



Transit Watch: Public Transit in Crisis



July 6, 2020

[New York Times Opinion](#): “Mass Transit, and Cities, Could Grind to a Halt Without Federal Aid”

By Nicole Gelinas

As Congress plans another round of economic rescue, it will have to take a step that lawmakers from both parties have found distasteful for four decades: federal operating aid for mass transit.

The pandemic is an existential crisis for transit. Patrick Foye, chairman of New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the nation’s largest provider, said the entity’s fiscal situation was a “four-alarm fire.” The threat is far greater than after Sept. 11 and the 2008 recession.

Even as ridership has plummeted by double-digit percentages, transit agencies like the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority and Boston’s Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority must resume full service as economies reopen. Otherwise, they risk overcrowded trains and buses that do not allow for minimal social distancing.

Transit agencies have never before faced a situation where they must pay to run full service with a fraction of revenue. This is devastating to budgets. The New York M.T.A. faces a shortfall of \$14.3 billion over two years on a \$34.5 billion budget. Washington’s and Boston’s transit authorities and San Francisco’s Bay Area Rapid Transit face commensurate shortfalls, adjusted for size.

In April, Congress provided \$25 billion to transit agencies through the CARES Act, including \$4 billion for the M.T.A. But this aid was targeted to a months long shortfall, not a years long recovery.

If Congress doesn’t provide more aid, the M.T.A. risks a downward spiral. As transit agencies cut back service or raise fares, white-collar workers and their employers will remain reluctant to come back. Service workers with no choice but to use transit — including lower-wage Black and Hispanic people — will face less reliable service at a higher cost, shouldering delays and overcrowding.

Congress should save transit not for transit’s sake, but to save cities. Subways, buses and commuter rail make up the physical infrastructure that enables urban life.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, of the 3.8 million commuters and visitors who descended on Manhattan every day, three-quarters took a subway, bus, train or ferry.

In Washington, Boston and San Francisco, more than a third of commuters take public transit to work. In Chicago; Newark; Arlington, Va.; and Philadelphia, it’s more than a quarter. Transit riders, by staying off the streets, enable others to drive to work without creating impassible traffic jams.

We have seen this crisis before, after World War II, with the mass marketing of the automobile. Cities saw a population exodus as middle-class residents embraced the car and suburban life, and elected officials began to neglect transit.

It turned out, though, that a big part of what makes cities attractive is street life, which is incompatible with suburban-style car dependency. In the early ’80s, cities, thanks in large part to federal funds, began rebuilding their transit systems and started regaining population.

Covid-19 may pose just as grave a challenge for cities as did post-World War II suburbanization, just in a compressed time frame. New York, with less than 3 percent of the U.S. population, has 19 percent of the fatalities.

Wealthier people are fleeing to suburbs, where they can have outdoor space. Executives in industries from banking to tech have no idea when or whether to require workers to come back to central-city offices five days a week. But for Congress to give up on cities would be catastrophic for America’s creativity and productivity.

Covid-19 has hit cities so hard because of what they do so well: bring people closely together for fun and profit. New York, for example, generates more than 7 percent of the G.D.P., again outweighing population share.

To save transit and save cities, Congress should do something it hasn’t liked to do since the mid-’80s: provide continuing aid for transit operations.

Starting in the Reagan administration and continuing through the Clinton years, lawmakers and the White House gradually eliminated ’70s-era crisis aid for larger transit systems (in cities with more than 200,000 residents). The theory was that riders and taxpayers should pay for day-to-day service and that operating aid would only avoid the need for fare hikes. At the time, the decision was sound. Cities such as New York and Boston were rebounding from decades of economic decline, and their growing tax and ridership bases could support fares and subsidies.

Congress and successive presidents reserved federal aid for transformative infrastructure projects, such as new rail lines to increase ridership.

Now these cities once again face population loss and deep deficits. There is no point in investing in new infrastructure if agencies can’t afford to run service; indeed, the M.T.A. has already frozen its infrastructure investments (and will need more aid there, too).

Riders — particularly lower-paid essential workers — cannot bear large fare hikes.

Congress should solve the problem now, rather than ask transit systems to keep coming back for more. Lawmakers should create a formula for operating aid for the next half-decade, one tied to pre-pandemic ridership as well as to post-pandemic recovery. As riders returned, federal aid would automatically decline.

Finally, Congress can tie aid to cost reform, creating a commission to assess why European and developed Asian cities can provide higher-quality transit at a lower cost.

Congress and the White House should remember: In the two decades leading up to 1970s, urban decline presaged a fragile national economy that grew increasingly dependent on mortgage debt and environmental degradation. Let’s not make the same mistake for a different reason.

Nicole Gelinas is a contributing editor to the Manhattan Institute’s City Journal. She is writing a book about how over the past 40 years transit saved New York City.

Read the [full OpEd here](#).

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