



Transit Watch: Public Transit in Crisis



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The Future of American Public Transit Depends On Congress

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At this time last year, tens of millions of Americans were riding subways, busses, trains and street cars for their daily commutes, quietly paying the required fare in both directions. But in the dumpster-fire year of 2020, in which COVID-19 upended how we live, that routine now seems inconceivable, at least until a vaccine is widely available.

But the budgets of major transit systems may not be able to hold out that long. As COVID-19 has forced people to avoid crowds and work from home, transit hubs across the country have seen their profits from ridership fares tank. Rail ridership in Washington, D.C. has plummeted 86% since 2019; daily ridership on New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) subways is down 67 to 72%; in Boston, subway ridership is only a quarter of what it was pre-pandemic; and in the San Francisco Bay Area, mass transit ridership through Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) is 88% below its baseline.

These declines have fueled extreme budget shortfalls, forcing transit authorities to slash routes and delay scheduled expansions - decisions that, experts say, could impair mass transit for the next decade. A transit system with fewer, slower routes attracts fewer riders, and therefore earns less revenue in fares, which means there's less money to maintain infrastructure. The result is a negative feedback loop in which the bona fide efforts to save transit systems - cost-cutting measures - ultimately fuel their downfall.

"When you cut routes entirely, you are losing ridership there. When you cut weekend service, you are losing ridership there. When you operate less frequently, fewer people will use transit, simply because you've made it less convenient, and they're going to start looking for other choices," says Christof Spieler, a senior lecturer of urban transportation at Rice University and the author of *Trains, Buses, People: An Opinionated Atlas of US Transit*.

And when mass transit systems flounder, it has a nationwide ripple effect, exacerbating inequality, hindering infrastructure maintenance, and slowing the economic recovery in both the cities where mass transit is ubiquitous and across the national economy at large.

It seems likely that Congress will soon act to support the struggling sector, at least partially. The bipartisan Emergency Coronavirus Relief Act of 2020, unveiled Monday, includes \$15 billion in funding for transit systems, but that may be barebones. The New York MTA alone is requesting \$12 billion. Meanwhile, the WMATA in D.C.'s budget shortfall already exceeds \$450 million.

New York's MTA threatened it may be forced to cut subway services by 40% if it doesn't receive a significant stream of federal aid soon. (On Wednesday, the agency's board approved a budget that delays these drastic measures, for now, and instead settled on fare increases and service reductions for the Long Island Rail Road to mitigate 2021 budget shortfalls. But it indicated it is still deeply in the red.)

Similarly, Washington, D.C. has floated a proposal that would eliminate weekend train service entirely, allow certain trains to run only every 30 minutes on weekdays, and shut the system down at 9 p.m. Monday through Friday. The proposal also includes cutting more than 2,000 positions, which would pose further challenges to the Authority's post-pandemic success. "When you want to bring service back, that means you have to find new people to fill those slots. You have to train those people. That's not easy," says Spieler. "Transit service isn't like some dial you can easily turn down and turn back up again, logistically ramping up service can actually be quite difficult."

While the pandemic is temporary, its effects on mass transit ridership and transportation finances may not be. "All of those changes tend to be long lasting," Spieler says about riders' responses to budget cuts. "If somebody is forced into buying a car because transit no longer meets their needs, they're going to hang on to that car, even if you bring the service back."

If mass transit stumbles, there's a national ripple effect.

If big transit hubs are forced to cut routes or service, millions of people will be inconvenienced. But the impact will fall disproportionately on low-income Americans, who rely on public transit more often than their richer, whiter peers. Those on the bottom-rung of the income ladder tend to have the poorest access to alternate forms of transportation like personal cars, taxis, and ride shares, like Uber or Lyft, due to budget constraints; are more likely to be essential workers who do not have the option of telecommuting; and live further from the places they need to get to - such as jobs and grocery stores.

"Transit ridership has always been disproportionately low-income, non-white riders, immigrant riders," says Evelyn Blumenberg, an urban planning professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. "That composition is even more disproportionately poor, non-white, and immigrants during the pandemic."

It's a problem I understand on a somewhat personal level. While I have been fortunate to work from home since March, I don't own a car, like nearly 40% of my my Washington, D.C. peers. Buying or leasing one is cost prohibitive: even if I could swing the car note, parking at my apartment complex would cost me about \$200 per month on top of the parking fees at every destination I drove it to. These costs, of course, are on top of gas, insurance and maintenance. Walking isn't much of a solution either: it would take me two and half hours each day to commute to work by foot.

Additionally, scaling down mass transit systems in major cities would also pose logistical challenges for people who don't even use them. If a sizable chunk of the population who depends on reliable mass transit suddenly purchased cars or relied more heavily on ride-share services, roads and interstates would struggle to handle that influx once more people start working out of office buildings again. "To build a highway that moves as many people as a subway, you would need about a 20-lane highway," says Marlon Boarnet, a transportation expert and public policy professor at University of Southern California. "The math is at some level just unforgiving. You literally run out of land."

Beyond the logistical consequences, there are major economic ones too. "If we cut back weekend service, if we cut back evening service, you are severely impacting job opportunities, opportunities to practice recreation, shop, and anything you would travel for, for a group of persons for whom transit has been part of a social safety net," says Boarnet. "Most of our highly productive cities that are driving our economy cannot operate their transportation system or their economy in an automobile-only setting."

Is transit too important to fail?

As cities and states struggle with their own budget shortfalls, most experts agree it's up to the federal government to step in to sustain mass transit now.

Early in the pandemic, Congress did help with transit systems' budget shortfalls. The CARES Act, passed in late March, included \$25 billion in aid for transit agencies to respond to pandemic-related challenges. But as COVID-19 infections and deaths have relentlessly ticked up for eight months and counting, requiring some transit organizations to ramp up cleaning costs while also reducing their capacities, cities need much more.

President-elect Joe Biden's Nov. 3 victory offers some solace to transit system operators. Biden, who has long relied on Amtrak to get between Delaware and D.C., is a self-proclaimed public transportation enthusiast and may push for more aid. But some may find his selection of one of his 2020 Democratic challengers, Pete Buttigieg, for Transportation Secretary, less comforting. The former South Bend, Indiana mayor hails from an area with no subway system and a population of just 102,000. Politico's Adam Wren went as far as likening Buttigieg's ascension from managing Indiana's resident complaints about late-night train noises as a mayor to potentially leading the entire Federal Railroad Administration as Transportation Secretary to a "discarded plot line from NBC's 'Parks & Recreation.'"

If confirmed by the Senate, Buttigieg will have his work cut out for him. Stielor explains the stakes this way: "The question we're asking right now, is not 'Do we still need transit?' It's very obvious we still need transit. It's not 'Does transit make financial sense?' Because beyond this blip of COVID, this doesn't fundamentally change any of that math. It's not 'Can we afford to keep transit running?' There's no doubt we can afford it."

"The question is," he says, "'Do elected officials care enough about transit to keep it running?'"

For more information, please contact the California Transit Association at COVID-19@caltransit.org.