



# Bus Station on the Brink:

## CITY ACTION IS NEEDED TO PREVENT THE LOSS OF CHICAGO'S GREYHOUND TERMINAL

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**The Chicago Greyhound Terminal on Harrison Street is at risk of being shuttered due to the property's anticipated sale, possibly for residential use. This critical hub:**

- Handles 55 buses daily, serving around 500,000 annual passengers, more than commercial airports in Bloomington, Champaign-Urbana & Rockford, IL.
- Serves passengers who are disproportionately low-income, unemployed, and disabled and those lacking access to private vehicles. These travelers would suffer if operations shifted to a curbside spot without a secure, climate-controlled waiting room.
- Is a connecting point for travel involving several dozen bus lines across the United States,
- Is notable for still being *privately* owned, whereas most metro areas provide public facilities.

This brief was prepared to encourage and support the evaluation among policymakers of the potential acquisition of the station, located at 630 W. Harrison Street, by a public agency to forestall the loss of the facility. Like many other U.S. bus stations, this station is at risk of being closed in the wake of a recent announcement by the private company owning the site that it is for sale. The brief recommends (see page 9) three steps towards working to acquire the facility and operating it in a manner like public airports, railroad stations, and transit hubs.



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**PHOTO (ABOVE):** CHICAGO GREYHOUND TERMINAL, APRIL 8, 2023 (Angelia Millsap photo) <sup>1</sup>This version in an update to our April study to reflect to recent closing of the Philadelphia Greyhound station in June 2023



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## FIVE MAJOR FINDINGS FROM OUR ANALYSIS

The analysis draws on publicly available sources of information, including:

- Measurements of the changing scale of the city's intercity bus service using published timetables.
- A review of actions in the 25 largest US metro areas with respect to offering public bus terminals.
- An evaluation of state government surveys measuring the demographics of riders.

**FINDING 1. The intercity bus system from downtown Chicago is comprehensive, with routes emanating from three primary locations: the Greyhound Station on Harrison Street, a curbside area on S. Canal Street near Chicago Union Station (CUS), and outside CUS's Door E. The Greyhound Station is easily the busiest location but is at imminent risk of closure due to redevelopment.**

The present terminal is just the **third used by Greyhound in the past century**. Greyhound operated from the Union Bus Depot at 1157 S. Wabash (now Trader Joe's) until 1953, when it and most other lines moved to a much larger facility at 170 W. Randolph. The rival Trailways bus system used a station several blocks east, but by the late 1980s, all Trailway operations had been consolidated into the massive Randolph Street station.

In 1989, Greyhound and other lines moved to the present and much **smaller station on Harrison, near the Jane Byrne Interchange**, designed by Nagle, Hartray & Associates. Relatively little changed at the station immediately after Germany-based FlixBus, the parent company of FlixBus, purchased Greyhound from FirstGroup plc in late 2021. FlixBus's acquisition did not include the Chicago terminal and most other station properties (see sidebar). FirstGroup has sold most of these properties to a real estate holding company.

Large-scale **curbside operations from the vicinity of Union Station** began with Megabus's U.S. launch in 2006. The double-decker operator eventually moved to another curbside spot south of the Congress Parkway, but it withdrew the last of its Chicago service (a Twin Cities run) last year. Its corporate sister, Van Galder Bus Services, continues to provide a service to Madison, WI, as part of the Amtrak Thruway system, leaving from outside Door 5E at Union Station. FlixBus began service from a curb on S. Canal Street in 2021 and, along with OurBus, gradually expanded there. After analysis for this report was completed, FlixBus moved to the Chicago Greyhound Terminal, perhaps due to construction along Canal.

### Why is the Chicago Greyhound Terminal at Risk?

FlixBus did not purchase most of Greyhound's real estate when its corporate parent acquired the legacy bus line from UK-based FirstGroup plc in 2021. Last December, FirstGroup sold the 88,000-square foot station site to Connecticut-based Twenty Lake Holdings, which in turn hired CBRE to position the property for sale. Twenty Lake reportedly paid **\$140 million** for 33 Greyhound properties. A report indicates that the site could accommodate two towers catering to a strong market for residential apartments [6]. In several other cities, bus lines have been suddenly evicted once buyers for station properties have been found, often given with only a few weeks to relocate (see page 8).



**FINDING 2.** The Greyhound Station currently has 55 scheduled arrivals and departures per day that link the city to many distant destinations, and the facility has the potential to handle more if it was opened to all bus lines, including those unaffiliated with Greyhound. Although the number of buses is down from 2017, this is partially due to driver shortages and COVID impacts.

Currently, there are 55 scheduled buses from the station (Table 1). There would be 67 if you include Indian Trails and Miller Transportation, which previously used the station but have recently ceased doing so. Both appear interested in returning if conditions are right (see Endnote 1). The estimates may slightly understate daily volumes on the busiest days, as bus lines occasionally operate “extra sections.” We provide a breakdown of current service levels by nine carriers serving downtown in the Appendix.

**TABLE 1: Daily Arrivals and Departures at Downtown Chicago Locations**

	June 2017		March 2023	
	Daily Peak Day (Sundays)	Daily Shoulder Day (Thursday)	Daily Peak Day (Sundays)	Daily Shoulder Day (Thursday)
Greyhound Bus Station, all carriers	82	79	55	55
Greyhound Bus Station plus two lines formerly using the station. See Endnote 1	82	79	67	67
Curbside on Canal Street south of Jackson Blvd.	NA	NA	14	10
Curbside at Union Station (Door E), excluding buses also stopping at Greyhound Sta.	NA	NA	28	28

Several features of the station operations stand out:

- The station stands out for having a **diverse set of interline partners connecting with Greyhound**, each having a significant presence. Barron’s Burlington Trailways, Miller Trailway/Hoosier Ride, and Burlington Trailways had at least six daily operations at the start of this year, although Miller recently suspended service (see Table 4 in the Appendix). Greyhound has only 1- 2 major interline partners at most other hubs. A map of routes appears on the previous page.
- Numerous **Greyhound buses using the station also stop at Union Station** to serve Amtrak Thruway passengers, operating to locations not served by the passenger railroad.



A family disembarks a Greyhound bus that has just arrived from Detroit, MI on a chilly evening in early 2023. A Trailways bus is in the distance.

- Greyhound operates many **long-haul routes** from the terminal, including buses to the East Coast and the South. Its buses no longer run to the West Coast like Amtrak’s “transcontinental” trains, as these bus itineraries are now mainly limited to its St. Louis hub.
- **Indian Trails Bus Lines**, a longstanding station user, canceled its Chicago service before the pandemic. It restored a route to Detroit this year, departing curbside from Polk Street near Canal Street, as it no longer “interlines” with Greyhound, which may be a factor in its absence from the station (see Endnote 1).

Activity at the Chicago Station could be expanded if incentives, facility improvements, and other measures were taken to encourage other bus lines to use it. In many other cities, including Boston, MA, Denver, CO, and Washington, DC (see page 8), consolidated intercity bus facilities operated by the municipal government have become centralized hubs used by nearly all major bus lines.

**FINDING 3.** Annual traffic volume at Greyhound Station is in the 456,000 – 557,000 range, a level of passenger traffic greater than the commercial airports serving Bloomington-Normal, Champaign, and Rockford, IL. If the Station were an airport, its traffic would be among the 185 busiest in the United States, and its traffic has been gradually rebounding since the end of the pandemic.

Due to the absence of published estimates of ridership in most major U.S. cities, including Chicago, we made independent estimates of traffic at the station. Our estimates assume (supported by research) that the average occupancy of buses arriving/departing Chicago is 28 on peak days, 25 on shoulder days, and 26 overall (See Endnote 2 on page 12). The typical motorcoach has 50 – 54 seats.

**Table 2: Approximate Daily and Annual Ridership by Location**

	June 2017		March 2023		
	Daily Peak Day (Sundays)	Daily Shoulder Day (Thursday)	Daily Peak Day (Sundays)	Daily Shoulder Day (Thursday)	Annual Approximate Range
Greyhound Bus Station, 630 Harrison Street	2,296	1,975	1,675	1,375	456,000 – 557,000
Greyhound Bus Station plus two bus lines formerly using the station. (See Note 1)	Same as above	Same as above	1,876	1,540	555,000 – 679,000
Curbside on Canal Street, south of Jackson Blvd.	NA	NA	392	250	102,000 – 125,000
Curbside at Union Station (Door E)	NA	NA	784	700	239,000 – 292,000

We estimate that the Greyhound Station handles the following:

- Roughly 1,675 passengers on peak days (e.g., Fridays and Sundays) and 1,375 on shoulder days (e.g., Thursdays).
- The *annual volume* at the Greyhound station appears to be 456,000 – 557,000. These rough estimates are based on numerous assumptions. If it were an airport, the midpoint of this range would make it among the 185 busiest passenger airports in the United States (see Endnote 3).
- If you add the two bus lines, Indian Trails, and Miller Transportation, that no longer use the station, apparently partly due to Greyhound-FlixBus changes, you reach a number roughly 20% higher, as shown in row two of Table 2.
- Annual passenger traffic at *curbside* ridership (rows three and four combined) at or near Union Station is in the 340,000 - 390,000 range, excluding buses that also serve the Greyhound station.

Traffic is rebounding. We forecasted in February that, by late this year, intercity bus travel nationwide would reach about 90% of pre-pandemic volumes.

**FINDING 4.** Chicago’s intercity bus system serves customers with substantially lower incomes, less access to cars, and higher unemployment than the general population. Surveys by state governments in the Midwest show that roughly three-quarters of riders have household incomes of less than \$40,000. More than a quarter would not have made the trip if bus service were not available.

To fill the void left by the absence of formal analysis about intercity bus riders in Chicago, we reviewed studies published by three Midwest states linked by bus to our city, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio and one analysis by the State of Kansas. All show that intercity bus users are younger, lower-income, more likely to be unemployed, less likely to have access to a car, and more likely to travel alone than the general population. Key findings include:

- a) Around two-thirds, 65-70%, of riders had annual household incomes less than \$40,000, while between one-third and 38% had incomes less than \$20,000 (1,2,3,4). The reports consistently show that the Midwest’s intercity bus systems cater to travelers with very limited financial resources.
- b) 18 -19% of riders were found to be unemployed in of the two studies reporting on this (2, 3, 1), while the fourth, Ohio’s, found that 11% were without work, a level still double that for the state (4,5).
- c) Persons with disabilities are likelier to use intercity buses than the general population. The Kansas study did a particularly extensive analysis of this rider group, finding that 15% of disabled people surveyed reported taking a bus



Passenger queue for departures at the Chicago Greyhound Terminal in January 2023.

trip over the previous 12 months, compared to just 6% to 9% of the general population (2). Similarly, 30% of disabled survey respondents that were active or potential riders had a limitation that prevented them from driving, while 41% had a household income of less than \$15,000 annually (2). When asked what improvements they would want to see, “Buses [that] better accommodate the disabled” was the most common response, chosen by 76% of respondents (2, p.49).

- d) **More than a quarter of riders had no other viable options**, with 26 - 30% of passengers indicating that they would not have made the trip if bus service had not been available (1; 4). 71% of respondents in the Ohio study lacked access to a private vehicle, while 56% of Kansas respondents reported the same (4,2). The ability to reach bus stations using local transit was also found to be critical (2,1).
- e) **The preponderance of travelers used buses for personal business, including visits to family and friends, recreation, and to gain access to medical or public services**. Even so, around 17% of Minnesota, Kansas, and Ohio respondents report traveling for job-related reasons, including commuting (1,2,4). Please refer to Endnote 3 for additional analysis of traveler characteristics.

**FINDING 5. Allowing the closure of the Greyhound Station without giving passengers an attractive alternative that is both centrally located and equipped with an indoor waiting room would make metropolitan Chicago a weak link in the national intercity bus system. In ten of the 14 largest metropolitan regions in the country, government agencies have stepped forward to provide public accommodations for intercity bus lines.**

Fifteen of the 25 largest metropolitan areas in the United States provide Greyhound or other bus lines access to public facilities in downtown areas with security arrangements, off-street arrival, and departure areas, and connecting opportunities with other transportation services (see Appendix, Table 3). If the Greyhound station closes and the carrier moves away from downtown or to a curbside location, Chicago would be the largest metropolitan area in the country without a publicly provided downtown terminal location.

**Why Chicago’s Extreme Weather Would Make a Curb Location Untenable for Greyhound and its Interline Partners**

If the Chicago Greyhound Terminal closes and operations are shifted to a curbside spot, as has happened in Charlottesville, VA, Portland, OR, and Tampa, FL, and several other cities, metropolitan Chicago would be the only urbanized region with more than 2.5 million people in which passengers are forced to wait outside with average winter temperatures below 40°. Chicago’s average January temperature is just 22°, creating an untenable situation. The next-coldest city where passengers are picked up at curbside spots would be Portland, which has an average January temperature of 40°. Chicago’s 38 inches of snowfall per year is more than five times that of the Oregon city<sup>1</sup>

**Table 3: Status of Intercity Bus Stations in Largest 25 U.S. Metropolitan Areas**

	<b>Metropolitan Statistical Area</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Action to Provide Public Bus Depot near City Center?</b>
1	New York/Newark, NY, NJ	19,768,458	Yes - Port Authority Bus Terminal
2	Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA	12,997,353	Yes - Los Angeles Union Station East bus facility
3	Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL	9,509,934	No - station at risk
4	Dallas-Fort Worth, TX	7,759,615	No - station and maintenance area at risk. See note A
5	Houston, TX	7,206,841	No - station being closed, solution not yet evident
6	Washington-Arlington, DC, VA	6,356,434	Yes - Washington Union Station
7	Philadelphia-Camden, PA	6,228,601	No - station closed in June '23, now curbside boarding
8	Atlanta-Sandy Springs, GA	6,144,050	Yes - new station under construction w/GDOT support
9	Miami-Fort Lauderdale, FL	6,091,747	Yes - bus facility at Miami International Airport
10	Phoenix-Mesa-Chandler, AZ	4,946,145	No - outlying location
11	Boston-Cambridge, MA	4,899,932	Yes - South Station Bus Terminal
12	Riverside-San Bernardino, CA	4,653,105	Yes - San Bernardino Metrolink/Amtrak depot
13	San Francisco-Oakland, CA	4,623,264	Yes - Transbay Bus Terminal
14	Detroit-Warren, MI	4,365,205	Yes - new station to be built with MDOT support
15	Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA	4,011,553	No - outlying location, downtown station closed in '14
16	Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN	3,690,512	Yes - St. Paul Union Station
17	San Diego-Chula Vista, CA	3,286,069	No - outlying location, does not appear to be at risk
18	Tampa-St. Petersburg, FL	3,219,514	No - station closed, now curbside, resulting in difficulties
19	Denver-Aurora, CO	2,972,566	Yes - Denver Union Station
20	Baltimore-Columbia, MD	2,838,327	No - outlying location, downtown station closed in '17
21	St. Louis, MO-IL	2,809,299	Yes - Gateway Transportation Center
22	Charlotte-Concord, NC-SC	2,701,046	Yes - under construction, Gateway Intermodal Center
23	Orlando-Kissimmee, FL	2,691,925	No - station reportedly at risk
24	San Antonio-New Braunfels, TX	2,601,788	Yes - Megabus at Via Crossroads transit, see Endnote 4
25	Portland-Vancouver, OR-WA	2,511,612	No - station closed, now curbside, see Endnote 4

Caption: Most local and regional governments in metro areas with populations greater than 2.5 million have been active in providing high-quality public facilities to Greyhound and other lines. Note A: an earlier version of this report indicated Dallas's station was not at risk. We have since learned it is, in fact, at risk.

The desire of private developers to redevelop Greyhound properties has already created much hardship around the country. Our review of recent station closures shows that:

- In 2022 and early 2023, Greyhound relocated, involuntarily in most cases, from its longstanding stations in Charlottesville, VA; Cincinnati, OH; Erie, PA; Jackson, MS; Knoxville, TN; Los Angeles, CA; North Little Rock, AK; and Tampa, FL.
- While some relocations, such as in Los Angeles, brought these buses to a more centralized and desirable location, others placed the new stops far from city centers. In [Charlottesville](#), [Jackson](#), Knoxville, North Little Rock, and Tampa, the relocations raised concerns and even public outcry due to the loss of indoor waiting rooms and the unappealing nature of the new locations.
- Recently, there have been reports that Greyhound stations in Cleveland, OH; Houston, TX; Kansas City, MO; Louisville, KY; and Nashville, TN, are also at risk.

The loss of the Chicago station would create problems far greater than in these other cities due to our role as a connecting point and the lack of alternative sites for bus lines. Chicago is uniquely important as a transfer hub, with many passengers waiting 2 – 8 hours between buses. These passengers would struggle greatly if operations were shifted to a curbside location (see sidebar).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There are compelling reasons for public action to aggressively pursue strategies that assure the Harrison Street station remains available to intercity bus lines and their passengers. Much needs to be done by relevant public agencies, including these initiatives:

- Recognize the urgency of action. This should include resisting zoning changes or plans to raze the station and transform it into residential, hotel, or office use.
- Develop a plan for both public acquisition and operation of the station. Much of the cost of operating the station could be covered by user fees. The program could be developed in consultation with other cities, regions, and states that manage and operate public terminals. Learning from the public agencies managing highly successful public terminals in Boston, MA, Denver, CO, and Washington, DC, would be particularly beneficial.
- Assemble a technical committee comprised of planners at appropriate public agencies to explore the role of intercity bus travel in our region and options to improve and expand service at a publicly owned station.



## APPENDIX

Table 4: Present Service Levels in Downtown Chicago (arrivals & departures combined)

	Daily Ops	Location	Routes and Notes
Barons Bus	6	Greyhound Sta.	East to Indiana & Ohio
Burlington Trailways	6	Greyhound Sta.	West to Iowa & Nebraska
FlixBus	10*	Canal St. until April '23, now Grey. Sta.	Five routes, to Twin Cities, Columbus, OH, Detroit, Milwaukee and Bloomington, IN
Greyhound Lines	43	Greyhound Sta.	Offers comprehensive network
Indian Trails	6	Previously user, now at 95 <sup>th</sup> Street	Recently relaunched to Detroit. Now uses a curb on Polk Street.
Miller Transportation "Hoosier Ride"	6	Greyhound Sta. ( <i>suspended 2/23</i> )	Operates east to Indiana & Ohio. May return to Chicago if station arrangements improve
OurBus	4*	Canal Street	To Indianapolis & Bloomington, IN
Peoria Charter	4	Union Station	To Champaign/Urbana
Van Galder	24	Union Station	Amtrak Thruway to Rockford & Madison, WI

\*denotes peak day number. Varies by season and day of the week. FlixBus activity may be > ten on some days

Not shown: Bus lines operating from Chicago's southwest side catering to Spanish-speaking populations.

## NOTES

**Endnote 1:** Two longtime Greyhound "interline partners" no longer use the Harrison Street station but could return if the opportunity arises. **Indian Trails**, which operates an extensive network in Michigan, dropped Chicago service several years ago but returned earlier this year without a Greyhound interline agreement, terminating curbside at Polk Street near Canal Street. For unclear reasons, **Miller Trailway/Hoosier Rider**, another longtime partner operating an extensive Indiana and Ohio network, dropped service to Chicago in early 2023. It could return if station arrangements change. FlixBus moved to the Greyhound Terminal after the traffic estimates for this brief were completed, which has elevated the Terminal's role.

**Endnote 2.** The study, [Developing Refined Estimates of Intercity Bus Ridership](#), found that intercity buses in the Northeast before the pandemic generated 23 passenger miles per bus mile. We consider this a reasonable estimate for Midwest routes as well. Considering that the average bus has 50 – 54 seats, it indicates that, on average, buses are slightly less than half full. The estimate, however, likely understates current loads from Chicago for two reasons: First, many buses leave Chicago full or relatively full but gradually discharge passengers at stops. As a result, their average occupancy tends to be higher when leaving Chicago than at outlying locations. (A similar pattern occurs in the opposite direction). Second, constraints on adding capacity, due to driver and equipment shortages, in the wake of the pandemic have apparently pushed up average loads. We assume 26 passengers per arrival and departure in our calculations. Our assertion that, if the Terminal was an airport, it would rank among the top 185 busiest airports is an approximation using 2021 passenger enplanements from this [published list](#), with passenger enplanements multiplied by two to get total traffic (enplanements and deplanements combined).

**Endnote 3.** Among the other findings for the four state-sponsored studies were that: 1) Among the Midwestern states, more than three-quarters of travelers (76-78%) travel, while 87% in the Kansas study were solo riders (1, 2, 3,4). 2) Travelers tend to be younger than the population. 3) Seniors, however, accounted for 3% to roughly 9% of intercity bus riders (1,2,3,4). Focus groups in Kansas found that seniors are concerned about accessibility and stop location issues (2). The studies were conducted between 2009 and 2019.

**Endnote 4.** The Portland (OR) Greyhound Station closed in 2019. Passengers can buy tickets at a storefront location at 427 NW 6th Ave, Portland. The carrier, however, notes that "Bus will board at the curbside on NW Station Way marked for buses only, north of Union Station. The curb is across the street from Station Place Parking Garage and along the fence parallel to the train tracks." We are not aware of reports that Greyhound station in San Antonio at 500 N Saint Mary's Street, which is open 24 hours, is at risk. Arrangements in that city have allowed Megabus to use the Via Transit Crossroads Transit Center at 171 Via Crossroad Blvd, approximately seven miles from the Greyhound station.

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