Los Angeles County
Metropolitan Transportation
Authority
One Gateway Plaza
3rd Floor Board Room
Los Angeles, CA

Metro

Board Report

File #: 2026-0258, **File Type:** Informational Report **Agenda Number:** 43.

OPERATIONS, SAFETY, AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE
APRIL 16, 2026

SUBJECT: EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY IN TRANSPORTATION

ACTION: RECEIVE AND FILE

RECOMMENDATION

RECEIVE AND FILE the report of the Neurodiverse Rider Experience Survey & Engagement (Initiative) (Attachment A).

ISSUE

Metro is committed to providing a transportation system that is inclusive, accessible, and welcoming to all riders. In response to Board Motion #32.1, authored by Directors Mitchell, Yaroslavsky, Dupont-Walker, Butts, Sandoval, and Padilla (Attachment B), Metro initiated a comprehensive effort to gather feedback from neurodivergent individuals, including those with autism and other developmental disabilities, as well as their caregivers, on their experiences using public transit and opportunities for improvement. Through a systemwide survey, mystery rides, listening sessions, and peer agency research, Metro gathered input on barriers to using public transit and potential opportunities for improvement. The findings from this Initiative will help inform future service and customer experience enhancements.

BACKGROUND

Metro strives to provide a safe, clean, reliable, and welcoming transit system for all riders. Delivering an inclusive and accessible system has long been central to Metro's mission and extends beyond meeting the minimum requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, reflecting Metro's commitment to serving the diverse needs of Los Angeles County.

As Metro continues to advance accessibility across the system, there is growing recognition that riders with non-apparent disabilities, including those who are neurodiverse, may experience barriers that are less visible but still significant when using the Metro system. These barriers can include sensitivity to noise, smells, and crowding; challenges navigating complex or unclear information; and difficulty adapting to unexpected service disruptions, such as delays, reroutes, or mechanical issues.

To better understand these experiences and identify opportunities for improvement, Metro worked in partnership with community-based organizations to engage neurodiverse individuals and caregivers

and gather insight on how the Metro system can better support their needs. This partnership ensures the effort was informed by lived experience and grounded in the perspective of those most directly affected.

DISCUSSION

Metro undertook a comprehensive engagement effort to better understand the experiences of neurodiverse riders through mystery rides, a neurodiverse focused survey, listening sessions, and peer agency research. Collectively, these efforts provided both qualitative and quantitative insight into how neurodiverse riders interact with the transit system, where barriers exist, and where targeted improvements can have the greatest impact (attachment A). The Initiative engaged over 1,600 respondents, including both neurodiverse individuals and caregivers, and incorporated more than 200 mystery rides to capture real-world experiences with bus and rail service.

Across all engagement methods, findings were notably consistent. The most significant pain points identified by neurodiverse riders are smells, cleanliness, noise, crowding, personal safety, and unclear or unpredictable travel conditions. These pain points closely mirror those reported by Metro's broader rider population. This alignment underscores that improving core service conditions benefits all riders. However, for neurodiverse riders, these challenges can have a more pronounced impact, as heightened sensitivity to sensory conditions and difficulty adapting to unexpected changes can make navigating the system independently more challenging.

The findings support a three-part response: strengthening the core conditions of the transit experience that affect all riders; advancing targeted strategies that address the specific needs of neurodiverse riders and their caregivers; and promoting broader inclusion through partnerships and workforce opportunities, while recognizing that some recommendations identified in this report face practical limitations within the operational, safety, and resource constraints of a large public transit system.

RESPONSE TO SURVEY FINDINGS

First, Metro will continue to prioritize improvements to the core conditions most frequently identified through the survey, including safety, rider behavior, cleanliness, odors, crowding, and bus stop comfort. Participants identified increased staff and security presence as the most frequently suggested improvement, along with stronger enforcement of rider etiquette rules, improvements to bus stop infrastructure, and increased cleaning frequency. These findings reinforce that improvements to the fundamentals of the transit experience will benefit all riders, while also addressing issues that can have a more acute effect on neurodiverse riders due to sensory sensitivities and difficulty adapting to uncertainty.

Consistent with these findings, feedback on bus stop conditions, such as a lack of shade, seating, lighting, and overall comfort, reflects broader systemwide concerns. It is important to note that the majority of bus stops across Los Angeles County are owned and maintained by local jurisdictions, not Metro. However, Metro continues to play a leadership and convening role in advancing improvements. In Spring 2025, Metro hosted a Bus Stop Summit bringing together local partners to elevate the importance of bus stop infrastructure, and a follow-up summit is planned for 2026 to

continue this work. Metro has also secured federal grant funding to support bus stop improvements across the region, reinforcing its commitment to improving conditions in partnership with local agencies.

In recent years, Metro has made substantial investments in safety, security, and cleaning across the system. These efforts include increased uniformed presence, expanded ambassador and outreach programs, and enhanced cleaning protocols for vehicles, stations, and high-traffic areas. These investments directly address the top concerns identified through this initiative and are foundational to improving both real and perceived conditions within the system. Metro has significantly increased its investment in cleaning over the past several years, nearly doubling total funding from approximately $169 million in FY22 to over $310 million proposed for FY27. The most substantial increases occurred early in this period, with rapid year-over-year growth as Metro expanded cleaning resources and intensified efforts systemwide. Funding levels have continued to rise, reflecting a transition from rapid expansion to sustained, elevated investment. Overall, this sustained growth demonstrates a clear and ongoing commitment to improving system cleanliness, including addressing odors, and maintaining a higher standard of the rider environment over time.

Second, Metro will advance targeted strategies that improve predictability, confidence, and support for neurodiverse riders. The Initiative found that uncertainty, unclear or inaccurate trip information, and difficulty navigating the system can reduce comfort and confidence in independent transit use. Participants also identified clearer online and in-app information, more information at bus stops, more in-vehicle information, improved customer service training, and travel training as important strategies to improve the rider experience. In response, a key recommendation is the establishment of a Practice Transit Experience Program, designed to provide structured, low-pressure opportunities for riders and their caregivers to learn and rehearse using the transit system.

This program would include two complementary components. First, a simulation-based experience modeled after airline programs, in which participants are guided through a full transit journey, from trip planning to boarding and riding, in a controlled environment without the pressure of an active trip. This approach allows participants to build familiarity, reduce anxiety associated with uncertainty, and gain confidence through repetition. Second, is an expansion of Metro’s existing travel training efforts through the On the Move Riders Program to provide real-world, guided transit experiences. This component would focus on hands-on learning in live service conditions, equipping participants with the skills needed to navigate the system independently over time. Peer agency research similarly identified customer travel training as an effective strategy for helping neurodiverse riders build confidence, understand trip planning, recognize stops, and navigate the system more independently.

In parallel, Metro will evaluate opportunities to enhance digital tools to better support neurodiverse riders. As part of the rollout of the new Metro Micro App and broader mobile platform improvements, staff will assess how app-based features can improve trip planning, predictability, and rider confidence. This includes analyzing the feasibility of providing real-time or approximate information on crowding levels on buses and trains, as well as other features that may reduce uncertainty and support more informed travel decisions

The Initiative also underscored the critical role of frontline staff in shaping the customer experience. Listening session participants identified staff behavior and the need for improved customer service

training as important issues, and peer agency research highlighted neurodiversity specific staff and operator training as a key component of a more inclusive transit environment. Metro will develop and implement specialized training for all frontline employees. This training will be developed in partnership with a community-based organization with expertise in neurodiversity and will focus on effective communication, de-escalation, and strategies to support riders experiencing sensory or cognitive challenges.

Metro also reviewed emerging best practices that support riders with non-apparent disabilities, including programs designed to provide a simple, voluntary way for individuals to communicate that they may need additional assistance while traveling. One widely adopted model is the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program, which allows individuals with non-visible disabilities to discreetly signal that they may need extra time, patience, or support. Participants typically wear a sunflower-branded lanyard, badge, or wristband that is recognized by trained staff across participating organizations, including airports, airlines, and transit providers worldwide. The program is voluntary and designed to empower riders to request support without requiring them to disclose personal medical information.

A complementary approach used by some transit agencies is the “I Need Help” card, which allows riders to present a simple, pre-written card indicating that they may need assistance with navigation, communication, or other aspects of their trip. These cards can be especially helpful for individuals who may have difficulty verbally communicating their needs in stressful or unfamiliar situations.

Together, these programs provide low-cost, easy-to-implement tools that can improve communication between riders and frontline staff, reduce anxiety, and support more positive interactions throughout the transit journey. Metro will explore the feasibility of implementing similar tools and programs tailored to Los Angeles County's needs. This will include evaluating how such programs could be integrated with staff training, customer experience efforts, and broader accessibility initiatives to ensure they are effective, culturally appropriate, and widely understood by both riders and employees.
Through this exploration, Metro aims to identify practical strategies that enhance dignity, independence, and ease of use for riders with non-apparent disabilities, while reinforcing a more inclusive and supportive transit environment for all.

In addition to the rider-focused recommendations, staff will also advance broader inclusion efforts through a pilot Neurodiverse Workforce Inclusion Program designed to create pathways for neurodiverse individuals to access employment opportunities within Metro. This effort will focus on partnerships with community-based organizations to support recruitment, job readiness, and long-term success, while ensuring Metro is prepared to effectively onboard and retain neurodiverse employees. Expanding neurodiversity within the workforce can help Metro strengthen its culture of inclusion, better reflect the communities it serves, and build greater organizational awareness of the diverse needs of its riders.

Additionally, Metro will expand partnerships with neurodiverse-serving organizations by incorporating them into station activation and placemaking efforts. This includes creating opportunities for participation as vendors, performers, and community partners, supporting both economic opportunity and a more welcoming, inclusive transit environment.

Taken as a whole, these efforts reflect a balanced approach: strengthening the core conditions of the transit experience that affect all riders, while advancing targeted strategies that support the specific needs of neurodiverse individuals. Through this work, Metro continues to move toward a more inclusive, accessible, and customer-focused transportation system.While the report identifies a range of thoughtful and aspirational recommendations, it is important to note that some may present practical limitations within the operational, safety, and resource constraints inherent to a large public transit system

EQUITY PLATFORM

Equity is at the core of Metro's mission, and this Initiative represents a critical step in ensuring that the transit system works for everyone, including those whose needs have historically been less visible in transportation planning. Neurodiverse individuals are an essential part of Los Angeles County's communities. Yet too often, their experiences navigating public transit have not been fully understood or intentionally addressed.

This Initiative reflects Metro's commitment to listen, learn, and act. By directly engaging neurodiverse riders and their caregivers through surveys, mystery rides, and listening sessions, Metro is elevating voices that are not always centered in traditional planning processes. The findings make clear that while many challenges are shared across all riders, the consequences can be more significant for neurodiverse individuals, impacting their independence, confidence, and ability to fully participate in daily life.
Designing and operating a transit system that works for neurodiverse riders ultimately creates a better system for everyone. Improvements in safety, cleanliness, clarity of information, and overall customer experience benefit all users, while targeted strategies, such as practice transit programs, specialized training for frontline staff, and inclusive workforce opportunities, help remove barriers that have limited access for this community.

Metro's commitment extends beyond compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Title VI. This work is about advancing dignity, expanding opportunity, and ensuring that public transportation serves as a gateway, not a barrier, to education, employment, healthcare, and community life. By embedding neurodiverse perspectives into system design, operations, and customer experience, Metro is taking meaningful steps toward a more inclusive, responsive, and equitable transportation system for all.

VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED OUTCOME

VMT and VMT per capita in Los Angeles County are lower than national averages, the lowest in the SCAG region, and on the lower end of VMT per capita statewide, with these declining VMT trends due in part to Metro's significant investment in rail and bus transit.* Metro's Board-adopted VMT reduction targets align with California's statewide climate goals, including achieving carbon neutrality by 2045. To ensure continued progress, all Board items are assessed for their potential impact on VMT.

As part of these ongoing efforts, this item is expected to contribute to further reductions in VMT. This

item supports Metro's systemwide strategy to reduce VMT through customer experience activities that will improve and further encourage transit ridership, ridesharing, and active transportation. Metro's Board-adopted VMT reduction targets were designed to build on the success of existing investments, and this item aligns with those objectives.

*Based on population estimates from the United States Census and VMT estimates from Caltrans' Highway Performance Monitoring System (HPMS) data between 2001-2019.

IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

The recommendation supports strategic plan goal #2, Deliver outstanding trip experiences for all users of the transportation system; and goal #3, Enhance communities and lives through mobility and access to opportunity. The service improvements to be made as a result of the feedback from the initiative will directly address and support these goals.

NEXT STEPS

Upon receipt of this report, staff will advance implementation of the strategies identified through the Neurodiverse Rider Experience Survey and Engagement Initiative. Efforts will focus on advancing targeted programs designed to support neurodiverse riders, including practice transit experiences, workforce initiatives, staff training, and expanded partnerships with community-based organizations.

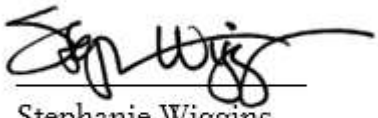
Metro will continue to coordinate with internal departments, local jurisdictions, and external partners to advance these efforts, and will report back on implementation progress, including near-, medium-, and long-term actions.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A - Neurodiverse Rider Experience Survey & Engagement Initiative Report
Attachment B - Motion #32.1 Embracing Autism and Neurodiversity in Transportation

Prepared_by
Prepared by: Althea Bovell, Deputy Chief, Civil Rights Programs (213) 418-3168
Elba Higueros, Deputy Chief of Staff, (210) 922-6820

Reviewed by: Nicole Englund, Chief of Staff, (213) 922-7950



Stephanie Wiggins
Chief Executive Officer

ATTACHMENT A

Attachment A - Neurodiverse Rider Experience Survey & Engagement Initiative Report

Document Available Online at:

https://libraryarchives.metro.net/DB_Attachments/Attachment%20A%20-%20Neurodiverse%20Rider%20Experience%20Survey%20&%20Engagement%20Initiative%20Report.pdf

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Board Report

File #: 2025-0328, **File Type:** Motion / Motion Response **Agenda Number:** 32.1.

OPERATIONS, SAFETY, AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE
APRIL 17, 2025

Motion by:

DIRECTORS MITCHELL, YAROSLAVSKY, DUPONT-WALKER, BUTTS, SANDOVAL, AND PADILLA

Embracing Autism and Neurodiversity in Transportation Motion

Related to Item 32: Monthly Update on Public Safety

For all to ride Metro safely and with autonomy, it requires designing the Metro system from neurodiverse perspectives, including people with autism and other developmental disabilities. Neurodiversity recognizes that people experience and interact with the world in different ways that impact differences in social preferences, ways of learning, communicating, or experiencing the environment that should be embraced and encouraged (https://www.nnlm.gov/reading-club/topic/331).

Several agency efforts exist to enhance transportation services and operations for persons with disabilities, such as the Coordinated Plan, Section 5310 Program, Metro's Office of Civil Rights management of ADA compliance, and community relations programming, among others. However, the agency has an opportunity to make a focused effort in building programs, policies, and infrastructure enhancements for people with autism and other development disabilities. As Metro continues to strive to deliver a world-class transportation system, it must reflect the spectrum of neurodiversity and developmental disabilities within our communities so that all can Go Metro.

SUBJECT: EMBRACING AUTISM AND NEURODIVERSITY IN TRANSPORTATION MOTION

RECOMMENDATION

APPROVE Motion by Mitchell, Yaroslavsky, Dupont-Walker, Butts, Sandoval, and Padilla that the Board direct the Chief Executive Officer to:

A. Develop and administer a survey no later than September 2025 that solicits feedback from individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities, including their families and caregivers, on how they ride public transit and ways to improve their transit experience. The survey should also solicit feedback from those who do not use public transit to understand barriers and opportunities. The survey should be developed and administered in consultation with

key stakeholder groups that directly represent or work with individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities, such as the Special Needs Network, The Wiley Center, and Aging and Disability Transportation Network.

B. Based on the survey, identify gaps, opportunities, and recommendations on changes or additions to policy, programming, and operational capital infrastructure that can be implemented in the short-, medium-, and long-term, and respective funding required. Recommendations may include modeling existing programs such as the On the Move Rider Program that increases awareness and confidence in public transportation for individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities. Report back on the survey results and recommendations by November 2025.

Neurodiverse Rider Experience Survey & Engagement Initiative

April 2026

Metro

Background

Neurodiversity Considerations

California contains approximately 200,000 individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), approximately one-third of whom live in LA County.

Neurodiverse individuals experience the world differently.

There is a critical need to develop independence and skills to support pathways to career and workforce development.

Metro Board Motion
April 2025

Understand the system from neurodiverse perspectives.

Develop a survey to identify unique needs and perspectives from non-riders.

Pinpoint gaps, opportunities, and recommendations for short-, medium-, and long-term changes to policy, programming, and infrastructure.

External Factors

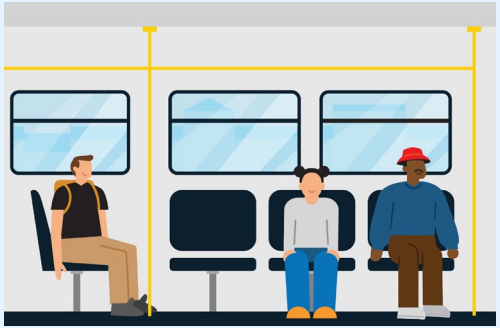
Metro seeks to remove barriers and create lasting legacy infrastructure projects and programs.

Los Angeles to host the Olympic Games in **2028.**

Methods – Mixed Methods Research Design

QUALITATIVE MEASURE 1

Mystery Riders



- **29** mystery riders
- **Over 200 rides** journaled: identified key topics for consideration
- Occurred across the Metro system on both bus and rail

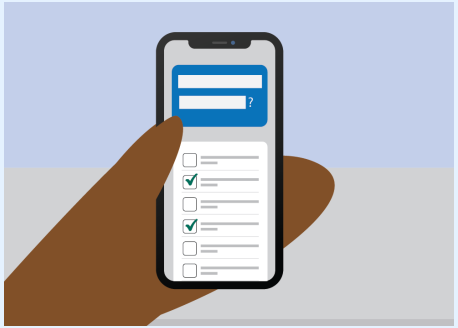
QUALITATIVE MEASURE 2

Listening Sessions

- **4 listening sessions** across LA County
- Small group guided discussion
- Feedback provided through pictures and words
- Comfortable community setting where services are delivered

QUANTITATIVE MEASURE 1

Countywide Survey



- Digitally powered social media based campaign
- Survey developed for and informed by ND individuals and caregivers throughout development process
- Open over a 5 week period
- **1,630** validated responses

Myster Riders: Positives and Challenges

Mystery riders described their transit journeys using words like:

Accessible
Friends
On Time
Nice riders
Quiet
Short
Close
Interesting
Comfortable
Easy
Excited
Fun
Air-Conditioning
Clean
Relaxed
Fast
Calm
Not Crowded
No Traffic
Nice Bus Driver
Safe
Smooth
Quick
Cool

Mystery riders described their transit journeys using words like:

Nervous
Argument
Late
Worried
Aware
Not enough shade
Dark
Walk
Dirty
Lost
TAP Cards
Loud
Couldn't find the right bus
Bus broke down
Long
Rude
Bumpy
Traffic
Wrong bus
Wait
Not Safe
Crowded
Noise
Rushing
Missed the bus/train
Smell
Hot
Tired

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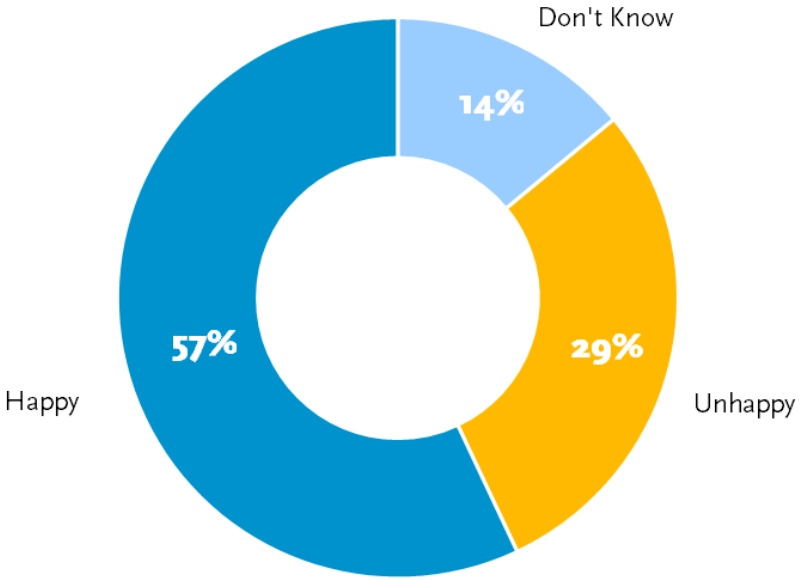
Survey Findings: Overall Happiness (Satisfaction)

How happy or unhappy are you with your overall Metro experience?



Majority of respondents are overall happy with their Metro experience

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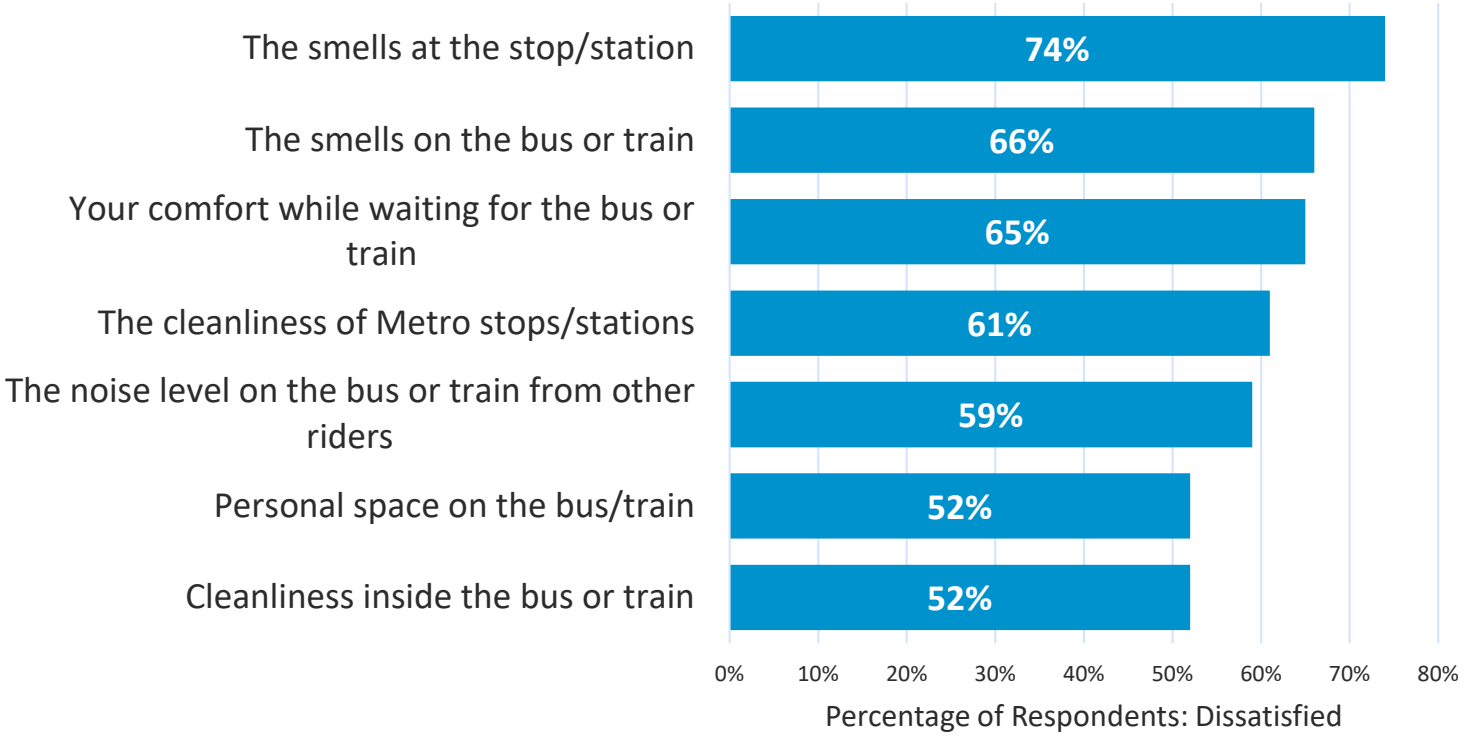
Survey Findings: Pain Points

How happy or unhappy are you with…?



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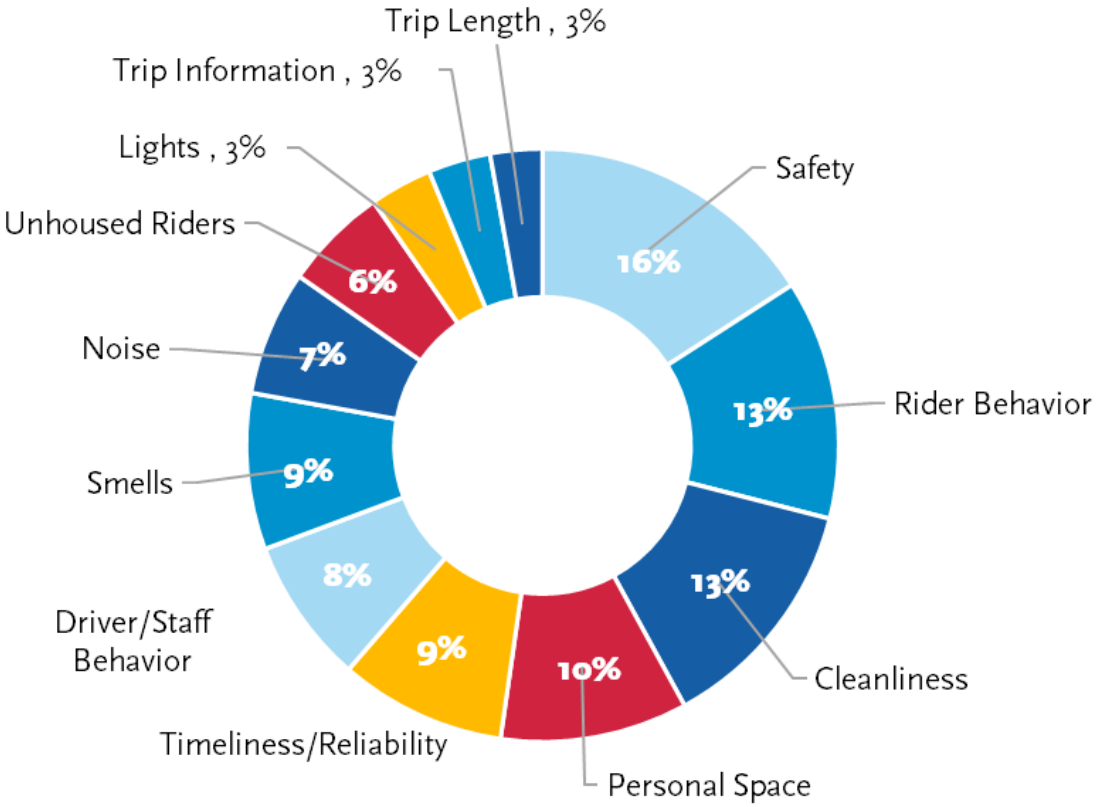
Listening Sessions: Pain Points

The most frequently mentioned pain points included:

- **Safety**: Concerns about safety while riding transit or waiting at stops and stations
- **Rider Behavior**: Concerns about riders playing loud music, smoking, or disregarding other rules
- **Cleanliness**: Concerns about the level of cleanliness onboard vehicles and at stops and stations



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Recommendations

Continue to Strengthen Core Conditions

Metro will continue to prioritize improvements to the core conditions most frequently identified through the survey, including safety, rider behavior, cleanliness, odors, crowding, and bus stop comfort

- Metro has made substantial investments in safety, security, and cleaning across the system
- Metro investment in cleaning over the past several years has nearly doubled, total funding from approximately $169 million in FY22 to over $310 million proposed for FY27
- Expanded uniformed presence by Transit Security Officers, Ambassadors, and Homeless Outreach with Crisis Interventionists set to launch next fiscal year
- Bus stop summit and federal bus stop improvement grants
- Implementing calm spaces on the transit network (pilot World Cup)

Recommendations

Expand Travel Training Programs

Introduce a two-pronged approach to build confidence and independence:

- Simulation-based training to reduce uncertainty
- Real-world guided transit experiences through existing programs

Implement Neurodiversity Training for Staff

- Provide targeted training for frontline staff to better recognize and support neurodiverse riders.
- Improve customer interactions and support
- Create a more welcoming and inclusive environment

Recommendations

Establish a Workforce Development Pipeline

- Create pathways for neurodiverse individuals to join Metro's workforce
- Build life skills and increase representation

Station Activation Plans

- Expand partnerships with neurodiverse-serving organizations for station activation and placemaking efforts.
- Create opportunities for participation as vendors, performers, and community partners, supporting both economic opportunity and a more welcoming, inclusive transit environment.

Initiatives For Further Review

- Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program or the "I Need Help" card
- Evaluate opportunities to enhance digital tools to better support neurodiverse riders

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Thank You!

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