

TRANSPORTATION

1 year in, here's how IndyGo's CEO grades the Red Line — and what's coming next



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Inez Evans became CEO of IndyGo on Aug. 19, 2019. The agency launched the Red Line, its first rapid-transit system, weeks later. The novel coronavirus changed everything the next spring.

Now the leader of Indianapolis' transit corporation must guide the service that Hoosiers depend on for millions of trips each year to the future, despite a nosedive in ridership during the pandemic.

It's a tall task.

"Oh my goodness, it has been nonstop since I got here to Indianapolis," she told IndyStar in an interview.

Evans discussed the first year of the Red Line, changes to the future Purple Line and what could be next for IndyGo.

Grading the Red Line

The CEO's grades for the Red Line run the gamut.

"If I had to break it down, I would give my team an A," Evans said. "Because they've gone through every challenge that the community has thrown at them, and they've persevered."

"When it comes to the buses, I would give the buses an F," she said. "They have failed us completely."

Evans said the manufacturer in charge of the electric buses for the Red Line, BYD, did not own up to the contractual obligation of going 275 miles on a charge. Instead, IndyGo tests

found buses traveling as few as 152 miles on a day when the temperature was 10 degrees below zero. Really hot days can hurt the buses' range, too, she said.

To make up the difference, the manufacturer will pay for the installation of three charging pads that will charge the buses while drivers take breaks. IndyGo will install chargers at both ends of the Red Line, with the charger at the northern end of the line coming online "sometime next year," Evans said.

IndyGo disclosed the need for the chargers in May 2019. In June 2019, the company making the chargers and IndyGo said they would install them before last winter. That didn't happen.

As IndyGo waits to receive the new wireless charging infrastructure, it is in various stages of purchasing and preparing property at the ends of the Red Line. This winter, IndyGo will use temporary wired chargers and have more buses and drivers available to trade out buses as needed.

Evans said they have the option to buy 75 more buses from BYD, but they're also going to see if any other companies are planning similar electric, 60-foot buses. "At that point in time, then we'll make our decision as to whether or not we'll stay with BYD or move to a different manufacturer," she said.

When asked whether IndyGo was committed to electric buses on future rapid-transit lines, Evans said "yes, no and maybe."

Hybrid buses: IndyGo partners with Allison Transmission

While IndyGo would need federal approval to switch away from electric due to grants, she said they're also starting to learn more about hydrogen fuel cell technology.

"So I don't want to put definitively I will only do electric," Evans said. "I think it's better to say we are definitely committed to a zero-emission solution on our BRT lines."

Because of the battles with bus ranges, Evans said she'd give the Red Line's service a B+ or C, depending on the season.

The CEO gave another poor grade, a C, for the Red Line's overall technology. The new bus system uses fare machines, real-time screens and apps. Currently, riders can use the myStop app to see where buses are along the route, whether they're on time and even how many people are on them.

But IndyGo has yet to release another promised app called MyKey. The agency said the app would allow users to refill fare cards or purchase a digital card for free, avoiding the one-time \$2 fee for a physical card.

From last year: Answers to all of your burning questions about the Red Line

Evans could not provide a date for when the app would launch for everyone.

"We're gearing up next year, I believe, to be able to open it up to more individuals," she said. "But the goal is, we want to make sure it's right."

Behind the scenes IndyGo is looking at whether it's even the right type of software and the right vendor.

"I think we trusted a lot of our contractors to provide certain levels of service," Evans said, "and I think as a new agency expanding into some new areas we didn't have the technical expertise, either, on staff to be able to manage some of those things."

Lessons for the Purple, Blue lines

IndyGo's leader said the agency will use these lessons from the Red Line when it launches the Purple Line and Blue Line additions to the rapid-transit system.

In addition to some back-end functional changes — like making sure they can monitor whether station heaters are working from a single location instead of checking them all individually — IndyGo will make some aesthetic changes to station design. Among other items, they'll standardize glass sizes, use easier-to-obtain types of wood, and rethink landscaping.

IndyGo's second bus rapid transit line will run to Fort Harrison in Lawrence. Initially scheduled to launch next fall, the Purple Line is now targeted for 2023.

Evans said design challenges, including how long it would have taken to move infrastructure, pushed back the date.

In a plan published in August, the 15.2-mile line shares 12 stations with the Red Line. Most of the line's dedicated stations are along 38th Street, where IndyGo will collaborate with the Department of Public Works to complete major infrastructure projects. Plans call for fixes to drainage systems, added sidewalks and more.

Earlier plans called for the line to follow Meridian Street toward downtown south of 18th Street, but Evans said moving infrastructure would have taken two-and-a-half years — and they weren't sure what the price was going to be.

"Now, I don't know about you," Evans said, "but I don't want to go into a project, digging into the ground when I don't know how much it's going to cost."

The Purple Line will now share stations with the Red Line on Capitol Avenue.

The Blue Line, which plans say will run along Washington Street from Cumberland to the airport, won't be complete until at least 2025.

The future of IndyGo

Evans said residents' desire for more transportation options, shown by the 2016 passage of a referendum to raise income tax for public transit, is one of the things that attracted her to Indianapolis and IndyGo.

"Where other cities were really talking about the significance of transit and whether or not, you know, to expand or to cut, many cities were talking about cutting their services," she said. "And Indianapolis was saying no, no, no: We want transportation."

But there are still things IndyGo can't do. Train service, for example.

"Legislatively, we can't do rail. So that would have to change," she said. "And the referendum that is presently in place doesn't financially support rail. I think we would love to bring rail here, but that would be a decision for the citizens of our county. If they do it, we're the right people to run it."

Indiana law also requires IndyGo to privately raise a portion of its expenses. Evans said this has been a challenge during the pandemic. She said the agency's foundation is seeking large donors and has submitted for several grants.

IndyGo must raise donations to comply with state law. How much? That's unclear.

The fundraising difficulties aside, Evans said she expects funds from the federal CARES Act to make up for revenue lost due to lower ridership during the pandemic.

As riders begin to return to the service, the CEO now one year into the job is excited to keep moving forward and discovering the future of public transit in Indianapolis.

Evans hinted at on-demand services she has seen transit agencies operate elsewhere in the country.

For example, a California agency operates a program where riders can call their dispatch and request a ride to a specific destination. By partnering with a taxi or ride-sharing service, the agency can provide that ride at a lower cost to the rider than if that person used Uber or Lyft.

She said IndyGo is "intrigued by the opportunity" to bring a similar program here.

"Fixed route is called fixed route for a certain reason," Evans said. "It's on a fixed system. But what we've heard from people is, 'I can't walk that far. The bus doesn't meet my needs all the time. When I need to go, I need to go. It takes too long.' And so we're trying to break down those barriers."

Breaking down the barriers may mean finding new ways to achieve their goals.

"Is the 40-foot bus, the 60-foot bus the solution for every community? We would say no," Evans said. "The goal is to move people. That can be in a smaller vehicle. That can also mean using other partners to help us move people."

"So please don't fret, community, if there's not a 40-foot bus, but, you know, something will be coming to get you to where you need to go."

IndyStar visual journalist Robert Scheer contributed.

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