

By Stuart Luman

[Transportation] Bunching and waiting

If you are one of the 930,000 daily Chicago bus riders, you've experienced bunching. When buses on the same route fail to stay evenly spaced, they caravan together, leaving frustrated commuters waiting at stops or empty buses running one behind another.

This problem isn't unique to Chicago. But the [Chicago Transit Authority](#) has made the situation worse by cutting the number of supervisors stationed on routes to ensure buses run on time.

Since 1998, the CTA has cut 47 of the jobs, about a quarter of its full-time supervisor staff, saving \$3.8 million, according to the agency. The remaining supervisors have been assigned larger geographic areas to cover by car and are dispatched by radio to problem spots.



Buses jockey along Chicago Avenue, one of the worst routes for bunching. There are fewer CTA supervisors on the street. Photo: John R. Boehm

>> TRANSPORTATION OUR SOLUTION

Under the old system, supervisors were regularly on streets to deal with bunching, turning around empty buses to restart routes, letting full buses skip stops and getting slow drivers back on schedule. Their numbers were downsized in favor of several high-tech projects, such as the Bus Service Management System, a \$7-million project to eliminate bunching announced in 1999.

The technology promised to wirelessly locate and link buses to the CTA's control center, allowing supervisors to be dispatched remotely to trouble spots. It didn't work, according to the agency, and was scrapped in 2002. But the fired supervisors were not replaced. "We were able to reduce the number of supervisors and retain their effectiveness," a CTA spokesperson says.

But Darrell Jefferson, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 241, which represents bus operators, says the reductions have made service worse. "You have supervisors covering a wider area now because they're making up for the cutbacks," he says.

Seven years after announcing its first plan to eliminate bunching, the CTA has only one wireless technology pilot project. Called Bus Tracker, it tells riders on the No. 20 Madison Street line how long they'll have to wait. Other programs designed to prevent delays include the Chicago Card, an I-Pass-like transit card that speeds boarding, and another new technology called signal prioritization, which allows bus drivers to keep or turn traffic lights green as they approach intersections. The CTA hopes to launch a pilot program in 2007.

So how bad is bunching? The CTA says 76% of buses arrive at stops every 10 minutes. Private groups offer a harsher assessment. In 2004, the Committee for Better Transit, a commuter group, stationed volunteers at stops on 14 major routes and found buses arrived off schedule 60% of the time and were bunched 40% of the time. The worst performers were the No. 50 Damen Avenue, off schedule 87% of the time, and the No. 66 Chicago Avenue, bunched 30% of the time.

"They're in a state of denial (that) they have problems," says Jackie Leavy, executive director of the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group, which runs the Committee for Better Transit.

The solution? Hire back supervisors. If the CTA added 28, two for each of the 14 key routes identified by the riders' group, it would, by CTA estimates, cost \$2.42 million a year.

That's a small price to pay to keep Chicagoans, and our economy, moving.

>> TRANSPORTATION FIRST PERSON

Got a problem? Ask a driver

To learn more about bus bunching — and the potential solutions — we went straight to someone who knows: Jerry Gross, 66, who drove a [Chicago Transit Authority](#) bus for more than 25 years before retiring in 2003. We asked him how things have changed and what he'd do to fix the problem.

CRAIN'S: How bad was bus bunching during your career at CTA?

MR. GROSS: It was something that happened, but there were more supervisors, so it could be cured by buses switching back (being turned around when bunching occurred). Sometimes on busy bus lines, the bunching up could be a lot worse than two or three buses; it could be 10 or 12 on Lawrence Avenue, which was a busy bus line.

What could bus drivers do about bunching?

If there were a bunch of buses running together and the buses near the front had nobody getting off and there were people waiting at the bus stops, they would pass the people by. That was called "breezing," and sometimes the first bus or the second



Man behind the wheel: "People didn't like to be passed up, but they understood, and it actually made things better," former CTA bus driver Jerry Gross says. Photo: John R. Boehm

bus would breeze. People didn't like to be passed up, but they understood, and it actually made things better. Now the CTA doesn't want them to breeze. They want them to make every stop even if they're so full they can't get one more person on because people complain when a bus passes them by and they don't know why.

Can current bus drivers tell their superiors if there's bus bunching?

The communication system now is a matter of pressing buttons. If you're late, you're supposed to punch it into the machine. Some do, some don't. If you're more than 10 minutes late, it's a violation if you don't notify them electronically. There's still a phone in the bus for voice communication, but it isn't used very much anymore. When I started in 1962, it was long before they even had radios in buses; there was no communication at all. So as time has gone on, they have all the electronics and service has probably gotten worse. Isn't that a shame?

If you were running the CTA, how would you stop bunching?

There should be a way of communicating with the control center and getting authorized to turn around, do switchbacks, without a supervisor coming out to do it. Because the control center is not allowed to switch buses directly, there has to be a supervisor involved. But they are in CTA squad cars, and sometimes it takes a long time for them to solve the problem.

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