Fares were falling on the backs of people who could least afford it. Transit is a public service.

In addition to the federal, regional, and local tax revenues that usually fund transit systems, many cities have offered free rides at least part of the year: Tucson, Arizona; Albany, New York; Birmingham, Alabama; Worcester, Massachusetts; and Shreveport, Louisiana, with 2023 ridership ranging from 17.5 million in Tucson to 3.3 million in Shreveport.

In addition to Richmond, Virginia, the largest of the cities that fully recovered ridership all 14 of those had free rides at least part of the year, according to a Stateline analysis, and waiving fares has played a large part. The strategy is especially helpful to lower-paid workers, but it might not be sustainable, according to a Stateline analysis.

There are only a few cities where transit systems have regained pre-pandemic ridership, according to a Stateline analysis. The strategy is especially helpful to lower-paid workers, but it might not be sustainable, according to a Stateline analysis.

No fare! Free bus rides raise questions of fairness, viability.

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23 cities had ridership in 2023 that was equal to or higher than in 2019, and 14 of those had free rides at least part of the year, according to a Stateline analysis.

Only 23 cities had ridership in 2023 that was equal to or higher than in 2019, and 14 of those had free rides at least part of the year, according to a Stateline analysis.

What's happened to the $1 billion in federal aid to states that offered free rides at least part of the year? It might be time to stop relying on transit revenue from fares entirely, according to a Stateline analysis.

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