

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Transit CEO's report card: How will Charlotte grade John Lewis' tenure leading CATS?

By **Genna Contino** and **Evan Moore**

Updated October 15, 2022 1:28 PM

Trust is the currency of public services, and outgoing Charlotte Area Transit System CEO John Lewis' legal tender declined as CATS' troubles mounted in 2022, says John Holmes.

Holmes, a transit rider who sits on nonprofit advocacy group [Charlotte East's transportation committee](#), said people across the spectrum are glad Lewis is leaving.

"Once you lose that (trust), it's really hard to gain that back," Holmes said.

[Lewis is resigning](#) on Nov. 30 after leading the organization for the past seven years. Lewis said he's going to pursue a job in the private sector, but didn't specify what's next.

During his tenure, Lewis worked through new public transit challenges associated with [the pandemic](#), extended [the Blue Line](#), added [electric buses to the fleet](#) and launched plans to [extend to Charlotte's street car](#).

But in Lewis' last months on the job, CATS faced [a myriad of transit troubles](#) — delayed and canceled buses and inconsistent schedules among them. In February, a gunman killed 41-year-old CATS driver Ethan Rivera during [a road-rage incident](#). Police arrested a suspect in a Kansas City suburb and extradited him to Charlotte in March.

But Lewis' performance as CEO and his role in the tribulations faced by riders depends on who you ask. While local leaders told The Charlotte Observer they understand the job is no easy task, they still offered critiques of Lewis's performance.



CATS CEO John Lewis pictured on Thursday, March 14, 2019, when he recognized the 58th millionth Blue Line Rider. Courtesy CATS

Charlotte transit inconsistencies

Ron Tober, CATS first chief executive [from 1999 to 2007](#), said it surprised him to see lackluster communication between Lewis and City Council and the Metropolitan Transit Commission when service frequency was cut earlier this year.

“He did not seem to be on top of what was causing it,” Tober said.

[In July](#), CATS cut some bus trips and decreased frequency for buses and the light rail. Tober didn’t fully buy it when Lewis cited driver vacancies, absences, scheduled vacations and days off.

Bus ridership began to decline pre-COVID. In January 2020, local bus operations saw a 3.6% decrease in ridership, [MTC meeting minutes show](#), and Tober said he didn't see a concerted effort to increase ridership on Lewis's end.

"I would fault him for that," Tober said.

At-large [City Council member Lawana Mayfield](#) agreed, saying she hopes a new CEO is more transparent and can explain transit challenges to the average rider with a single priority: moving people.

"He did well in the role and knew this would be a challenge. I don't think he found his voice enough to be independent from the powers that be and the Charlotte way," [Mayfield said](#). "He could've been more direct and transparent."

[CLT POLITICS NEWSLETTER: Sign up for exclusive insight and analysis about Charlotte-area politics](#)

What about the next CATS CEO?

UNC Charlotte Urban Institute [Research Engagement Director Ely Portillo](#) said Lewis's replacement needs to figure out a way to "fix and rejuvenate" the bus system to lure riders and win their trust back.

"It's also a job that needs someone who is a visionary, who can help push the transit system forward, champion the transit plan and figure out complex projects like the bus terminal uptown," Portillo said. "You need someone who can balance both the need to fix what's already there, and figure out how to build what comes next. It's a challenging prescription."

One A+ Lewis got with the bus system? [Going electric](#), Tober said.

In fiscal year 2021, the city purchased 27 electric vehicles with a goal of having an entirely electric fleet over the next decade. Tober said the decision is a step in the right direction toward a greener Charlotte.

But the most important role for a CEO, Tober said, is connecting with employees and listening to feedback from them and riders.

"If the employees are not with you on delivering this service, you're going to have problems," Tober said.

The CityLYNX Gold Line performs a test run along West Trade Street in west Charlotte on Thursday, August 26, 2021. CATS announced that the streetcar will open for passenger service on Monday, August 30. Jeff Siner jsiner@charlotteobserver.com

[Introducing Know Your 704: What do you wonder about Charlotte? We're here at your service.](#)

Long term planning

Portillo points to two major milestones in Lewis's leadership. He said the [Blue Line Extension](#) was a major achievement under Lewis' leadership along with the [CATS Gold Line streetcar](#), a 4-mile route that connects the Historic West End through uptown and into Elizabeth.

“That is a massive project that connects important employment centers, uptown into university, and has spurred a lot of redevelopment already,” Portillo said, referring to the Blue Line Extension.

Lewis will leave without seeing [many plans](#) come to fruition, including [revamping the Charlotte Transportation Center](#), another Blue Line extension, expanding the CityLYNX Gold Line, creating a commuter rail Red Line and building the Silver Line. These are all part of [Charlotte's 2030 transit plan](#) — but Lewis said construction can't begin until [a sales tax referendum](#) is approved by voters.

City Manager Marcus Jones said the projects won't be stalled due to CATS' leadership change, though some in county government aren't convinced they'll see the projects finished at all.

At-large [County Commissioner Pat Cotham](#) is especially wary of the [Red Line](#). The plan has been stalled for more than two decades primarily because of Norfolk Southern's ownership of the O-line, a rarely used freight line that runs from Winston-Salem to Charlotte that CATS hopes to use.

“Red line? More like ‘Pat-would-be-dead line’ by the time it's built,” [Cotham](#) said.

Cotham hopes a new CEO will forge a better relationship with county government. Under Lewis's leadership, she said, the county wasn't valued as a stakeholder until it came time to fund projects.

“It's all about a strong foundation and building relationships,” Cotham said.

Holmes, who also sits on the city's [Bicycle Advisory Committee](#), said Lewis was passionate about expanding rail in Mecklenburg County, and he hopes a new CEO brings in the same excitement toward buses.

“It's really frustrating to advocate for these bigger projects because the people in the city are really hurting,” Holmes said.

This story was originally published October 15, 2022 at 8:25 AM.

Genna Contino *The Charlotte Observer*  

Genna Contino previously covered local government for the Observer, where she wrote about Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. She attended the University of South Carolina and grew up in Rock Hill.

Get unlimited digital access

Try 1 month for \$1

#ReadLocal

CLAIM OFFER

LOCAL

ICE arrests and deportations rising sharply in North Carolina, with more expected

Updated October 23, 2025 10:47 AM

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Durham's Greg Lindberg hires ex-Trump bodyguard to seek pardon from president

Updated October 23, 2025 10:46 AM

LOCAL

Assault charge, tax liens among records for candidates in Concord mayor's race

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

What's next for civil legal aid fund that is frozen by NC lawmakers?

LOCAL

Developer offered \$15M road to Mooresville, but lawmakers picked up the bill

Updated October 22, 2025 10:13 PM

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

No deal on budget, raises or Medicaid as NC lawmakers leave town

Updated October 22, 2025 5:32 PM



Part of the McClatchy Media Network

ABOUT

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Archives](#)

Connect with us:



SUBSCRIPTIONS

[Customer Service](#)

[Start a Subscription](#)

[Cancel a Subscription](#)

[Make a Payment](#)

ADVERTISING

[McClatchy Advertising](#)

[Place an Ad](#)

Place a Classified Ad

Place an Ad - Celebrations

Place an Obituary

Staffing Solutions

Political | Advocacy Advertising

EXPLORE

 Read Today's Edition

 Mobile Apps

 Newsletters

 Puzzles & Games

 Horoscopes

[COPYRIGHT](#)

[COMMENTING POLICY](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[YOUR PRIVACY CHOICES](#)

[TERMS OF SERVICE](#)