



Transit Watch: Public Transit in Crisis



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Public Transit Has to Come Back

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The pandemic shouldn't become a pretext for giving up on subways and buses.

When public-transportation agencies across the country saw a once-in-a-century drop in passengers as the coronavirus swept the nation, longtime transit doomsayers saw an opportunity. The pandemic, many prognosticators have suggested, foretells a permanent shift to more remote work and away from urban life. This sentiment undercut support for a transit bailout, which Congress has slow-walked during the second half of 2020.

For decades, public transportation in America has been a story of disinvestment and deferred maintenance, even in boom times. While driving has grown consistently across the U.S., transit ridership has flagged in recent years, giving evidence to critics that transit is unviable, and a waste of taxpayer dollars. Public officials feel free to slight public transportation in bizarre ways, as the Trump administration did this fall by refusing pandemic-safety grants to transit agencies in areas that it deemed "anarchist jurisdictions," including the transit-dependent and Democratic-led cities of New York City, Seattle, and Portland, Oregon.

But predictions that Zoom will make public transit obsolete ignore cities' long history of resiliency and the many advantages of living and working in them. In post-pandemic America, restoring transit will be as essential as restoring power lines, water mains, and roads after a natural or economic disaster. Transit investment can be a strategic public-works program - call it a WPA for the MTA - offering a chance to bolster the economy, create jobs, and reverse historical inequities. Expanding transit can help accommodate sustainable metropolitan growth, decrease sprawl, and address climate change and the racial injustice the nation faced long before the pandemic.

But transit can't accomplish any of these goals if the current crisis pushes it into a coma. When service is cut, workers are laid off, and buses and subways are shunted off to storage yards, the system can't be immediately switched back on. Intricate transit networks require thousands of trained, experienced personnel to operate, clean, maintain, and repair them. Once the human capital disappears, finding and training new workers can take months at best. As the system falls into disrepair from lack of maintenance and inspections, schedules are reduced and unexpected delays mount. By the time trains and buses are ready to run at full strength again, riders may have given up.

Public-transportation use is an economic indicator, and because millions of people have been working and studying at home over the past nine months, systems across the country - including most of the largest, which serve New York; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; Boston; and San Francisco - have threatened ruinous service cuts and staff layoffs to offset the budgetary impact of ridership drops and billions of dollars in lost local tax revenue.

The pandemic's full economic impact on transit has been delayed by the \$25 billion in CARES stimulus aid Congress approved in the spring. But the money, which helped agencies make payroll and keep buses and trains moving, is running out. And now officials are outlining service cuts and drafting layoff notices for thousands of transit workers - and struggling to convey the potential damage to the nation if more rescue aid fails to arrive quickly. The new relief package being discussed in Congress proposes another \$14 billion in aid to transit systems - far less than the \$32 billion needed, according to the American Public Transportation Association, to stave off disastrous cuts.

Slashing or eliminating the transit service that carried 34 million passengers a day in 2019 will cause a national mobility crisis in 2021, hobbling the economic recovery that a crisis-weary nation needs. Traffic is already returning to the nation's roads, and could easily reach pre-pandemic levels of gridlock unless checked. In cities across the country, streets will become impassable if even a fraction of former transit riders return to work and errands in cars. Shifting even one-fifth of New York City's 5 million daily subway riders into cars could place up to 1 million additional cars on saturated streets, doubling traffic in Manhattan.

A number of major companies have announced they won't return to offices until at least the summer of 2021, and some have plans for introducing permanent work-from-home options. But expectations that telecommuting will permanently replace office work are at best premature.

New York shows how cities bounce back. More than a century ago, as an influenza pandemic raged through the city during the summer and fall of 1918, New Yorkers took fewer trips on subways and buses. Once the outbreak was contained, ridership immediately rebounded, and 1919 saw 100 million more passengers than the year before. For the first time, 2 billion passenger trips occurred on the system in a single year.

Likewise, New York recovered from the 1970s fiscal crisis, despite having lost 11 percent of its population in a single decade. It also recovered faster than the rest of the nation following the 2008 economic meltdown. Fear following the 9/11 terrorist attacks prompted many to question whether the city's real-estate industry and Lower Manhattan in particular would ever recover. Many expected that workers would be unwilling to return to the area or work in skyscrapers. Those fears did not come to pass, as the city came roaring back. Mayors, elected officials, and transit agencies across the country should recognize this history and aggressively advocate for an in-person economy as the basis for the post-pandemic recovery, with a strong reliance on transit.

The long-term danger to cities isn't that downtown jobs will disappear; it's that commuters will have to get to any in-person job or destination in their own car. Cities don't have room for a car-driven recovery - which would also worsen the racial and economic disparities that millions of Americans protested against this summer. But allowing transit to implode would all but guarantee that outcome.

Transit agencies run on transit fares and sales taxes. Both revenue streams have evaporated. In New York City this fall, transit officials drafted plans to cut core subway and bus service by 40 percent - plans it hopes to avert with rapid action by the incoming Biden administration. The New York City region accounts for about 10 percent of the national economy. A mobility crisis in New York alone would be a national crisis and a drag on the country's recovery. A study by the NYU Rudin Center estimated that transit cuts could ripple throughout the regional economy, causing 450,000 lost jobs within two years, and a \$65 billion loss of GDP. Other transit-dependent cities would face their own traffic paralysis and the economic crisis that would accompany it.

Even if American drivers successfully slog through local traffic pinch points, where will they park all those cars when they arrive at their destinations?

The head of San Francisco's MTA is forecasting a "massive decrease" in service and preparing to lay off about one-fifth of the transit agency's workforce. Before the pandemic, San Francisco's Muni and BART accounted for more than 1.1 million trips, a volume far eclipsing the number of cars that drove into San Francisco over the Oakland-Bay Bridge and Golden Gate Bridge combined, and nearly triple the number of available parking spaces in San Francisco.

As alarming as the drop in people taking transit is, more remarkable is that so many traveled at all - a 70 percent drop in New York City ridership still amounts to 1.7 million people traveling on an average weekday. These riders aren't just dedicated or courageous; many of them have little choice. Essential workers who have worked through the pandemic are uniquely dependent on transit, and those fortunate enough to be able to work from home are dependent on this human infrastructure.

A study by New York City's comptroller in March determined that 55 percent of health-care workers, janitors, grocery clerks, child-care staff, bus and truck drivers, and other essential workers take buses, subways, or other trains to reach their jobs, and most of those people are foreign-born. The advocacy organization TransitCenter estimates that 2.8 million essential workers nationwide rode transit in 2018; in cities including Seattle and Miami, such workers made up about one-third of transit riders.

Transit dependence is only a more recent and visible demonstration of something that was true before the pandemic: The American Public Transportation Association estimates that 60 percent of transit trips are taken by people of color, and people with low income and few and poor transportation choices - who may not be able to afford the roughly \$9,282 it costs to own, operate, and maintain a car annually.

Even for residents who live far from the nearest bus stop, almost every item on the shelf of the local Walgreens or Walmart, like the food on the Olive Garden table and the bottle of Bud at the bar, and the Amazon package that made its way from Maine to Montana, is manufactured, stocked, packed, served, delivered, or handled by transit-dependent workers somewhere along a national supply chain. Not everybody rides transit, but everybody is dependent on those who do.

The American Public Transit Association estimates that more than 430,000 people work for transit agencies, and that every \$1 invested in public transit generates \$5 in economic returns in the long term, far more than road projects, which become congested and obsolete almost immediately after they open. APTA's analysis finds that \$1 billion invested in transit supports the equivalent of 50,000 jobs and produces \$642 million in tax revenue.

Nevertheless, Congress after Congress has been strikingly unwilling to recognize public transit as a matter of national importance. In 2019, Americans took nearly 9.9 billion transit trips, 10 times the number of passengers who flew last year on all of the nation's airlines combined. Yet the federal aid package under discussion proposes \$1 billion less for transit than for privately held airlines such as United, Delta, and American to move far fewer people. The federal government came to the rescue of General Motors and Chrysler during the economic crisis of 2008, loaning \$80 billion to keep the automakers open and assembly lines moving.

Unlike the private carmakers and airlines that lawmakers have been quick to bail out, transit is not supposed to be profitable - not even when buses and trains are full and ridership is growing. Just like public roads, bridges, and tunnels, transit operates as a public service similar to a power or water utility, not as a private enterprise that can cut service the moment it stops making money, stranding people who have the fewest options.

Transit leaders will gladly accept any relief that allows them to keep buses and trains running in the near term. But transit's growth was stunted before the pandemic. APTA in 2018 estimated a \$90 billion maintenance backlog, the accumulation of deferred maintenance and outdated equipment. Correcting structural issues will require a years-long investment strategy. The \$32 billion requested by transit agencies should be seen as the minimum down payment on long-term, expansive investments in new equipment, infrastructure, and service.

The investment should be strategic, creating more transit that is more useful to more people, and creating transit networks to connect the large majority of people with places other than where they work. Only 15 percent of daily jobs are commuting trips, yet most transit is designed just to whisk people from residential neighborhoods to downtown job centers. This is an opportunity to realign transit to serve trips made for school and shopping, to obtain services and connect neighborhoods off the transit grid.

When the pandemic ends, transit will reclaim the role it never actually relinquished: a lifeline to jobs, schools, and services for millions of Americans, including many who lack other transportation options. Housing and transportation together account for 50 percent of monthly household expenses, making a commitment to transportation independence one of the strongest actions a city can take. And in light of 2020's national racial reckoning, restoring transit to full strength is the first step toward fulfilling the promise of a more just and connected nation.

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