing connects," she said. Eiselt, who did not seek reelection, served as chair of the Transportation, Planning and Environmental Committee. "Right now, it's too easy to get in the car and go."

Here's a look at some of the biggest issues facing whoever is named as Lewis' replacement.



John Lewis, the CEO of the Charlotte Area Transit System, has resigned. Whoever replaces him has a number of big issues that face the system today like funding future transit lines and bus driver safety. Alex Slitz alslitz@charlotteobserver.com

Driver safety and shortages

In February, CATS bus driver [Ethan Rivera](#) was fatally shot in what Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police called a road rage incident. Someone was later arrested in the killing. Three months later, another man suspected of [firing several shots](#) into a different CATS bus was arrested.

Lewis addressed those incidents, saying CATS had increased security patrols and tested real-time camera system for passengers on CATS buses and trains.

But some of the same issues have persisted.

Just this week, [another person was arrested](#) for firing a shot that struck the side of a CATS bus, according to WBTV. The impact of the bullet caused bruising on the

shoulder of a passenger but the bullet did not strike the passenger, the station reported.

The transit system has also recently been facing bus driver shortages.

On average, about 80 [drivers were absent](#) every day in a roughly one-month period between June and July, according to an Observer review of data reported through CATS' social media. Between scheduled vacations and unexcused absences and weekly days off, CATS was operating some days short of 40 to 50 drivers, Lewis said at the time.

These are important issues to address as the city considers plans to make the bus system more reliable, said Ely Portillo, director of research engagement at UNC Charlotte Urban Institute.

“It’s pretty clear you can’t have a successful revival or a repair of the bus system without having enough drivers and enough drivers confident that they feel safe,” Portillo said.

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Bus ridership woes

Over the last decade, bus ridership numbers in Charlotte have been on the decline.

In 2013, the earliest data available online from the Federal Transit Administration, Charlotte buses served a total of 23.3 million passengers.

In 2016, the number fell to 20.4 million and by 2019, it was 15.6 million. The pandemic caused another sharp drop in 2020, recording 12.5 million trips.

These numbers stand out even more when you think about how much Charlotte is growing, Portillo has said. Charlotte grew from around 731,000 in the 2010 census to an estimated 880,000 residents today.

Infrastructure like traffic signal priority for buses and dedicated bus lanes could help make public transit more appealing than cars, Portillo said.

A streetcar's future

It's not uncommon to get social media alerts from CATS about delays on the Gold Line, the streetcar that runs from Johnson C. Smith University east to Elizabeth.

On Monday, the transit system [tweeted to expect](#) delays due to a vehicle blocking the tracks. Earlier that same morning, there was a [delay due to](#) mechanical issues. Both delays appeared to be brief.

Council members have expressed concerns about plans to extend the Gold Line.

Those plans call for extending the streetcar from Hawthorne Lane to the old Eastland Mall along Central Avenue. Another extension on the northwest side of uptown would go out to the Rosa Parks Center along Beatties Ford Road.

CATS needs to find ways to [improve the Gold Line's speed](#) so it operates more like the Blue Line light rail rather than operating within traffic, Lewis said in response to council members' concerns in June.

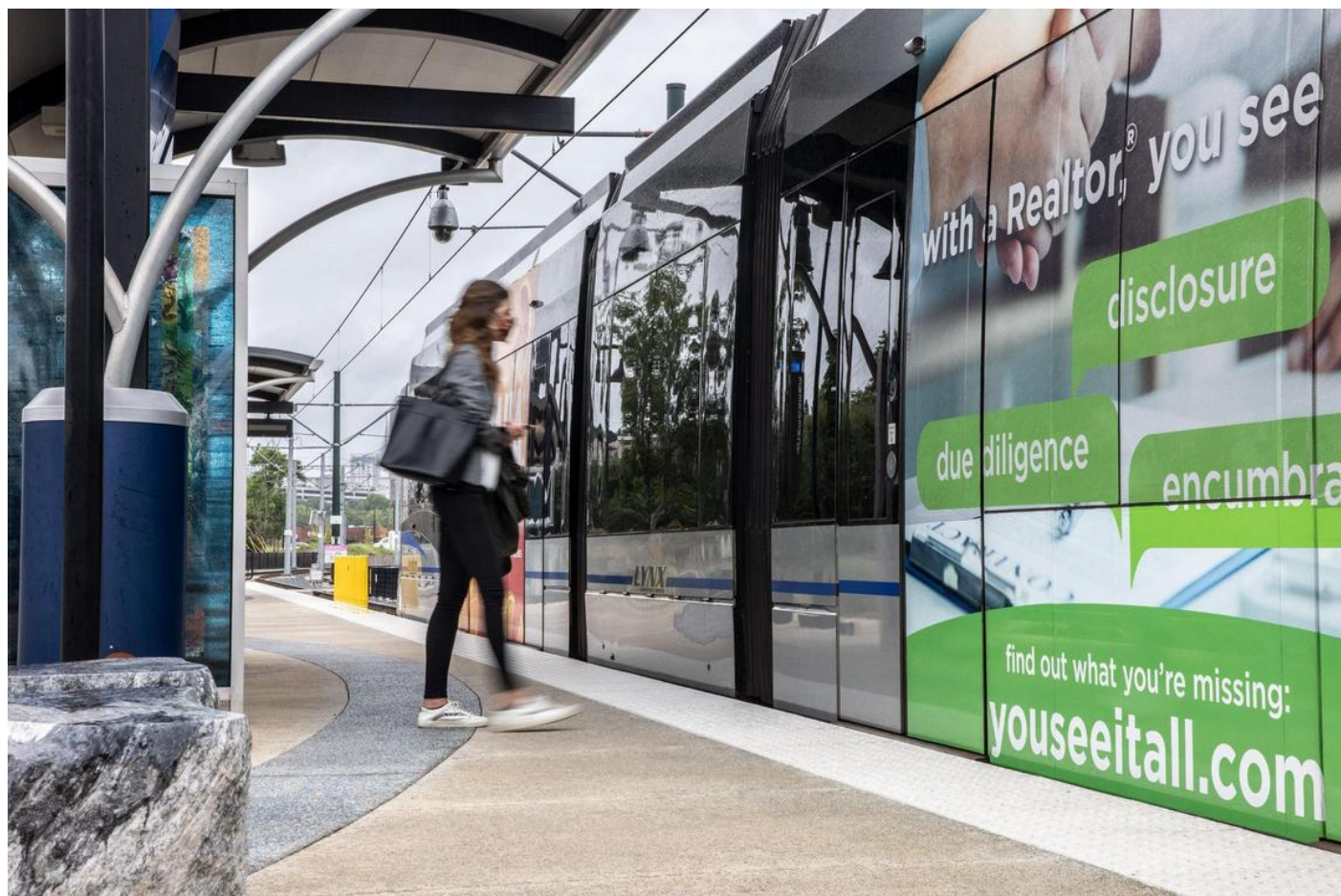
What about the Silver Line?

Plans are moving forward on the Silver Line, a planned 29-mile, east-west light rail that would run from Gaston to Union counties. But funding remains a question.

Plans call for the Silver Line to be built in phases.

If local officials want to see that line or the LYNX Red Line, which would run to the northern county towns, they'll need to [put a penny sales tax referendum](#) or

something similar on the ballot to pay for it, Lewis said this month.



Ridership numbers are down over the past decade in Charlotte. The new Charlotte Area Transit System leader will have to figure out how to address that issue. Khadejeh Nikouyeh Knikouyeh@charlotteobserver.com

Eiselt believes there's a good blueprint for a regional mobility plan in [Connect Beyond](#). The regional transit plan seeks to better connect 12 counties in the region across two states.

"We have to get back to talking about regional transit," Eiselt said.

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