

This is a feature I pitched and wrote while interning for the Clarion Ledger and USA Today Network in Jackson, Mississippi. It was published [online](#) on Aug. 7, 2024 and was also the A1 Sunday centerpiece in print. I was [awarded](#) the Bill Minor Prize in Investigative Journalism, the state's top journalism award, for this story.

Exclusive: One Lake Project could flood parts of South Jackson. Residents there had no idea

Sandbags line the edges of Juanita Day's home on a quiet road in South Jackson. Stacked upon each other against the house's frame, they cover the perimeter of the structure.

Another stack of more than 80 bags stands in front of a car shelter, slightly to the side of the house. All of the sandbags are handmade by 80-year-old Day and her husband, David Christopher. The last time they had to make them, it took the two and their grandson days to bag enough for the whole property.

Day sits on her front stoop in a rocking chair, the purple flowers she's planted in her front yard peeking through her porch rails. She and Christopher are just one year away from paying off the house. She looks out across the grass of her front yard and the property she has lived on for the last 30 years, contemplating what floods — ones bigger than the many she has already seen — would mean.

"I'm deathly afraid of water," she said. "I do not swim."

Day and her neighbors in South Jackson, as well as people in the communities of Richland and Byram, could be set up for more flooding as developers decide whether and how to dredge and dam the Pearl River.

Though not known to many of the residents who would receive downstream induced flooding from the potential dam, their neighborhoods are marked with purple squares on potential development maps, part of 38,000 acres indicated for induced floods where water pushed away from wealthier areas of the Jackson metro would instead tear its way through economically disadvantaged communities.

The Clarion Ledger canvassed all three potentially affected neighborhoods marked in the development plans for induced flooding. The neighborhoods cross borders from South Jackson to Byram and into Richland.

Of the 55 residents spoken to, only two, who had gotten their information through the nonprofit, Pearl Riverkeeper, had heard about the dam, about potential flooding in their neighborhood or about recent updates on the One Lake Project.

The dam proposal is just the latest in the One Lake Project, a controversial initiative to curb Pearl River flooding in Jackson by creating a lake and reservoir downstream from the Ross Barnett

Reservoir. The Project will be mainly funded by federal grants and local taxes and constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, but the project is locally sponsored by The Rankin-Hinds Pearl River Flood and Drainage Control District, which hails the project's potential to bring economic opportunity, and open up new real estate and recreational venues to the area along the river.

After decades of debate, One Lake is poised to become a reality. The Corps released its most recent iteration of the plan, the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, on June 7, with four alternatives.

While the Corps did not state its chosen plan yet and will not officially choose until sometime after this past week, it labeled Alternative D as the "National Economic Development Plan," or the plan that maximizes net economic benefit.

Alternative D would include dredging and damming the Pearl River, leading to the induced flooding that the Corps, in its DEIS, said would impact more than 200 structures.

In its main report, the Corps identified approximately 52 structures that would flood so severely — with first floor flooding of 5 inches or more — that it would offer owners voluntary buyouts, elevation or floodproofing. The Corps will make a final decision on which alternative to use in December.

But the project hasn't been all smooth sailing. In July, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife [ruling](#) to protect the Pearl River Map Turtle under the Endangered Species Act put a potential delay in place for One Lake. The Pearl River Map Turtle is a freshwater [turtle](#) indigenous to the Pearl River. The dam could still move forward, but the Corps would have to consult U.S. Fish and Wildlife before starting construction on the river.

To stay or to go? South Jackson neighborhood debates

For Day, an extra 5 inches of water on top of the flooding she already gets, would make her property uninhabitable. The handmade sandbags, barely sufficient to hold back the deluge as is, would be unable to withstand it.

For years, Day said, she has worked hard to make her house payments, never missed one, never been late.

"For them people to intentionally flood this property," she said, her eyes brimming with tears, "that's not right. And we might not be rich people, but we matter."

Day doesn't know what she would do if induced flooding came to her house — maybe buy a mobile home or move to Raymond or Dallas with their children.

“We have been here for so long,” she said.

Day’s street is mostly older folks, people who, like Day, have lived in the neighborhood for years.

The lady across the street, Day said, pointing at a blue house with a cast stone fountain, her husband had a heart attack and died, so she lives alone.

The woman in another house, gray with a white door, across the road from Day, “She is by herself,” Day said.

“This man over here has Parkinson's,” Day said, motioning down the road to another house. “He has a caregiver that stays over there with him.”

The house next door to Day and Christopher's, home of Angela Garner, is surrounded by a red brick wall, another form of makeshift flood protection. The wall was [constructed after the 1979 “Easter floods”](#) that put most of Jackson, even the Coliseum, under water.

“Her husband,” Garner said, nodding at the blue house across the street, “came in [on a boat] and just kind of salvaged the people that were living here.”

The wall hasn’t done much in recent years. Like Day, Garner has water to her door when it rains.

Garner said she would stay in her home, even if the floods increase and even if she is one of the homes to which developers offer a buyout. After everything she has put into the house, it just wouldn’t be worth it.

“Will I be the only one here on the street? I don't know,” she said, sitting on the brick wall looking across the street at her neighbors. “I mean, I work so hard.”

Transparency troubles

The Corps held two in-person meetings in Jackson in July and one virtual public meeting in June about the alternatives. The 60-day public comment period closed Aug. 6. Garner and a neighbor, advised about the proposed dam by Pearl Riverkeeper, attended one of the public meetings.

One of the slides at the meeting mentioned the “structural flooding inducements” in economically disadvantaged areas that would occur in neighborhoods like Garner’s, which the Corps refers to as “environmental justice (EJ) areas of concern.”

“We want to make sure everyone’s involved and make sure we aren’t targeting cheap land to build the project,” said Brandon Davis, environmental planning chief for the Corps, at the July 10 in-person public [meeting](#). “We’re making sure everyone’s involved, everyone’s included.”

The specific impacts of the flooding and proposed buyouts and floodproofing, however, were not spelled out on the slides, leaving even those who attended the meetings largely in the dark about the consequences of adopting Alternative D.

Tom Shaw, project management chief for the Corps, echoed Davis' sentiments in an interview with the Clarion Ledger. He said that the Corps is "working with those EJ communities that are identified in the study area trying to get some feedback." He said that there would be more meetings in the impacted communities in the next few months if Alternative D is approved.

In the July 10 public meeting, Davis said there would be two to three meetings in the coming months to give "environmental justice" communities the opportunity to ask more questions and "understand about the project and how it's going to benefit them."

Notably, those meetings would take place after the public comment period is over.

Though present in the June 27 virtual [meeting](#), a slide titled "areas of consideration for downstream impacts" was missing in the July public [meetings](#). Shaw said the Corps removed the slide, the only part of the presentation with a map illustrating geographic areas in Jackson that would receive downstream induced flooding, to eliminate duplication, shorten the slideshow and "provide additional clarification." The Corps, he said, replaced the slide "areas of consideration for downstream impacts" with a slide showing "potential influence area" across county lines all the way to Lawrence, Mississippi.

Although induced flooding from the dam would cover an area of 38,000 acres containing around 220 structures, the Corps estimates that only 52 structures would be impacted enough to receive offers like elevation plans for putting homes on stilts or floodproofing. It was unable to provide the addresses of any of those properties because further study of the floodplain is needed to narrow down specific points.

Keith W. Turner, attorney for The Rankin-Hinds Pearl River Flood and Drainage Control District, said the area marked for induced flooding on the map is an estimate and "worst case scenario," adding that the board thinks the Corps overestimates negative impact.

Of the 55 residents the Clarion Ledger spoke with in Byram, South Jackson and Richland, none had heard from developers, or anyone involved with the One Lake Project and only two, Garner and her neighbor, notified by Pearl Riverkeeper, had heard about the induced flooding at all.

"The outreach to the community that is actually getting flooded that could have induced flooding currently hasn't happened at all," said Abby Braman, executive director of Pearl Riverkeeper, which opposes Alternative D. "If we don't have a good knowledge of what's going on, the negative and the positive effects of the project, then there's no way for us to make an educated decision about whether the project is appropriate or not."

‘We’d be destitute’: Richland residents wonder where they will go

The DEIS main report [states](#) that Alternative D “may cause high, adverse disproportionate impacts to low-income residents who cannot afford the costs associated with elevation” and one option “may be available which involves offering voluntary buyouts to homeowners unable to participate in the elevation program due to high financial burdens.”

Wanda St. Germain Bischof, who lives in a trailer park neighborhood in Richland marked on the flood map, already gets flooding every time it rains. She has video cameras and a large flashlight trained on the gully by her property so she can predict how bad it will overflow. With water regularly up to the deck on her trailer home, Bischof said 5 more inches of water would flood out the inside.

During a flood last year, she watched her neighbor’s car get totaled in his driveway from the water. Since then, she has moved all of her cars to the top of the road where elevation is higher every time it rains.

While the lot she lives on may be worth \$19,000, the trailer is over 40 years old.

“They’re not going to give us nothing for that,” she said.

A potential buyout for her trailer and property from developers, she added, would not cover new land, utilities and a house.

“Where are we gonna go?” she said. “We’d be destitute. This is everything.”

Bischof, who works cleaning homes for the elderly and is semi-retired, spent all of her retirement money on the trailer, paying it off and fixing it up so she could die in it. She and her husband have lived in the trailer for the past 35 years and raised their two kids from birth in it.

“It may be a beat up trailer, but it’s my home and it’s our home,” she said.

A couple of streets over from Bischof, Dot Roberson also gets flash flooding in her yard. One time, it was so bad that she had to wade through her yard to get to her car, the water splashing halfway up her legs.

Roberson said buying flood insurance wouldn’t be an option for her and a lot of her neighbors. Her insurance company quoted her around \$1,500 a year for flood insurance.

“I can’t afford that,” she said. “The biggest portion of people here are like me. I’m a widow. I’m 77 years old, retired, living off of Social Security, alone.”

Walking around her front yard, she points out two large sinkholes from the last time it rained.

“They should talk to the people that it's going to impact,” she said. “Think about what it's going to do to them.”

Most of the flood protection the One Lake Project seeks to put in place would go to wealthier areas of Jackson, Braman said, and worse, the economic development plan and recreational area around the river, one of the project's biggest benefits, would serve the same well-to-do areas.

The potential price of upstream affluence and flood mitigation would be paid downstream by some of Jackson metro's poorest neighborhoods, affecting people such as Day or Garner, Bischof or Roberson.

“It would really impact us very badly if they do this,” Roberson said, pausing to find the right words. “I mean they'd just about wash us out.”

This is an enterprise piece I pitched and wrote for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution while working the weekend shift following breaking news of a meteorite landing in Georgia. It was [published](#) online on June 29, 2025 and on the front page on June 30, 2025.

Meteorite hunters chase treasures after fireball streaks across Georgia

It only took Ed Albin a few steps Sunday to spot it as he wandered onto an empty construction site in Henry County about 45 minutes southeast of Atlanta.

“Oh, my God,” he said, crouching down to take a look at his find, “Oh, my God.”

Perched on the dirt like it just fell from the sky isn’t just any old rock. It’s a chunk of the Georgia fireball that blazed across the sky Thursday afternoon and [disintegrated](#) 27 miles above West Forest on its way southeast.

In a floppy sun hat and pink shirt, Albin tests the meteorite with a rare earth magnet attached to a metal pole. It gives a faint hint of magnetic attraction, its nickel iron flecks pulling it toward the magnet — proof of its descent from outer space.

Another hunter, Sonny Clary, runs over to take a look.

“Millions of years flying in outer space,” he said, in awe. “How cool is that?”

Most people would easily mistake a meteorite for an average black rock. Maybe that’s what makes them special. They’re cosmic treasures hidden in plain sight.

Hundreds of meteorite hunters have descended on Georgia. They flew in from across the country, packing their bags and abandoning their plans and lives back home for a chance to find a stone from the stars.

Many of them have met before, a niche group that hunts alongside each other each time a meteor — which when it hits the ground becomes a meteorite — comes to Earth. Some are locals or first-time hunters.

But all are united in one goal with equal opportunity at achieving it.

And all of them remember the moment they heard that heart-stopping news: A fireball has landed in Georgia.

Meteorite hunting is both a hobby and a business. Oftentimes, finds in the field pay for expensive plane tickets and travel to get to remote locations — like this Sunday, when hunters scavenged

through the “hot spot,” a field marked for construction behind a home development in McDonough.

They can turn quite the profit. Meteorites found from the fireball so far are going for roughly \$100 per gram.

The last time a meteor landed in Georgia, in 2022 near Junction city, pieces went for \$400 per gram.

Most scientists wait to receive meteorites. They don’t hunt alongside the hunters that chase them around the country. But Ed Albin is different. Though he is an associate professor of space and earth sciences for American Public University and worked as a planetarium astronomer for the Fernbank Museum for 27 years before retirement, as he puts it, he’s “not a stuffed shirt.” He hunts right alongside everyone else. And he’s in it for science. Every small piece of meteorite is enough for geochemical analysis and classification.

The meteorite he found Sunday morning, clocking in at 14.33 grams, could sell for upward of \$1,500. But Albin plans to hang on to it — he said it’s the “most beautiful space rock he’s ever collected to date.” He’s not a religious person, he said, but he did say a little prayer while driving to McDonough.

“I was saying, ‘Please, creator of the universe, help me find one of your marvelous stones,’” he said. “And he or she came through.”

He then wrapped the meteorite in a plastic case with a black frame and tucked it in his pocket.

Some of the world’s finest meteorite hunters flew into Georgia for the event. Steve Arnold, star of the documentary “Meteorite Men” on Science Channel, pulled up to McDonough on Sunday morning in his bright yellow truck. He started driving from his home in Arkansas a few hours after the fall, reaching the site at sunrise. He’s not sure how long he’ll stay. In 2003, he stayed in Chicago for 44 days after a fall; in 2008, he stayed for 28 days in Texas.

Meteor hunting is his livelihood, but he also owns a ghost tour business in Arkansas, he jokes “as far on the opposite end of the spectrum of the science of hunting meteorites.”

Though meteorite hunting is his career, he firmly believes that anyone can do it. A 9-year-old boy found one of the biggest chunks of the Georgia fireball to date on Saturday.

“If a 9-year-old can find one, anybody can find one,” he said.

He’s been handing out postcards around the neighborhood near the fall asking people to search their yards for meteorites.

“Most of the time, these end up going through your lawn mower,” Craig Zlimen, a top tier meteorite hunter who drove from Minnesota to Georgia on Thursday, said. “They end up going down a storm drain. They end up getting dropped in a cow pasture and stepped on. They end up getting run over on the roads. They get wet. There’s iron in them, so they rust and fall apart and they just disappear.”

It’s potentially thousands of dollars – and a small piece of outer space –that gets lost in a crash landing on Earth.

Steven Dixey, a bartender from Atlanta, made the first finds from the Georgia fireball just a couple of hours after the first reports of the meteor trickled in. Though he’d been collecting for a little over a decade, Thursday was his first real meteorite find.

“It was sheer luck,” he said.

He mailed some of his findings off to Arizona State University Saturday morning to be studied and classified.

For now, he’s not planning to continue the hunt.

“I had a lot of fun doing it, but I think I’m gonna leave some for more people to find,” he said.

Preston Allen and his son Jerron, 14, flew in from Utah on Friday. It’s their first time in Georgia.

“I saw a bunch of my friends going out there, and just kind of got that jolt of adrenaline, that FOMO that kind of hits,” Allen said. “It’s the first thing I thought about when I woke up.”

Jerron Allen had his first meteorite find on Saturday.

“He had a big smile on his face,” Allen said. “He was excited.”

There’s even a meteorite hunting dog. Her name is Piper. Her owner, Carl Dietrich, who came to Georgia from South Carolina, hunts for meteorites in the field while Piper enthusiastically greets other hunters and nibbles on the tall grass. He empties out chunks of meteorite he’s found from their storage place in a granola box.

Dietrich and Piper have been traveling around the country in his car to hunt meteorites since 2022. Dietrich even has a bed folded up in the back so they don’t spend too much on hotels. Plus, when he goes desert hunting, the bed in the car with air conditioning beats a hot stuffy tent every time.

Dietrich rescued Piper from the pound. She's a mutt, but he thinks she has some shepherd in her — a hunting dog through and through.

"She's there for emotional support," he said, laughing. "She has a blast. She loves seeing all the people, and she loves being outside, too."

He got into meteorite hunting after watching Arnold's show on Discovery Channel. When he was 18, he saw a fireball streaking through the sky, and the rest was history.

"I'm really grateful that I got into it," he said. "It's a blast, and it's definitely given me more of a sense of purpose."

Iliana Machiz and her husband, Ari Machiz, from Mableton, have enjoyed casual hunting since the 2022 Junction City fall, where they made their first finds. Ari Machiz, a school bus driver, had just finished his summer school shift on Thursday when the fireball streaked across the sky. The timing was perfect.

"I started because of him, and I look for them because of him, but I'm not gonna deny that you get adrenaline trying to find them," Iliana said, holding an umbrella to protect herself from the sun while hunting through the field. "It really feels like egg hunts for adults."

It's not about keeping the meteorites, she said, it's about the chase. Still, she is excited by Albin's morning find.

"I was telling him, 'You found a beautiful one,'" she said, laughing. "'Ninety-nine percent of me is so happy for you, but my human nature says 'I wish it was me.'"

This is an investigative story I wrote for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. It was published online and in print on March 20, 2025. Leading up to the investigation, I also published multiple breaking news [stories](#) following the Gilmer County High School [case](#).

Georgia AI-generated child pornography case spurs legislative action

A state bill [introduced](#) during this year's legislative session seeks to punish distribution of AI-generated sexually explicit images of children with up to 15 years in prison, whether or not the child exists.

[Senate Bill 9](#) comes on the heels of similar bills in legislatures across the country to combat a crime getting attention: AI-created child pornography. Laws specifically aimed at curbing AI child deepfakes sailed through legislatures, [including](#) most recently in California and Tennessee. In Georgia, because the bill has bipartisan support, it is expected to pass. The legislation passed Wednesday without dissent out of the House Technology and Infrastructure Innovation Committee to the House Rules Committee.

Sen. Emanuel Jones, D-Decatur, who co-sponsored the bill, said the legislation was created to prevent and deter AI crime being seen across the country.

Within weeks, the issue had come home to Georgia with the arrest of Ronald Richardson, a Pepsi vendor, who took advantage of his access to Gilmer County High School so he could refill soda machines to take photos of girls he encountered, authorities say. He convinced other girls to share with him photos and videos of themselves, Gilmer County sheriff's officials said. What the girls did not know is that he would allegedly use AI to convert their photos to child pornography that he circulated via the internet. Richardson was charged in January with multiple counts of sexual exploitation for possessing child pornography.

Richardson's arrest is believed to be the first Georgia case of AI-created child pornography. The arrest confirms for Jones that a new law is needed specifically for this type of activity. "There's already been one case and it's just a matter of time before others. We need to get ahead of it," he said.

In December, one of the girls reported to the school's resource officer that Richardson had asked her for videos.

Parents of eight alleged female victims filed a lawsuit against Richardson and Pepsi on behalf of their children, who ranged from ages 12 to 17 at the time they say they were victimized.

The investigation began after a student told the school resource officer that she would talk regularly to Richardson when he was at the school and had done so for approximately a year. Richardson had often given her free soft drinks, but this was the first time she had been asked to send him pictures, according to the Gilmer County Sheriff's incident report.

Gilmer County High School demanded that Pepsi investigate and remove Richardson in September when students reported Richardson taking pictures of them as they walked past him loading the vending machines. Though temporarily removed, Richardson was reinstated to his route and serving the high school because Pepsi was "having difficulty finding other drivers in the area," according to the lawsuit.

After being reported again in December, Richardson was fired from the company and is currently in jail on multiple counts of sexual exploitation. He was not employed by the district but was given an access badge to freely enter the high school and middle school. Gilmer County Charter Schools Superintendent H. Brian Ridley declined to comment beyond the district's Jan. 29 [news release](#), which pledged to cooperate with police.

Gilmer County Sheriff Stacy Nicholson said there were many minors who were victims in the case.

"All of the sexually explicit (nude) photographs of the minor children that Richardson is alleged to have possessed are actually normal snapshots which he captured from various social media pages and then altered (or had altered) using AI to make the images appear nude," said Nicholson.

Richardson was denied bail. The case was referred to the DeKalb County District Attorney's Office, which agreed to serve as the prosecuting office on Feb. 5.

Sen. John Albers, R-Roswell, chaired the Senate Study Committee on Artificial Intelligence and also co-sponsored SB 9.

"SB 9 is designed to modernize and strengthen the legal provisions concerning obscenity and the use of emerging technologies in criminal activities, thereby offering better protection to the citizens of Georgia from evolving threats and inappropriate materials," Albers said in a statement to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

At the federal level, legislators are also attempting to curb the issue of AI child pornography. The U.S. Senate unanimously [passed](#) the Take It Down Act on Feb. 13, which would criminalize "revenge porn," the distribution of nonconsensual sexually explicit images and videos to

humiliate or retaliate against a victim. The act would also require technology companies to take down nonconsensual images within 48 hours of notice from a victim. The bill is co-sponsored by Ted Cruz, R-Texas, and Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn. First lady Melania Trump recently appeared at a Capitol Hill roundtable and urged lawmakers to pass the bill.

Thomas Kadri, an assistant professor at the University of Georgia School of Law, said there are currently very few, if any, legal requirements for platforms to remove sexual deepfakes or ways for users to ask for their removal.

Beyond addressing the issue criminally, Kadri said, there is also potential for states like Georgia to create laws around civil liability such as giving victims the right to sue their perpetrators for AI deepfake creation and distribution.

This is a quick turn news story I pitched and wrote for Politico. It was [published](#) online on the Politico PRO website on July 2, 2024.

California considers tough new sexual assault penalty

SACRAMENTO, California — California is taking a second look at a proposal to crack down on sexual assault after it stalled last year.

The Assembly Public Safety Committee on Tuesday will consider whether to classify as a violent felony the rape of an intoxicated person where the defendant purposely caused the victim's intoxication in order to assault them — making it a “strike” under the state's Three Strikes Law. It is among a number of bills swinging right on criminal justice in the state as public favor turns toward a harsher stance on crime.

The backstory: The bill sailed through the state Senate last year on a unanimous vote but stalled in the Assembly. Democratic State Sen. Marie Alvarado-Gil said she shelved [Senate Bill 268](#) last year before its public safety hearing after then-Chair Reggie Jones-Sawyer informed her it would likely die in committee.

But a series of leadership changes could make this year an entirely different story. Jones-Sawyer, a criminal justice reform advocate, was removed as committee chair in November after facing backlash for stalling a hearing on a proposal to make child sex trafficking a strike offense. Assemblymember Robert Rivas replaced him with Assemblymember Kevin McCarty, who is running for mayor of Sacramento and has a more moderate stance on public safety policy.

“We are bringing the bill back with hopes that with fresh eyes, we would be able to be successful in passing the bill through that Assembly committee,” Alvarado-Gil said.

The arguments: Jonathan Raven, of the California District Attorneys Association, said he is “cautiously optimistic” that McCarty and the committee will back the bill, adding “it seems to be common sense in terms of ensuring there's some consistency to how our laws are applied.”

But criminal justice advocates are opposed, arguing that incarcerating people for longer periods of time is not the solution. “The money needs to be spent on things that will stop that cycle,” said Margo George with California Public Defenders Association.

Key context: For sexual assault crimes in particular, the state has trended toward harsher penalties after implementing the One Strike Law in 1994, which enhances prison sentences for sex crimes committed under aggravating circumstances.

Last year, the Legislature ultimately passed Republican state Sen. Shannon Grove's [Senate Bill 14](#) that made child sex trafficking a strike offense, but not without a fight. Though it passed unanimously in the Senate, it was voted down in the Assembly Public Safety Committee. It was only after [Gov. Gavin Newsom decried the decision](#) that the Assembly advanced the bill. "Strengthening penalties surrounding sexual assault and protecting our most vulnerable members of society shouldn't be complicated," Grove, who co-authored SB 268 with Alvarado-Gil, said in a statement.

This is a feature I pitched and wrote while interning for the Clarion Ledger and USA Today Network in Jackson, Mississippi. It was published [online](#) on July 10, 2024 and was also an A1 Sunday article in print.

Has JTRAN really improved since its March relaunch? We rode buses to find out

When Adgo Werte and Marcus Carson got to their bus stops at 7 a.m. on June 26, they didn't expect to wait an hour to get on the bus to work. But they also weren't surprised. Both JTRAN regulars, Werte and Carson are all too familiar with missing buses and late arrivals.

JTRAN, historically plagued with broken down buses and missed stops, got a much-needed update in March, receiving \$14 million in grants for new buses, a new app and redesigned bus routes.

"We now look like any city in the United States of America," Jackson's Deputy Director of Transportation Christine Welch said at a press conference for the JTRAN relaunch in March.

But Jackson's bus goers know that despite the city's attempt at reform, JTRAN still needs work. In fact, four months post revamp, some say it's gotten even worse. Compared to its peers in other Southern cities such as Mobile and Little Rock, JTRAN also appears to lag behind in technology and services.

JTRAN launched 12 redesigned bus routes on March 4, complete with new names, new bus numbers and new routing. Welch said the restructured routes were intended to put more bus lines in South Jackson, where ridership has increased in the past 15 years, and to create more bus connections outside of Union Station.

"The objective with the new system is that you can go to every major medical facility and major shopping areas," she added.

Katina Barner, who rides the bus to and from work, said the new route for her bus added ten minutes to her commute, and more when the bus is late.

"They [were] slower when the new routes came in," she said.

The March reroutes added an hour to Carson's daily commute. Sometimes, he said, the bus skips his stop. During the recent driver strikes in April when JTRAN employees called a "sick-out," Carson would regularly come into work late because his bus didn't show up on time or at all.

Welch said in a July 2 interview with The Clarion-Ledger bus users experiencing delays or increased commute times are incorrectly using the system.

“I don't know if everybody fully understands that you don't have to come to Union Station depending on where you're going,” she said. “The buses are interlocking where you just need to know where the transfer points are.”

Riders suggest the problem lies with JTRAN, not them. Werte experienced skipped stops while using the new JTRAN app, which provides maps of the bus routes.

“Yesterday, on this app there [were] so many stops [shown], but the bus passed some of the stops, so it didn't follow this app,” he said. “The stops that they actually use are totally different.”

Another JTRAN rider, Tedra Sanders, who has been riding JTRAN to and from work for the past five years agreed, adding that the bus has driven straight past her even when she was at the bus stop.

“It just kept going, and I was mad,” she said. She had to wait another hour for the next bus to come.

Waiting for the bus to come for long periods of time is hard on any day, but it is especially difficult in extreme weather conditions.

Mary Garland, who has been taking the bus for the past three months because she is vision impaired and unable to drive, said the system needs more shelters and shade.

“Many of the stations have no covering and it gets really hot out there,” she said.

Freda Germany, who has been taking the bus for the past 24 years and uses a wheelchair, said she's gotten soaking wet waiting for the bus in the rain.

Welch said JTRAN does not have any plans to add more bus shelters.

“There's no way feasible that we can do that,” she said. “That's maintenance. There's a lot of cost beyond just installing it on the streets.”

Germany and Werte also said that some of the fare boxes on the buses are broken, making it difficult to pay. JTRAN does not offer credit card or Apple Pay options, but does allow riders to pay with coin and cash or with a bus pass. One-way and day passes are available on board buses, but in order to purchase weekly or monthly passes, customers must go in person to the JTRAN Main Office or JTRAN Customer Service Office.

For those without access to a car, that means spending money on bus fare to purchase a bus pass. Further complicating matters, the JTRAN main office is only open during working hours on weekdays. The Union Station office offers service on one weekend day. The passes, even if bought in person at the offices, are only available in exchange for cash with no bills over \$20. These policies put commute riders in a bind, and causes some to forego a more economical bulk

ride pass in favor of purchasing a daily one-day pass or paying cash every time they board the bus.

Maria O'Quinn, who has been taking JTRAN for five years, said it was an "inconvenience" to have to go in person to get a bus pass at the offices.

Welch said JTRAN had previously tried mailing cards to customers, but that it caused confusion and people could not track their packages.

Jackson's public transit system falls behind even when compared to similarly sized cities across the South. When asked about broken fare boxes and lack of contactless payment options, Welch said JTRAN's bus fleet was purchased in 2016 but that new options were being explored for an upcoming purchase in the next 12 months.

As of right now, however, bus systems in Memphis, Little Rock, Birmingham, Mobile and Monroe all offer touchless apps that allow riders to pay without cash and purchase tickets ahead of time.

Memphis last purchased its fleet a couple of months ago. Mobile purchased buses in 2021 and the years following. Monroe purchased buses in 2019, 2020 and 2021. Birmingham was unable to provide an exact year and said they use a staggered approach to update or replace vehicles depending on each individual bus's lifecycle. Little Rock has 15 buses from 2015 and 29 buses ranging from 2018-2022.

Like Jackson, Mobile, Monroe and Birmingham offer service only six days a week with no buses running on Sundays. Little Rock and Memphis offer service seven days a week.

All bus stops in Birmingham offer overhangs and Monroe, Little Rock and Memphis are currently working on installing more shelters.

For Jackson residents, JTRAN continues to be the only public transportation option in the city.

"I have no transportation, and JTRAN is the public bus," Germany said, sitting in the front of a No. 15 bus headed for Tougaloo. "It's the only transportation I've got."