

## The Decline of Transit and How It Can Be Restored

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### The Decline of Transit<sup>1</sup>

The decline of transit in the United States is a familiar story, but the emphasis has often been misplaced. As cars became ever more common after the Second World War, riders deserted the increasingly elderly and dilapidated streetcars. Transit ridership peaked during the war, when riders had few alternatives due to rationing, but once war was over, auto ownership exploded. Within a decade, transit ridership had dropped precipitously, and governments had a choice to make.

Despite the radically changed circumstances, most governments had no interest in taking the then-radical step of subsidizing transit. Before the Second World War, transit companies were perceived by the public and political leaders as profitable monopolies owned by rapacious financiers. While their profitability was greatly exaggerated—many were in bankruptcy as early as the 1920s—they were about as beloved as cable companies or airlines are today, and the idea of subsidizing them was anathema. Instead, transit companies or even publicly owned transit agencies continually cut service in a vain attempt to balance their budgets. The service cuts further drove riders, and hence revenue, away, producing a vicious circle. Within twenty years, the once-thriving American urban transit systems had dwindled to a skeletal network, serving almost exclusively people who had no alternative.

After the Urban Mass Transportation Act was passed in 1964, the federal government, which had theretofore been subsidizing 90% of the cost of expressways, would subsidize transit infrastructure as well. The analogy was imperfect: unlike highways, transit infrastructure is largely useless without funding

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<sup>1</sup> For greater detail, consult my article “Why Did America Give Up on Mass Transit?” (<http://www.citylab.com/transportation/2018/08/how-america-killed-transit/568825/>)

for operations as well. After decades of service cuts, there was no strong connecting network of local transit to feed the expensive new rail systems. This severely hampered their success, as no rail line can reach capacity through walk-in traffic in a suburban area, or through park-and-ride. This era began the serious capital bias in transit funding that persists today. Governments, eagerly embracing the available federal dollars, are willing to fund multi-billion-dollar capital projects, most frequently light rail, but they are uninterested in providing a few million dollars a year of funding to run the service needed to make them work.

The problem with these rail systems is not that they are inherently without value; it is instead that the cart has been put before the horse. Expensive rail projects, because they can receive ample federal support and because they are linked with the generation of economic development, are an irresistible draw for local governments and transit agencies. However, these systems are too often being built and planned in isolation, instead of as part of a broader network.

It is impossible to build a rail system that can be within walking distance of all the origins and destinations in a modern metropolitan area. An effective rail transit system must be embedded within a broader transit network that is useful for people making all types of trips, not simply peak period trips to and from an office downtown.

### **Toronto: A Counter-Example**

Toronto represents an alternative course from that of most American transit systems. In the 1950s and 60s, instead of dramatically cutting its local transit service, it opted to provide modest subsidies, so that service could be expanded instead, even in low-density new suburbs. Today, Toronto is served by a grid of bus routes about a mile apart that operate at least every ten minutes all day, every day, and that operate twenty-four hours a day. This level of transit service is unprecedented in postwar suburbs, but it works.

Consider the bus on Finch Avenue, for example. Finch is a fairly typical arterial road, mostly lined with the backyard fences of suburban houses, along with some strip malls and apartment buildings. The route serves 44,000 riders a day, which makes it one of the busiest bus routes in North America—busier than all but a handful of routes in New York City. And this is in an area about as dense as Los Angeles and a third less dense than Santa Ana.

The clear conclusion is that service drives demand. If the bus on Finch ran once an hour, as commonly used density formulae would suggest, its ridership would almost certainly be barely a few hundred a day. Without investing in service improvements up front, the demand that would justify service improvements will never materialize.

These busy bus routes in turn feed the subway network, which is the busiest per mile in North America because it is not reliant on exclusively walk-in or drive-in traffic, which are inherently limited by the population density within walking distance and by the size of parking lots, respectively.

A more recent example of service driving demand is Brampton, a large, fast-growing suburb of Toronto. Its density is less than half that of Santa Ana, but it has recently invested in building out a grid network of frequent buses. The results are plain: 31.2 million riders per year in a city of 600,000, up from 23 million in 2015. All of Orange County (population 3.1 million) has only 46 million transit riders per year.

Orange County itself has also been investing in service improvements to some of its buses, and it has patently paid off. The county's bus system as a whole suffered a 2.9% year-on-year decline, but routes where service improvements were made enjoyed a 10.4% ridership increase. Likewise, Phoenix and Seattle have recently bucked the national ridership decline trends through improvements to their basic bus network.

These types of operational improvements are inexpensive, when compared with big capital projects. They cost in the millions, unlike the billions required for large rail projects, and they cover the entire urban area, not simply a few corridors.

However, because they require consistent annual outlays and are not supported by federal grants, many municipalities have become reluctant to undertake them.

### Pillars of Good Transit Service

What does good local transit service look like? Research has shown that when buses come about every 12 to 15 minutes or more, riders will not need to consult a schedule and won't mind waiting for a connection, which greatly enhances ridership. Even if that is unattainable, less frequent service running on a consistent clockface<sup>2</sup> schedule can produce considerable ridership gains. Buses must also allow people to make trips that are not just 9 to 5—everybody should be within a reasonable distance of a route that runs seven days a week, and nobody wants to feel like they will have to leave a restaurant at 8:30 pm to catch the last bus. Furthermore, riders should not be penalized with extra fares for making transfers, even between modes. Transfers make a true network possible, and a transfer is an inconvenience—riders shouldn't have to pay more for it.

In large metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, local buses are not fast enough to make true crosstown transit travel viable. The typical solution to this problem is rail infrastructure, but light rail is often not so much faster than local bus service, while traditional subways are very expensive. There is another alternative: regional rail.

In many other countries, a service like Metrolink in Los Angeles would not be a parking shuttle for commuters to downtown. Instead, it would be the rail backbone for the region's transit service. Paris' RER and the S-Bahn systems in German-speaking cities are much more like subways than American commuter rail—they come every ten or twenty minutes all day, and they have the same fares with free transfers to local bus service. Because their trains operate on tracks that have already existed for a century, the cost of construction is a tiny fraction of the cost of building a subway.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, every hour, on the hour and on the half-hour.

Closer to home, and an especially impressive example of low-cost rail transit, is Ottawa's O-Train, which delivered an 8-kilometre rail line with five stations and trains every fifteen minutes all day for only C\$21 million—less than the cost of a kilometre of on-street LRT.<sup>3</sup>

The upshot is that cities much smaller than Los Angeles can effectively have subway networks that are hundreds of miles in length. There are some changes in operating practices and federal rail regulations that would be required, but the cost of operating trains more frequently is minuscule by the standards of rapid transit. In such a system, a rider can take a frequent local bus from near their home to the rail station, travel quickly across town by rail, and then take a bus to their final destination. A system with a closely integrated network of frequent local buses and rail rapid transit enables both the speed necessary to make transit competitive on long trips, and the local service needed to make transit accessible to the entire population. Once again, focusing on better operations is often a better approach than big capital projects.

## Conclusion

The solutions are achievable and surprisingly affordable. Firstly, local transit agencies should develop plans to improve their local services, including clear service standards so that most of the region is within a reasonable distance of a frequent, all-day bus service. Secondly, the federal government should require that all funded capital projects have minimum operating standards, both for the rail lines themselves and for the feeding bus network. There should be no more light rail lines costing hundreds of millions that only provide a couple of trips per hour, and there should be no expensive rail projects when the surrounding bus network is nearly

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, see "Why Public Transportation Works Better Outside the U.S." (<https://www.citylab.com/transportation/2018/10/while-america-suffocated-transit-other-countries-embraced-it/572167/>) and "The O-Train Model: Affordable Rail Transit for North America" (<http://transitfutures.blogspot.com/2014/04/the-o-train-model-affordable-rail.html>)

nonexistent. Thirdly, there should be a policy for the development of rapid transit on existing rail corridors, including reform of federal rail regulations to enable the use of modern, off-the-shelf rail vehicles.

The objective is not to completely replace the automobile. That is impossible, as the automobile has numerous advantages that cannot be replicated. The objective is to provide people with genuine choices. People who cannot or choose not to drive should not be imprisoned in their homes in the evening or on Sunday because the bus isn't running. Our mostly unexpandable roads shouldn't be crowded with people who would use transit if it were a viable alternative. People shouldn't feel the need to buy their children cars as soon as they turn sixteen. People should not have to fear drunk drivers on the streets because there is no other way to get home from the bar at night. Providing such a real choice to Americans needn't cost billions and take decades. It's as simple as running the buses we already have more often, so people can travel when they want, to where they want.