



Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, leads a congregation of local boldfaced names in launching Transit for Austin's push for a "big and bold move" on mobility - likely leading up to a November 2020 transit bond package of more than \$1 billion. More in "Austin at Large," below.

Lord, Gotta Keep On Moving

Sales Tax Collection for CMTA

Fiscal Years start OCT 1

Cent	Year	Amount
1¢	1985	\$ 21,070,849.00
1¢	1986	\$ 41,703,714.00
1¢	1987	\$ 38,637,860.00
1¢	1988	\$ 40,316,633.00
.75¢	1989	\$ 37,434,492.00
.75¢	1990	\$ 38,599,332.00
.75¢	1991	\$ 42,664,065.00
.75¢	1992	\$ 46,339,967.00
.75¢	1993	\$ 51,008,302.00
.75¢	1994	\$ 56,978,015.00
.75¢	1995	\$ 61,074,760.00
1¢	1996	\$ 83,774,857.00
1¢	1997	\$ 89,099,371.00
1¢	1998	\$ 97,896,747.00
1¢	1999	\$ 107,134,304.00
1¢	2000	\$ 121,599,944.00
1¢	2001	\$ 120,935,134.00

Collected \$1,096,268,343 from 1985 - 2001 (17 years)

1¢	2002	\$ 112,288,426.00
1¢	2003	\$ 106,260,112.00
1¢	2004	\$ 114,480,570.00
1¢	2005	\$ 122,113,229.00
1¢	2006	\$ 135,915,215.00
1¢	2007	\$ 150,295,291.00
1¢	2008	\$ 154,156,602.00
1¢	2009	\$ 139,895,675.00

Collected \$1,035,405,120 from 2002 - 2009 (8 years)

1¢	2010	\$ 141,867,771.00
1¢	2011	\$ 151,156,042.00
1¢	2012	\$ 165,248,523.00
1¢	2013	\$ 179,022,794.00
1¢	2014	\$ 193,818,456.00
1¢	2015	\$ 210,413,739.00

Collected \$1,041,527,325 from 2010 - 2015 (6 years)

1¢	2016	\$ 221,298,975.00
1¢	2017	\$ 228,545,196.00
1¢	2018	\$ 243,571,292.00
1¢	2019	\$ 257,941,126.00 <i>(Forecasted)</i>
1¢	2020	\$ 265,679,360.00 <i>(budgeted)</i>

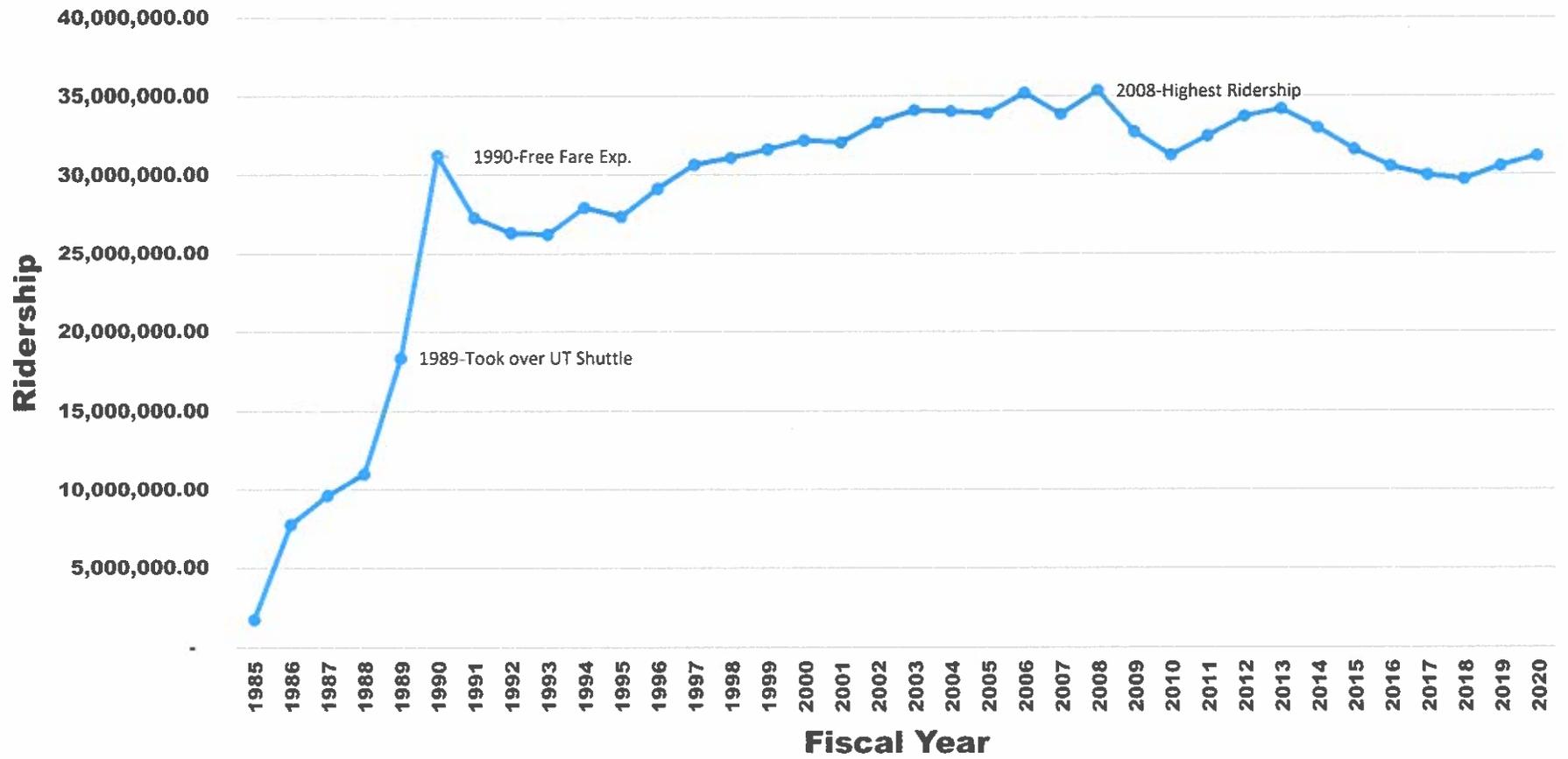
Collected \$1,217,035,949 from 2016 - 2020 (5 years)

Total: \$4,390,236,737 - Collected 4.4 Billion since 1985 (35 years)

*From 2000-2019 (20 years) \$3,270,824,111 (with 1 cent sales tax)

Capital Metro		
Total System Ridership		
FY	Riders	Relevant Notes
1985	1,772,182.00	Not a full fiscal year (Jul, Aug, Sept 1985)
1986	7,751,508.00	
1987	9,612,583.00	
1988	10,997,339.00	
1989	18,338,021.00	UT shuttle started here
1990	31,185,634.00	Free fare experiment
1991	27,301,889.00	
1992	26,349,394.00	
1993	26,247,403.00	
1994	27,950,549.00	
1995	27,364,490.00	
1996	29,130,686.00	
1997	30,625,272.00	
1998	31,058,515.00	
1999	31,582,427.00	
2000	32,153,602.00	
2001	32,011,724.00	
2002	33,265,093.00	
2003	34,067,514.00	
2004	33,997,096.00	
2005	33,873,006.00	Strike
2006	35,177,560.00	
2007	33,793,382.00	Record rainfall
2008	35,347,382.00	Record gas prices; Highest ridership
2009	32,693,281.00	
2010	31,208,595.00	
2011	32,421,884.00	
2012	33,669,997.00	
2013	34,171,993.00	
2014	32,935,784.00	
2015	31,571,152.00	
2016	30,482,386.00	
2017	29,950,671.00	
2018	29,695,646.00	
2019	30,521,857.00	Forecast
2020	31,151,680.00	Budgeted

CMTA - System Ridership



May 2018 Column

By Commissioner Gerald Daugherty

CapMetro & City of Austin Flounder at Solving Traffic Congestion

Here we go again: Capital Metro and the city of Austin are still trying to figure out how to improve mobility. First, we had Ben Wear's April 8th Statesman report about Capital Metro's plans for transit corridors. Then we had Capital Metro's Randy Clarke with his April 14th Statesman Viewpoint titled "Long-Term Investment in Transit Upgrades Vital".

Capital Metro uses population and traffic woes in an attempt to get people's support for their outdated ideas and ineffective solutions. This talk about millions of additional people in the next 20-30 years does not mean spending billions on transit is the answer. Now, Capital Metro talks about quality of life and affordability issues, and touts Project Connect as being "multigenerational." Actually, Project Connect's plan will take us backwards to early transit days, while ignoring mobility's future reality that's being created by new, flexible, and cost-effective approaches.

Touting billions spent in other cities (with huge traffic issues that continue to get worse) means nothing. Comparison of other cities and counties that have transportation "options" doesn't mean anything if cost benefits aren't applied. Touting the recent increase in ridership percentages is very misleading. Claiming that investments have increased transit ridership is very questionable, since Capital Metro has been on a 20 year declining trend in ridership while the regional population has increased over 50%.

There's no evidence that most people plan to abandon the automobile, whether that car has a driver, is driverless, or is a ride hailing service. A new study by UCLA's Institute of Transportation Studies shows mass transit use in Southern California has declined significantly in the past decade, and by 15% in the past 5 years alone. This study reflects a national trend, with transit ridership falling in every major urban area except Seattle, whose ridership grew less than 3% last year.

With ride-hailing services and driverless vehicles making a major transformation in today's and future personal transportation, it's possible that public transit could be nearly extinct by 2030 (except maybe in a few very dense areas, like New York City). With a projected 20 to 30 year time frame for Project Connect, it's likely this "transit investment" will be obsolete by the time it's finished.

As to this talk about how transit is a vital link to solving population growth and traffic mitigation: If transit were really a legitimate solution in this area, we should have seen improvement by now. Thinking big to Capital Metro means spending hundreds of millions of dollars a year, yet we have little to show for it. In fact, they've had 33 years (and over \$4 billion) without making any real dent in our traffic congestion.

With their dismal track record of producing solutions to traffic problems, imagine giving Capital Metro or the City of Austin \$6-\$8-\$10 billion more dollars! This latest idea has 7 major road corridors

slated for bus or rail to have their own dedicated lanes. In other words... they want to take away lanes from cars and trucks. How will that help congestion?

We need to be careful about billions more in future spending on public transit – especially rail. For example, Capital Metro's Red Line averages less than 2,000 weekday riders. Taxpayers subsidize this line to the tune of over \$15 million in operating costs per year, plus capital costs, for a total of more than \$15,000 per rider.

Capital Metro and the city of Austin are setting the stage to again ask for an unbelievable amount of money for something that's never been proven to truly help reduce congestion in cities like Austin. They are planting the seed for a multi-billion dollar bond election in 2020. This is irresponsible, and would syphon all the money needed for real solutions.

This area needs to first build a comprehensive roadway network instead of acquiescing to Capital Metro's ineffective ideas. Capital Metro needs to focus on providing the best bus system to serve those who have no alternative. And, with the latest decision by the State Highway Commission to not allow new toll roads and lanes, our need for more local money to fund road building is critical. We need to spend our money on tangible, proven methods that give citizens real mobility choices.

We'll need these local dollars to do something that actually helps traffic... and to leverage these dollars with the Texas Department of Transportation for improvements on our major roadways. If we burden ourselves with such a huge bond debt, we'll waste billions of taxpayer dollars for no benefit, and won't have money for what's really needed... adding to and improving our badly needed roadway capacity.

November 2019 Column

By Commissioner Gerald Daugherty

Here We Go Again... Again

It's deja vu all over again... It's Groundhog Day one more time... It's the Terminator on steroids. Will they ever stop? How many billions of dollars is it this time? Is it the low end estimate of \$2.8 billion or the high end estimate of \$9.8 billion?

The latest effort came into the light in April of 2018... with a Ben Wear report in the Statesman about Capital Metro's plans for transit corridors, and a Statesman Viewpoint by Capital Metro's Randy Clark titled "Long-Term Investments in Transit Upgrades Vital". My subsequent column in May of 2018 pointed out the many reasons why most of the proposed billions to be spent would be wasted money. Well, that latest effort is now fully out in the open with the October 30th joint work session involving the Austin City Council and the Capital Metro Board.

That work session began with a presentation of the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan... talking about Austin's mobility challenges and using the term "multimodal transportation options" as the solution. This Mobility Plan has the goal of having (by 2039) only 50% of commuters driving alone in their car (instead of the 74% that reportedly do today). That means that one-third of you presently doing that will be expected to use some other mode of transportation. How many of you will volunteer to do that?

Then they got into the heart of their proposal, "How Transit Fits In The Austin Strategic Mobility Plan", with the goal of increasing transit use from the present approximately 4% of commuters to 16%. They plan to do this by investing in a high-capacity transit system that will cost multiple billions of dollars. But since Capital Metro has collected over \$4 billion from taxpayers since 1985 (35 years), and hasn't been able to develop more than 4% transit use, how can they realistically QUADRUPLE transit use in the next 20 years?

Further expounding on that "high-capacity transit" phrase, these terms were used: A complete transit system must be created, including investing in high-capacity transit... high-capacity transit must be separate from the rest of traffic (in dedicated transit pathways)... but "where those dedicated pathways would be, what they would look like, and the specific mode of public transit are questions that Capital Metro, the City and the community are working on

answering together". This nebulous language seems to say they might not propose rail lines. But I think we know better than that.

The rest of the work session consisted of a presentation of Capital Metro's Project Connect, centering on their proposed high-capacity transit Orange and Blue lines, which will probably end up being proposed as rail lines.

And when will we find out the final proposal? Their timeline tells us that another joint work session be held on January 9, 2020... where the "locally preferred alternative" will be presented. Then in March the Austin City Council will decide what final transit plan will be put to voters in a November, 2020 bond election. Does anyone want to bet on whether or not rail will be included?

As I did in May of 2018, I feel once again compelled to speak out and make sure that once again the community is not duped into supporting a transit plan that will needlessly cost billions of dollars in a futile attempt to solve our congestion issues. Public transit won't take over our transportation load. This plan's true goal is not to fix our transportation issues, it's to get us out of our cars and change people's behavior.

Rail makes no sense in Austin. Buses would be the most effective way, but we have an inadequate road system that limits the bus. And the plan's proposed dedicated lanes will take lanes out of our already inadequate road system. Would that really help?

Given the history of how Capital Metro and the City have fared in dealing with congestion and public transportation, would you give them billions of dollars more? Would you trust them when they say that federal dollars will pay for 40% of this? Would you trust them to come up with realistic, cost-effective ways to mitigate our congestion? Once again, I'll be presenting the other side, so that the public can see that the bulk of this current plan would be a huge waste of precious tax dollars.

GD comments on KLBJ radio on 2 occasions (Todd & Don Thur am on 10/31/19 and @ 3:15 on Fri 11/8, after the 10/30/19 joint work session of the Austin City Council & Capital Metro Board, which presented their latest Project Connect Transit proposal.

Same song, 14th verse. Trying to force behavioral change on people?

Public transit won't take over transportation load. Goal is not to fix our transportation issues, it's to get us out of our cars.

Would you let CapMetro & COA bring this to you? Goofy Green Line to Elgin. Same group of consultants, engineers in the audience.

How would this actually work? Bring it on big, not just 1 or 2 billion. Will be a big target. Can dupe the people. I'm going to make sure the community is not duped. I'm going to present the other side.

Train makes no sense. Rubber tire most effective way, but we have an inadequate road system that limits the bus. Should have been building a comprehensive road system for the last 20-30 years.

Dedicated lanes will take lanes out of our already inadequate road system.

COA is responsible for our mess now. Is \$10 billion enough? Fed money is not going to happen.

Laugh if just bring billion. If so, would you let the COA & CapMetro do it? Would you give them the billions of dollars?

Too expensive, & will never have tens of thousands of new riders. Is wishful thinking.

Red Line is a model = 1,500 riders a day. Has the Red Line helped Hwy 183 traffic?

Much Higher Taxes

All Taxpayers will Subsidize each rider 90+% of Each Transit Ride.

Two Proposed, Dedicated Transit Lanes (Cost \$5-10 Billion) are 1/3 of the Plan.

Transit is Ineffective: Ridership has Long Decline Throughout Nation & Texas.

Four Major Texas Cities All Lost ridership in past 20 years.

Four Major Texas Cities Spent Billions to Improve Transit Ridership while total Population increased 6.6 million (50%) – It Has All Failed Coast to Coast.

Dedicated Lane Transit is Far Too Expensive & Averages Cost Overruns Are 40%

Mortgages Future Generations and Limits Funds to Improve Congestion & Mobility.

Significantly Increases Congestion in Central Austin.

Slows East-West Traffic.

Trains are 200 years Old, Outdated & Obsolete with New Technology

Transit Can Reach Only a Small Percentage of Total Available Jobs.

Transit is Primarily for Downtown Jobs Which are only 10% of total jobs.

It is not likely Austin will receive the 40% Projected for U.S. Funding.

Cap Metro and Austin Have proven to be Incompetent for Massive Projects

What's **WRONG** With Light Rail?

—COSTS TOO MUCH • DOES TOO LITTLE—

1. It has not changed a more than 50-year decline in the use of public transit.
2. It has not measurably reduced congestion or pollution in ANY city.
3. It will cost billions of tax dollars leaving a lack of funds for projects which will improve congestion and mobility.
4. It will consume a majority of our available transportation dollars to serve 2% or less of the trips in the community.
5. It will degrade the public transit system's service and cost effectiveness.

12 Reasons to Vote NO on CapMetro's Plan to Implement Light Rail

ourmobilityyourfuture.com

4 mins read

Our position: The Austin/CapMetro proposed (“Go Big”) transit system, called **Project Connect (PC)**, is supported by an array of dishonest and distorted justifications with little integrity and transparency. If implemented, this transit scheme would take decades and create more community destruction than any major decision in Austin’s history.

Bottom Line: Project Connect’s (PC) plan will result in major degradation of Quality-of-Life for all Austin citizens, for generations.

Background: Public Transit is an important community service but is changing rapidly due to improving technologies and citizens’ decision as to how mobility best meets their variety of needs resulting in the desired quality-of-life. These decisions and changing considerations have resulted in a long decline in transit ridership in the U.S. and in Texas.

1. **PC’s Train Plan Foundation Issue:** An estimated 90% of Austin’s immense increase in transportation funds, paid by taxpayers, would be used to fund primarily Central City light rail transit for less than 1%, and declining, of the passenger trips traveled. This will significantly increase

congestion and degrade the mobility of those traveling 99% of the non-rail, transit passenger miles.

2. **Congestion Will Increase:** Perhaps the extreme, dishonest reason for this proposed transit system is to “Reduce Congestion.” This plan will reduce road lanes which serve private, shared (taxi, Uber, etc.) commercial, public transit, emergency, school, and government vehicles causing major increases in congestion. There are no U.S. cities where more transit has measurably reduced overall congestion and many where it significantly increases congestion.

3. **Austin’s Major Goals Not Achievable:** The city has established a set of “fantasy” goals for this transit plan’s performance which have never been achieved in another city and will not be achieved in Austin.

4. **This is Only the First Phase of PC’s Plan:** Austin is proposing the first phase of a PC massive transit overhaul which they have not shared total cost estimates, citizens’ tax implications or schedules. Comparisons would estimate the cost to be over \$20 billion and take generations to complete a totally obsolete system.

5. **Huge Increase in Taxes and Rents:** This multi-billion dollar train transit system must be funded by increasing property/ citizen’s taxes, resulting in major tax increases for generations and continuing to make Austin less affordable. The total proposed transit system would increase taxes by thousands of dollars per year for the

average home. There is a very low probability the government will pay for 40% of the capital, as promised by the city. The U.S. government has delayed major transit commitments to almost 20 cities for several years and the current economic condition is not conducive to supporting Austin's weak plan. The government would not pay for overruns, which will occur, or for the additional \$100+ million per year for increased transit operating costs. This will further increase citizen's property taxes and rent.

6. **No City Models of Prior Success:** There are no cities, similar to Austin today, or Austin 75+ years from today, where this proposed transit strategy has effectively served its citizens mobility needs.

7. **Transit Ridership is Declining:** Transit ridership is on a declining trend in the total U.S. All four major Texas cities have spent a total of several tens of billions of dollars to increase transit ridership through 2019, and transit ridership has reduced in Texas over 20 years (1999 through 2019). Austin had the largest population growth of 85% and the greatest decline of transit ridership at 16%. People have made these choices for their best quality-of-life and trying to force them to change due to City leaders who think they know better will fail, resulting in a highly degraded Austin community.

8. **Will not Improve Environment:** This PC proposed transit system would have no measurable positive impact on congestion or the environment as studies in many cities have shown. It is more likely to exacerbate congestion and

environment issues. The city's promotion of "Code Next" to increase density is a companion, dishonest portrayal of benefits which will result in the opposite: higher costs, greater congestion, and greater air pollution.

9. **Outdated and Obsolete Before Complete:** This transit system and, especially its major light rail train elements, are totally outdated and obsolete. Current and future technology, rapidly advancing, is already replacing these dated concepts before they can be implemented. Is Austin the progressive, advanced thinking city it represents itself as? Let's go forward, not backwards.

10. **Devastating for Small Business:** This plan will result in the closing of most small Austin businesses on rail routes throughout construction years.

11. **Mortgages Future Generations:** Following this wasteful, ineffective transit approach will mortgage and degrade the future of many generations with growing tax burdens, higher home/rent costs, and congestion. This will strongly limit citizens access to resources to address real future needs.

12. **Motivated by Self-Serving Greed:** This PC plan is primarily a very self-serving transit plan for politicians, transit organizations, real estate community/investors and supporting/benefiting contractors with little relevance to the greater-good of the citizens of Austin's vast community.

Almost none of the folks in these supporting factions will ride transit, but they will receive high-tax dollar benefits.

What is a responsible vision for our transportation future?

Current and rapidly advancing technologies are revolutionizing transit and transportation. While the exact details of the new technologies are being rapidly developed, it is clear that the focus will be on systems meeting the choices and needs of citizens. The foundation will be “On-Demand, Doorstep-to-Destination,” meeting user needs of traveling when they want, and where they want, in a reasonable time. This can only be achieved on a comprehensive roadway system serving private, shared, commercial, public transit, emergency, school, government, and other vehicles. Therefore, Austin’s priority transportation goal must be to complete a comprehensive backbone roadway system enhanced by many elements of technology to make them safe and efficient. Transit systems costing billions of dollars to reconstruct train systems of the past, in dedicated lanes, are obsolete and ineffective. They serve a minuscule portion of citizens’ needs, consume a huge portion of transportation funds and limit future generations to achieve their visions and requirements for efficient transportation/mobility.

New Technologies and trends, such as working-at-home, will also reduce required road-lane miles and costs of mobility. Working-at-home population is already the fastest growing “commute to work” segment and is a greater percentage of the workforce than those commuting by public transit. Working at home has received massive forced evaluation due to the coronavirus situation. Epidemic considerations will likely accelerate the growing trend of working at home. This could result in major reductions of roadway use and parking needs, including reductions in public transit trips. Other rapidly advancing road vehicle technologies are producing safer vehicles which promise to significantly increase the capacities of roadway lanes.

It is essential and prudent that these major technology and operational impacts be fully evaluated in the New Mobility of the near future to establish an effective overall mobility strategy and role which each element, including public transit, will fulfill prior to committing many billions of dollars in a “double-down” commitment to obsolete light rail per the Project Connect (PC) plan.



The Antiplanner

Dedicated to the sunset of government planning

Antiplanner Policy Brief Number 27

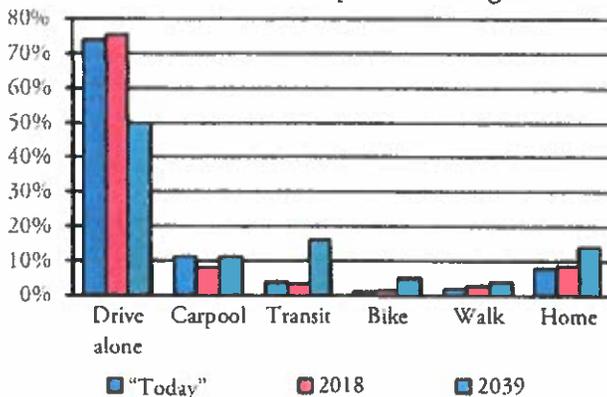
November 5, 2019

Transportation Planning for an Unattainable Fantasy

Austin is one of the fastest-growing urban areas in America, and the city of Austin and Austin's transit agency, Capital Metro, have a plan for dealing with all of the traffic that will be generated by that growth: assume that a third of the people who now drive alone to work will switch to transit, bicycling, walking, or telecommuting by 2039. That's right up there with planning for dinner by assuming that food will magically appear on the table the same way it does in Hogwarts.

Austin planners say that 74 percent of Austin workers drive alone to their jobs. In this, they are already behind the times, as the 2018 American Community Survey found that 75.4 percent of Austin workers drove alone (that's for the city of Austin; the drive-alone share in the the Austin urban area was 77.0 percent). The 2018 survey was released only a month before Austin's latest planning document, but even the 2017 survey found that 75 percent of Austin workers drove alone. You have to go back to the 2016 survey to find 74 percent drive-alones. So while Austin planners are assuming they can reduce driving alone from 74 to 50 percent, it is actually moving in the other direction.

Austin's Transportation Targets



"Today" is what Austin planners say today's commute shares are, which appears to be based on 2016 numbers. 2018 shows commute shares from the 2018 American Community Survey while 2039 shows Austin's targets.

Planners also claim that 11 percent of Austin workers carpool to work, an amount they hope to maintain through 2039. They are going to have trouble doing that as carpooling, in fact, only accounted for 8.0 percent of Austin workers in 2018.

Planners hope to increase telecommuting from its current 8 percent (which is accurate) to 14 percent. That could be difficult as they have no policy tools that can influence telecommuting.

Planners also hope to increase walking and bicycling from their current 2 and 1 percent to 4 and 5 percent. Walking to work is almost always greater than cycling to work, so it's difficult to see how they plan to magic cycling to be greater than walking. This is important because cycling trips are longer than walking trips and so have more of a potential impact on driving.

Finally, planners want to increase transit from 4 to 16 percent. In fact, transit carried just 3.24 percent of workers to their jobs in 2018, down from 3.62 percent in 2016. Changing from 4 to 16 percent is a an almost impossible 300 percent increase; changing from 3.24 to 16 is an even more formidable 394 percent increase. Again, reality is moving in the opposite direction from planners' goals.

When reading this plan, my first question was, "has anyone ever been able to reduce driving alone to work from roughly 75 to 50 percent?" And the second question was, "has anyone ever been able to increase transit's share by 300 to 390 percent?" Of course, I had similar questions about the projected quintupling of cycling and other parts of the plan, but those were the two big ones. We can answer these questions by looking at changes in commuting in various cities and urban areas between 2000 and 2018, which is approximately the amount of time in Austin's planning period.

Austin's Plan

Austin planners offer a list of strategies and projects that are supposed to produce major changes in transportation habits. For the most part, the strategies are similar to

those used in many other cities.

For example, the carpooling strategies include [Commute Solutions](#), a web site that allows people to find potential carpoolers; [Smart Trips](#), another web site; [Movability](#), a web site for employers; vanpooling; and similar programs. All of these programs assume that people are actively looking for carpooling partners. The reality is that the vast majority of carpooling is “fampooling,” that is, family members riding together to work. Carpooling has declined because family sizes have declined, so there are fewer opportunities for fampooling.

Austin’s “active transportation” (meaning walking and cycling) strategies include new sidewalks, pedestrian and bike trails, a [Safe Route to School](#) program, and similar programs. Again, communities all over the nation are using similar programs. Safe Route to Schools, for example, is a [federal grant program](#) that has given money to cities all over the country.

Austin’s transit strategies include adjusting traffic signals to give priority to transit vehicles, [transit incentives](#) including discounted transit passes and a frequent-rider program, new park-and-ride stations, and of course [Project Connect](#), Capital Metro’s dream of high-cost, “high-capacity” transit routes. (The term “high-capacity” is in quotes because some modes that Capital Metro calls “high-capacity,” such as light rail, are in fact low-capacity transit.) Again, many other cities have used signal priority systems, discounted transit fares, and high-cost transit systems to attract riders.

To see how well these programs have worked, I looked at journey-to-work data published by the Census Bureau. From 1960 to 2000, the decennial census asked a sampling of people how they got to work. Since 2005, the Census Bureau has done an annual American Community Survey asking people, among other things, how they get to work. The most recent American Community Survey data are from 2018.

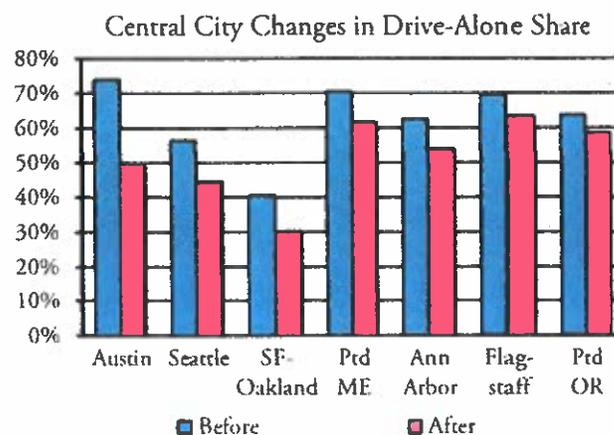
Since Austin is proposing to change people’s transportation habits by 2039, or 20 years in the future, I compared data for 2000 with 2018, which is close to 20 years of change. I looked at the data for 262 of the nation’s largest cities and 208 of the nation’s largest urban areas and posted a [spreadsheet](#) with these data so you can see what happened in your city or urban area.

I first looked to see which areas saw the biggest declines in the share of workers driving alone to work and/or the biggest increases in the share taking transit to work. Then I tried to determine what caused those changes and whether Austin’s plans are likely to produce similar results.

Reducing Drive-Along Share

Between 2000 and 2018, the share of workers driving alone to work increased in 53 percent of major cities and 54 percent of urban areas. In most of the places where driving alone declined, it fell by less than 3 percentage

points. Among central cities such as Austin, driving alone fell by more than 9 percentage points in only two: Seattle, where it fell by 12 percentage points, and San Francisco, where it fell by 10. It also declined by 19 percentage points in Seattle’s suburb of Bellevue and by 12 percentage points in San Francisco suburbs San Mateo and Mountain View.



In this and the next two charts, “before” is 2016 for Austin and 2000 for the other central cities; “after” is Austin’s 2039 target and 2018 for the other central cities. The other cities shown are the ones that saw the greatest decline of driving alone between 2000 and 2018.

Among major urban areas, driving alone declined by 10 percentage points in Livermore (which is really a suburb of San Francisco but is counted as a separate urban area by the Census Bureau), 6 in Seattle, Concord (another suburb of San Francisco), Danbury, and Ann Arbor, and 5 in Flagstaff, San Francisco-Oakland, Rochester, Albany, and Boston.

The fact that driving alone fell by much more in cities such as Seattle and San Francisco than in their urban areas suggests that a sorting process is taking place, where people who prefer not to drive move to the cities while people who prefer to drive are sorted into the suburbs. The result is that city programs that attempt to reducing driving may have a negligible effect when the urban areas are considered as a whole.

In Seattle, the main factor changing commuting habits has been the tremendous growth of jobs in the downtown area, a result of Amazon, Microsoft, and other high-tech companies building new downtown high-rise office buildings. According to the [Downtown Seattle Association](#), downtown Seattle had 244,000 jobs in 2000 and 314,000 in 2018. Today, Seattle may be the only major city in American that has more than half of its jobs downtown. Since hub-and-spoke transit systems work particularly well for downtown workers, increasing downtown jobs increases transit’s share of commuting. Downtown San Francisco also has the [fourth-largest concentration of jobs](#) in the United States.

Only about 20 percent of jobs in the city of Austin (and less than 10 percent in the Austin urban area) are

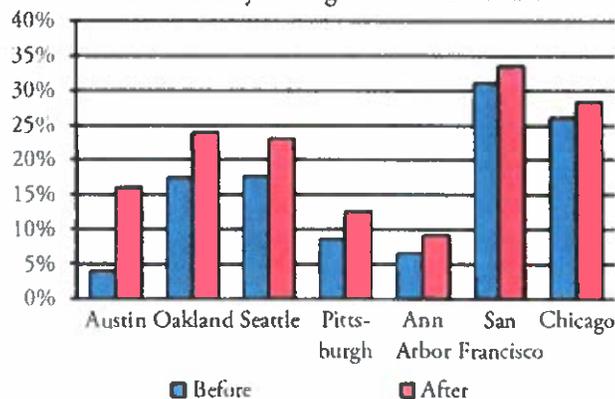
located in downtown Austin. Thus, Austin would have a difficult time replicating Seattle's results.

Austin's plan for reducing the share of people driving alone to work involves reducing parking and road diets (that is, converting auto lanes to bike or bus lanes). They call this "managing demand" as in "managing parking supply to reduce demand" or "manage congestion by managing demand." But creating a shortage of something doesn't change demand; all it does is create frustrated travelers. Many cities and regions have tried similar programs, yet no city or urban area has been able to reduce driving-alone's share of travel by 24 to 26 percentage points in the last eighteen years, as Austin hopes to do.

Increasing Transit's Share

Between 2000 and 2018, transit's share of commuting grew in 43 percent of the nation's major cities and 37 percent of the nation's major urban areas. Among central cities, the biggest increases in transit's share of commuting took place in Albany (4.6 percentage points), Seattle (4.0), New York (3.5) and San Francisco (3.3).

Central City Changes in Transit Share



As with the previous chart, the central cities shown saw the greatest changes in commute shares, in this case for transit, between 2000 and 2018, yet none came close to Austin's target.

On the other hand, transit's share declined in many cities and urban areas that have invested heavily in transit improvements. Transit's share declined by 5.0 percentage points in Atlanta, 2.6 in Denver, 2.1 in Houston, and 1.6 in Dallas. Transit's share also declined in each of these urban areas.

Among cities where transit's share was about 3.2 percent in 2000, which is what Austin's was in 2018, only one—Kalamazoo, Michigan—saw a large increase in transit's share, and that was only 50 percent more than what it was in 2000. Phoenix and Charlotte both had 3.2 percent shares in 2000, invested heavily in light rail, and saw transit's share nonetheless decline by 2018.

Austin's dreams are also contradicted by recent ridership trends. Austin, Dallas Fr. Worth, Houston, and San Antonio are some of the fastest-growing urban areas in the United States, having collectively gained 50 percent more people from 2000 to 2018. Yet the transit

systems in all four urban areas have lost 4 to 22 percent of their riders. Per capita ridership has fallen by 33 to 58 percent, with Austin transit suffering the largest losses and per capita losses. Thus, Austin's assumption that it can increase transit's share by more than 12 percentage points, or by 394 percent, in the next 20 years appears highly unrealistic.

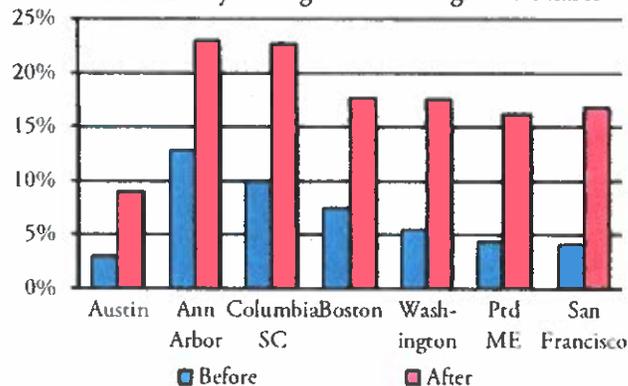
Maintaining Carpooling

Many cities have carpooling programs like the ones planned or used by Austin, yet since 2000, carpooling has declined in 92 percent of major American cities and 90 percent of major urban areas. As noted, most carpooling is fampooling, so unless family sizes increase, carpooling is likely to decline.

Increasing Walking and Cycling

A slight majority of cities and urban areas saw cycling's share of commuting increase, but only a few—5 percent of cities and 33 percent of urban areas—saw walking increase. Even where increases took place, they tended to be small.

Central City Changes in Walking/Bike Shares



When taken together, Austin's goals for increasing walking and cycling together are the one set of targets that appear to be attainable.

Among central cities, cycling grew by 3.6 percentage points (which is close to Austin's target) in Portland, 3.1 in Washington, 2.4 in New Orleans, 2.2 in San Francisco, 1.9 in Seattle, 1.6 in Denver, and 1.5 in Minneapolis. In other central cities and most suburbs it grew by less than 1.5 percentage points. Walking increased by 6.2 percentage points in the city of Boston; 2.9 in Portland, Maine; 2.3 in Washington; 1.9 in San Francisco; 1.6 in New York; and 1.0 in Seattle.

Among major urban areas, cycling increased by 1.9 percentage points in Santa Barbara, 1.4 in Portland and Anchorage, 1.0 in Madison, 0.9 in San Jose, and 0.8 in New Orleans and San Francisco-Oakland. Walking increased by 4.0 percentage points in Flagstaff; 2.8 in Santa Cruz; 1.6 in Portland Maine; 1.4 in Ft. Collins; 1.1 in Seattle; and 1.0 in Boston.

Austin's goals for walking and cycling appear to be the only ones that seem attainable, yet even they will be

difficult. Moreover, a lot of the increase in walking and cycling in various cities seems to be coming out of transit's share, not the drive-alone share. Notice from the first chart that, between 2016 and 2018, Austin itself saw an increase in walking and cycling at the expense of transit, while drive-alone's share has also increased.

Austin's numbers are also unrealistic in that planners assume they can increase cycling's share of travel to be greater than walking's share. This is significant since, as previously noted, cycling trips tend to be longer than walking trips and so are more likely to have an effect on total driving. Nationwide, cycling's share of commuting exceeds that of walking in less than 4 percent of major cities and less than 3 percent of major urban areas.

Increasing Telecommuting

Between 2000 and 2018, people working at home grew in 95 percent of major cities and 98 percent of major urban areas. Most of this growth took place without any city or regional policies promoting it, and the most growth appears to have taken place in high-tech cities and urban areas such as the cities of Berkeley and Palo Alto and the Raleigh and Austin urban areas.

Planning for how you wish people would travel rather than how they will travel leads to misspent tax dollars, increased consumer costs, greater congestion, and numerous other problems.

While working at home may increase further, Austin's assumption that it can increase working at home by 6 percentage points to 14 percent appears unrealistic. Only two suburbs—Highlands Ranch, Colorado and Scottsdale, Arizona—had that high a share of people working at home in 2018. The highest shares in any central cities are Portland and Atlanta, each of which are under 10 percent.

Realistically, only certain jobs are amenable to working at home. Most working-class jobs must be done either in factories or on site. Many office jobs, such as jobs in the banking, insurance, and similar sectors, require

regular face-to-face contact. Most education, health care, retail, and wholesale jobs must also be in non-residential locations. The number of people working at home may grow, but the amount of that growth is beyond Austin's control.

Conclusions

Planners have developed two main approaches to transportation. One is to estimate how people will travel and then provide and maintain the infrastructure to allow them to do so as efficiently and safely as possible. The other is to imagine how you wish people would travel and then provide the infrastructure assuming that to happen. The latter method is likely to lead to misallocation of capital resources, increased congestion, and increased costs to travelers.

Austin's plan is firmly based on this second approach. The city's targets of reducing driving alone by a third, maintaining carpooling at an already too-high number, and increasing transit by 394 percent are completely unrealistic. No American city has achieved similar results in the past two decades and none are likely to come close in the next two decades.

As discussed in a previous policy brief, one of the biggest factors in commute patterns is the number of downtown jobs. Many people think population density is a major factor, but among urban areas the correlation between urban population densities and the share of commuters who use transit is only about 0.4. Meanwhile, the correlation between the number of downtown jobs and the share of commuters who use transit is nearly 0.9.

So it is not surprising that the cities that have seen the biggest reductions in driving alone and biggest increases in transit commuting—Seattle and San Francisco—have hundreds of thousands more downtown jobs than Austin. Even they haven't seen changes as great as Austin is fantasizing for 2039. In short, Austin needs to go back to the drawing board and develop a plan that is based on how people actually will travel in 2039 and not one based on how planners wish they would travel.

Randal O'Toole, the Antiplanner, is a land-use and transportation policy analyst and author of *Gridlock: Why We're Stuck in Traffic and What to Do About It*. *Masthead photo is by Trey Ratcliff.*

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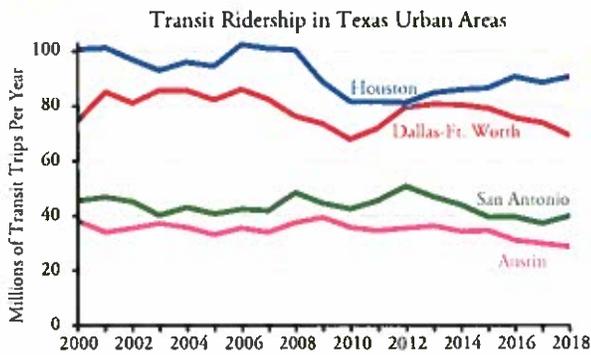
Dedicated to the sunset of government planning

Antiplanner Policy Brief Number 30

November 26, 2019

Do Transit Capital Improvements Boost Ridership?

Does spending a lot of money on transit improvements boost transit ridership? Since 1992, Dallas-Ft. Worth and Houston have each spent about ten times as much money on transit improvements as San Antonio and Austin. Transit systems in all four urban areas carry fewer riders today than they did in 2000. While Houston ridership has grown since 2012, it is because of a low-cost restructuring of its bus system, not because of transit capital improvements (e.g., new light-rail lines).



Houston and Dallas-Ft. Worth are bigger than San Antonio and Austin and so their transit systems carry more riders, but spending billions on rail transit did not noticeably affect ridership.

To find out whether it is generally true that spending more on transit can generate more riders, I gathered data for more than 100 of the nation's largest urban areas. The not-so-surprising result is that spending more on transit improvements doesn't do much to increase ridership. Moreover, the data indicate that urban areas that spend a lot on transit capital improvements don't grow faster and may grow considerably slower than areas that don't. Finally, the numbers show that increasing urban densities may have once had an effect on transit ridership, but doesn't seem to anymore.

Data Sources

The data I used to reach these conclusions come from the Census Bureau and Federal Transit Administration. For each decennial census, the Census Bureau identifies

the size and population of each urban area, including the central city or cities in that area, suburbs, and unincorporated areas that have more than about 1,000 people per square mile or are otherwise developed. The Census Bureau also estimates how many people use transit to get to work in each of the urban areas.

Since 2005, the Census Bureau has published annual estimates of population numbers and how people get to work based on the American Community Survey, an annual survey of about 3.5 million households. I gathered population numbers for 1990 through 2010 and estimates for 2018, and transit's share of commuting from the 1990, and 2000 censuses, and the 2010 and 2018 American Community Surveys.

In addition to measuring the growth of urban areas, the Census Bureau sometimes redefines them, merging some and splitting others. In 2000, the Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and West Palm Beach urban areas were merged into one. Seattle and Tacoma urban areas were also merged. The San Francisco urban area lost Concord, Livermore, San Rafael, and Vallejo, though San Rafael was added back in 2010. The Los Angeles urban area lost Mission Viejo, Santa Clarita, and Thousand Oaks. To keep data comparable over time, I added the numbers for urban areas that had been merged or would be separated.

In addition, three urban areas in Colorado—Boulder, Denver, and Longmont—and three in Utah—Ogden, Provo-Orem, and Salt Lake City—are each served by one transit agency. To keep data comparable, I added the numbers for these together.

The Federal Transit Administration's National Transit Database reports capital expenditures by transit agency and mode for every year from 1992 through 2017. This "capital" spending actually combines capital improvements—that is, construction of new transit facilities—with replacement of existing transit infrastructure and equipment. Since transit agencies that use modes of transit that require lots of infrastructure will need to spend money both building and replacing that infrastructure, I didn't attempt to separate these numbers.

The FTA numbers sometimes miss spending on early stages of capital improvements. It appears that if an urban area builds a new mode of travel, the FTA sometimes neglects to report capital expenditures until the mode becomes operational. For example, Portland spent \$166 million on its commuter-rail line, which opened in 2009, yet only \$5.6 million appears in the database, all of which was spent after 2009. This may be a mistake in the database, but it appears to have happened in other cities as well.

In addition, some transit agencies pay other railroads to run commuter trains on their lines. Though the other railroads may use some of this money to make capital improvements or replace existing infrastructure, these costs are counted as operating costs, not capital costs. Thus, capital costs are underreported for commuter rail.

The National Transit Database also has a file showing transit ridership and other operating data for every year from 1991 through 2017. Ridership numbers are based on each agencies' fiscal years, and a plurality if not a majority of agencies have fiscal years that end September 30. For 2018 numbers, I used October 2017 through September 2018 numbers from the database's monthly ridership updates. While the latest update also has October 2018 through September 2019 data, i.e., F.Y. 2019, I decided to stop with 2018 so the data would be comparable to the census data and because a few transit agencies were late in reporting the most recent ridership numbers.

For 1990 ridership data, I used a spreadsheet from the 1990 National Transit Database that isn't posted on the FTA web site. This reported transit trips, passenger miles, and other data for each transit agency and urban area. Unfortunately, Winston-Salem's transit agency neglected to report data that year, so I used 1991 ridership for that urban area.

Naturally, I combined the FTA data for urban areas that had been merged or separated by the Census Bureau in 2000. In addition, if you download the FTA historic database, you need to carefully go through it to ensure that urban areas are assigned the correct identification number. The urban area numbers are based on their population ranking in each decennial census, and if the ranking changes, then the numbers can change. If a transit agency disappears or is absorbed by another agency in one decade, the urban area number assigned to that agency is the number in the decade it disappeared, and the FTA never goes back to fix them.

After reviewing the data, I deleted San Juan, Puerto Rico and McAllen, Texas from the dataset as I don't have reliable 1990 numbers for the former and McAllen didn't even have a transit system in 1990. I was also missing some 1990 data for most urban areas with fewer than 380,000 people in 2018. This left 101 urban areas ranging from New York to Durham, North Carolina.

For those 101 urban areas, I was able to find or calculate:

1. The population of each urban area in 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2018 and the annual population growth rate in the intervening periods;
3. The land area of each urban area in those years (the land area in 2018 will be nearly the same as 2010 as the Census Bureau makes only trivial adjustments between decades);
4. The change in population density between each of those years;
5. Capital expenditures, adjusted for inflation, in each year from 1992 through 2017, which I summed into three groups: 1992 through 2000, 2001 through 2009, and 2010 through 2017;
6. Per capita transit ridership in 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2018 and the annual change in per capita ridership in the intervening periods;
8. Transit's share of commuting in 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2018 (only available for about 60 urban areas for 1980 and 1990) and the change in transit's share in the intervening periods.

Per Capita Capital Expenditures

Per capita spending on public transit improvements ranged from \$4 a year in Columbia, South Carolina and Augusta, Georgia to \$350 a year in the New York urban area. Fifteen urban areas spent more than \$100 per year, all of which have extensive and/or expensive rail systems. Eleven other urban areas with some form of rail transit spent between \$50 and \$100 per year.

Most urban areas that spent less than \$50 per person per year have no rail other than a streetcar line (whose capital cost may not be included in the National Transit Database). Exceptions were Nashville, which spent little opening a commuter-rail line, and Orlando, which has spent more than \$50 per capita since it started building its commuter-rail line but less than that before it had commuter rail. Norfolk-Virginia Beach and Buffalo both have light-rail lines but also spent less than \$50 per year due to the shortness of those lines.

New York transit riders come closer than most to covering operating costs with fares. But the region spent \$162 billion on capital costs, mostly capital replacement rather than new construction, over 26 years, none of which was recovered by fares. This made New York the most expensive urban area in terms of per capita capital costs.

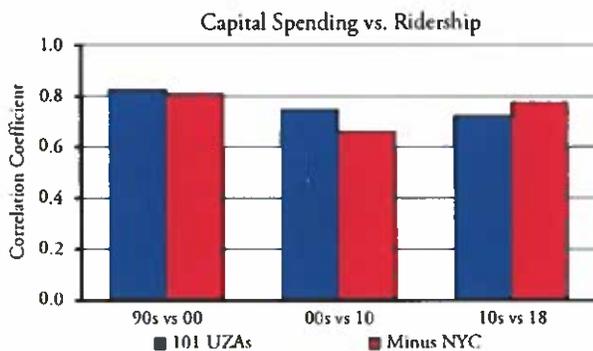
To compare capital costs with outputs such as ridership, I used Excel's correlation function. A correlation of 1.00 is perfect; a correlation of 0.00 means no relationship. In practice, correlations of any two sets of 100 random numbers can frequently be as high as 0.10, so anything below that can also be considered random. Correlation does not prove causation, but lack of correlation indicates lack of causation.

Because New York is so different from other urban areas, with four times as many downtown jobs, much

greater central city population density, and the nation's most extensive rail transit system, much of what is true about New York has no applicability to other urban areas in the United States. I tested correlations both with and without New York, but in most cases did not find a significant difference.

Capital Spending and Ridership

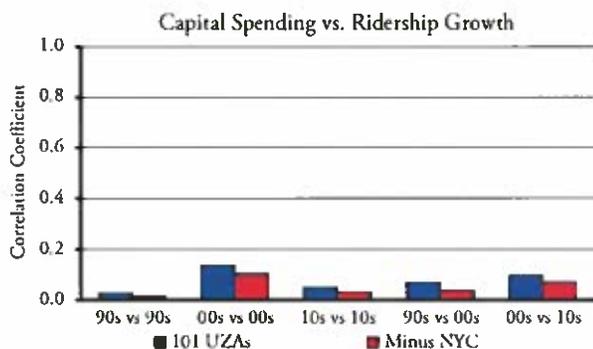
First, I tested the correlation between per capita capital spending in each decade with ridership at the end of that decade (2018 in the case of the most recent partial decade). These correlations turned out to be high at around 0.7 to 0.8.



There is a strong correlation between capital spending (which includes replacement of existing capital equipment) and transit ridership.

This is an example of correlation not proving causation. Instead, the urban areas with the highest per capita ridership were those with large downtown job concentrations and relatively dense residential areas. These include Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington. These urban areas also happen to have legacy rail transit systems that require lots of spending on replacing existing infrastructure and equipment, which the National Transit Database counts as a capital cost.

Capital Spending & Ridership Growth



The correlation between capital spending and growth in transit ridership is negligible.

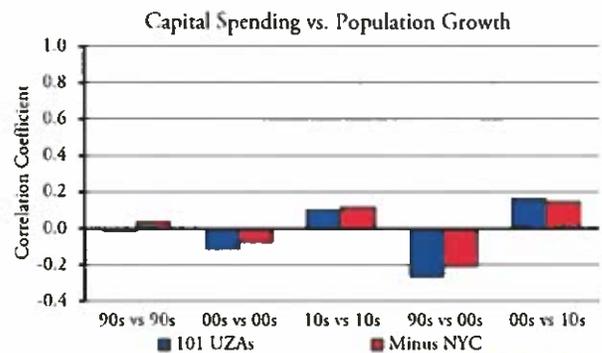
What we really want to know is whether urban area that spend more on transit capital improvements—which

usually means building new rail lines—succeed in increasing transit ridership. To answer this question, I compared capital spending in each decade with the growth in transit ridership in that decade. Since there may be a lag period between capital spending on ridership growth, I also compared capital spending in each decade with the growth in ridership in the following decade.

In every case, the correlations were low. In only one case was the correlation greater than 0.10. Subtracting New York from the mix reduced the correlations even further.

Capital Spending & Population Growth

Rail advocates often argue that spending money on rail transit stimulates urban growth. Actually, they argue that it stimulates development along the rail lines, but the implication is that it also stimulates growth. After all, if it doesn't stimulate growth, then all the rail line is doing is influencing the location of new development that would have taken place without the rail line. The difference is crucial because rail advocates also argue that the increased tax revenues from the new growth can help pay for the rail line, and if there is no net new growth, then there will be no net increase in tax revenues.



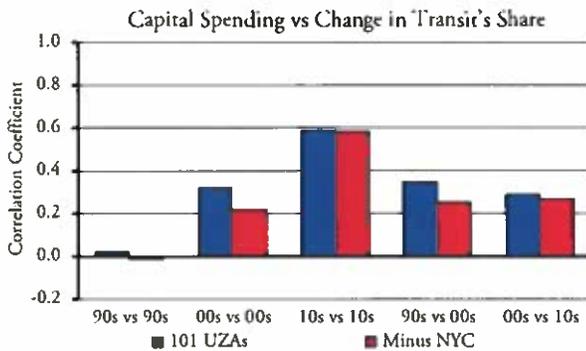
If there is a correlation between transit capital improvements and population growth, it is weak and quite possibly negative.

I compared per capita capital spending with population growth in each decade. In case there is a lag effect, I also compared capital spending with population growth in the following decade. The correlations were low, though not as low as between capital spending and ridership growth. However, a majority of the correlations were negative, suggesting that more capital spending slows population growth.

Capital Spending & Transit's Share

In most urban areas, transit's share of commuting is low and declining. But the correlation between per capita capital spending and the change in transit's share of commuting is moderate, between 0.3 and 0.6 in most cases. I suspect this is another case where the two variables—per capita capital spending and the change in transit's share—are not a causal relationship but are related to a third variable, in this case the growth in downtown jobs.

The positive correlation seems to be mainly due to the older urban areas with high downtown job numbers and legacy rail systems: Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington. They are joined by Seattle, whose downtown has seen amazing job growth in the last decade. However, other urban areas that spent a lot on rail, including Dallas, Houston, and Denver, have seen transit's share steadily fall, while transit share fell in two out of the three time periods in Baltimore, St. Louis, and San Diego. Interestingly, transit's share of commuting grew in Phoenix and Orlando until they built rail, when it fell.



The correlation between transit capital spending and the growth in transit's share of commuting seems to be mainly due to a few urban areas with large downtowns and, in most cases, legacy rail transit systems that require much expensive capital replacement.

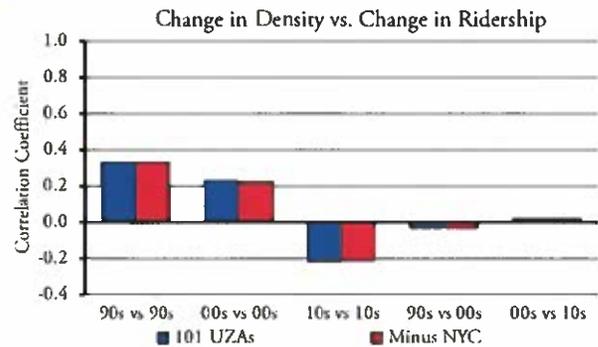
It is worth noting that several urban areas, including Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Portland, San Francisco, and San Jose, were able to increase transit's share of commuting between 2010 and 2018 despite a decline in per capita transit ridership in the same period. This is likely because ride hailing services such as Uber and Lyft are taking more non-commuting trips away from transit than commute trips. This is a continuation of trends that began in the 1920s when automobiles first became affordable to a majority of American families.

Density and Per Capita Ridership

Urban planners fervently believe that they can boost transit ridership by increasing population densities. Since my data set includes populations and land areas, I was able to test this. As usual, I tested changes in density in each decade with changes in per capita ridership in that decade as well as in the next decade.

The results were mixed. Increasing densities were associated with increasing per capita ridership in the 1990s and 2000s, but negatively associated with them in the 2010s. Further, increasing densities in either the 1990s or 2000s had no effect on the growth of per capita ridership

in the 2000s or 2010s. These results suggest that, if it ever was true that increasing densities could increase transit ridership, it isn't true anymore.



If increasing population densities ever had an effect on transit ridership, that effect is far weaker today.

Conclusions

The amount of money transit agencies spend on capital improvements has almost no effect on ridership or regional growth. If anything, regions that spend more on transit improvements grow slower than ones that spend less. Capital improvements may have a small effect on transit's share of commuting, though the real effect is most likely from the growth of the number of downtown jobs and the fact that regions with growing downtowns have a lot of rail transit that requires capital replacement.

This analysis also found some indications that factors that once influenced transit ridership have less of an influence or no influence today. Urban areas were once able to increase ridership by increasing their population densities, but that no longer appears to be true.

What it really comes down to is that, outside of New York and six other urban areas, transit is a negligible factor in transportation. In six of those seven urban areas (not including Seattle), most money must go to capital replacement, not expansion, which is a side effect of those regions' reliance on expensive forms of transit.

Transit is in decline in most of the nation. Just spending more money on transit is not going to change this. Transit agencies and cities that want to increase ridership need to find ways of doing so that are more cost-effective than expensive new transit projects.

Randal O'Toole, the Antiplanner, is a land-use and transportation policy analyst and author of *Romance of the Rails: Why the Passenger Trains We Love Are Not the Transportation We Need*. The data collected to produce this policy brief is available in a [downloadable spreadsheet](#). Masthead photo showing construction of the Cincinnati streetcar is by Travis Estell.

MOORE

Mass transit is making gridlock worse

Why in the world is the federal government, 20 years into the 21st century, continuing to pour tens of billions of tax dollars into little-used mass transit rail projects? In a digital age with increasingly popular and cheap door-to-door ride-sharing apps such as Uber and Lyft, universal use of cars by all income groups, and the revolution of smart driverless vehicles around the next corner, subway systems and light rail are as old-fashioned as the rotary phone. The federal government and urban planners in at least 25 cities are frantically spending money to lay down tracks that in 10 or 20 years, they will have to rip right out of the ground.

The scandal here is that mass transit is adding to traffic congestion problems across America. It is also blocking mobility as we divert billions of gas tax dollars that are supposed to get spent on road repairs and expansions to white elephant transit projects with minuscule ridership that in most cities is shrinking.

Meanwhile, the public is increasingly infuriated by traffic gridlock. In 2018, the average driver lost \$1,348 by sitting in traffic. Congestion is now nearly a \$100 billion annual tax on the economy. In cities such as Boston, Chicago, and



Los Angeles, drivers lose the equivalent of three to four weeks a year on the job snarled in traffic. By the way, every one of those cities has new or expanded transit systems that were designed to ease traffic congestion.

The latest transportation data underscores the futility of transit as a solution to inner-city gridlock. Today, fewer than 1 in 20 commuters takes transit to work. Yes, there are some densely populated cities where transit works and may even be indispensable — New York being by far the leader in transit use, with Washington and San Francisco not far behind. Almost everywhere else, transit numbers are so trivial as to have virtually no impact on traffic congestion whatsoever. For every one person using transit, 18 are in cars. About as many people walk, scooter, or ride bikes to work as use transit.

Yet urban planners arrogantly refuse to listen to what commuters want while

pouring money into fashionable light rail systems that people use the least. Transportation expert Wendell Cox has noted that for the exorbitant cost of transit subsidies in many cities, “it would be less expensive for taxpayers to purchase every transit rider a brand new Prius.”

But the subsidies keep rolling in. In Seattle, the urban transit enthusiasts have come forward with a grandiose plan called “Sound Transit.” It’s a plan to spend \$100 billion on new bus and rail projects over the next 25 years with car and gas taxes, tolls, and fees. But its analysis shows it will lead to almost no reduction in traffic congestion in that sprawling and gridlocked city. For tens of billions of dollars less, but spent on new and smart road technologies, average commute times would fall, even with the increase in population.

Even the urban myth that billions of dollars of big-city transit subsidies are needed to help the poor and minorities is fatuous. The percentage of Hispanics using transit has fallen 21% since 2000. Over the last two decades, almost 1 in 5 black commuters has stopped riding transit. The percentage of people with incomes below \$30,000 who use mass transit fell over the last 20 years, while those with incomes above \$75,000 has risen.

Ironically, the most significant change in transportation over the past several decades is that millions more poor people and minorities can afford to own a car and drive where they want, when they want. For low-income households, transit isn’t something to aspire to, but to be liberated from. Studies show conclusively that owning a car is literally and figuratively a road to higher incomes for those at the bottom.

If the goal of American transportation policy is greater mobility and speed at ever-lower costs, the first step is to stop laying down another inch of rail. Investing in mass transit makes as much sense in 2020 as building telephone poles. So just stop at this red light. ★

Stephen Moore is the finance and economics columnist of the *Washington Examiner* and an economic consultant with FreedomWorks.



Sent: Wednesday, May 13, 2020 10:50 AM
To: Gerald Daugherty
Subject: One of the emails I receive from NYTimes

CAUTION: This email is from OUTSIDE Travis County. Links or attachments may be dangerous. Click the Phish Alert button above if you think this email is malicious.

There may be no going back

Will office towers in big cities like New York ever be full again? The mass work-from-home experiment of 2020 has some executives rethinking their real estate footprint, The Times's Matthew Haag writes.

“Looking forward, are people going to want to crowd into offices?” asks Diane Ramirez, the chief executive of Halstead, which has more than a thousand real estate agents in the New York region. (In other words, she should know.)

- Barclays' C.E.O., Jes Staley, said recently that “the notion of putting 7,000 people in a building may be a thing of the past.”
- Google and Facebook recently said most staff will work from home for the rest of the year.
- Twitter said yesterday that if employees want to work from home permanently, “we will make that happen.”

It's about productivity. Eliminating city-center rent expenses isn't helpful if makes employees less effective. But executives on recent earnings calls seemed pleasantly surprised by remote arrangements:

- John Wren, the C.E.O. of Omnicom: “We've seen firsthand that our people can be just as productive at home as they are in the office.”
- Richard Fairbank, the C.E.O. of Capital One: “People are all in. They're engaged, and the productivity is extraordinary from people working from home.”
- John Rainey, the C.F.O. of PayPal: “It's maybe sort of counterintuitive, but we have the highest level of productivity among our work force that we've ever seen in our history.”

Is Mass Transit Dead?

After COVID-19, will Americans go back to using trains and buses at the same level?

By Nicole Gelinis

The New York City subway system's first modern experience with an outbreak of a deadly virus was half comedy, half triumph. In October 2014, Craig Spencer, an American doctor recently returned from treating Ebola patients in Guinea, decided to celebrate with a night on the town. From his West Harlem apartment, Spencer took three separate subways to a bowling alley in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, then took an Uber home.

The next day, he fell ill with a fever. Snarking commenters wagged that Spencer, with his perfect millennial mix of transportation and venue, had put all of gentrifying New York at risk of gruesome death, all because he wanted to amuse himself when he should have been self-quarantining.

Meanwhile, New York's public health system snapped to its protocol, one it rehearsed for years. Bellevue, the city's premier public hospital, isolated and treated Spencer until he made a full re-

covery. Public attention focused on the crowded subways Spencer had taken. One rider, donning medical gloves for her commute later that week, told the *New York Post* she wouldn't take any chances: "I don't play with my health." Another commuter vowed not to touch any subway poles. "I'm sticking to myself," he said. "I'm concerned about contracting the virus."

But the state-run Metropolitan Transportation Authority shined. It had a two-year-old pandemic plan in place, designed partly, as one former top MTA official remembers, in response to the reemergence of Ebola in Africa in 2012. The MTA noted in a confident statement that the Ebola virus could "not live for more than a few hours on hard services," and the authority already had a protocol for employees cleaning up potentially infectious waste, which could spread the virus. It had "updated its protocols to ensure employees are issued nitrile gloves, use a 10 percent bleach solution, and double-bag any potentially infectious waste." The Transport Workers Union agreed, noting that waste removal was

"nothing new." To reassure New Yorkers, Mayor Bill de Blasio rode the subway a few stops in full view of the press, holding a coffee cup in one bare hand and a subway pole in the other.

The episode, soon forgotten, was a triumph for the MTA. Subway and commuter-rail riders didn't flee, and ridership reached record levels by 2016. The MTA, of course, knew that it could face other types of infectious diseases. But there, too, top officials felt comfortable. A 2011 *Journal of Urban Health* study,

**“
New York's MTA has pared its schedule, but few commuters are around to notice. Subway ridership, typically nearly six million each day, is down 95%.**



A New York morning commute in June, 2014.

after all, published on the National Institutes of Health website, showed that even in a flu pandemic as virulent as the 1957-58 "Asian flu," which killed 1 million people globally, only "four percent of transmissions would occur on the subway." Most people would get sick in households or at school.

In mid-February 2020, even before New York had its first confirmed case of COVID-19, the MTA employed the same public health and PR protocol. On public health, the authority made clear it was deferring to state and federal experts. "We're following the guidance of CDC, the State Department of Health," said Chairman Patrick Foye. "They recommend that the public go about their business as usual." The MTA *did* step up its sanitation protocol and counseled riders to wash hands frequently.

But the message from Foye and the mayor was clear: Don't panic, don't change your behavior. Foye publicly rode the Long Island Rail Road commuter line from his suburban home to Manhattan, one hand on a pole and one hand on

his phone. The mayor, too, once again took to the subway, as did his would-be successor, City Council Speaker Corey Johnson. "You can still ride the subway," said Johnson on March 5. "I did it today from Union Square down to City Hall." MTA workers who tried to wear masks received stern rebukes, with management warning it went against uniform regulations; it was unnecessary and would scare the passengers.

Unfortunately, following the strategy that worked so well six years before, this time brought about tragedy and disaster. As of mid-April, 61 members of the MTA's 74,000-strong workforce have died from COVID-19. At a death rate nearing 100 per 100,000 people, it's likely among the highest of any American workforce. With nearly 2,300 workers currently suffering from the illness, and thousands more out sick, the MTA can barely maintain the pared-down subway, bus, and rail schedule it started offering in mid-March.

But few commuters are around to notice. Subway ridership, typically nearing

6 million each day, is down 95%. With so many crews out sick, trains can suffer delays of 40 minutes or more, and some cars are still overcrowded with essential workers. By late March, after its first three transit deaths, the MTA had begun giving out masks and gloves to its workforce as quickly as it could get its hands on them, but the death rate continued to increase. Even with an early infusion of \$4 billion in federal cash, the MTA is in severe financial distress, having warned its bondholders five separate times that its financial condition has deteriorated. Empty trains also mean rising disorder for thousands of homeless adult men. The subways remain their only haven. Crime is an issue as well. The MTA generally sees two murders in an entire year, but it recorded three in March.

Once New York emerges from its first go-around with COVID-19, the recriminations will start. Still, it is hard to see what good they will do. Should the MTA have shut service down altogether? Perhaps, but a full shutdown would have kept hundreds of thousands of grocery workers, food couriers, and home-health aides from their jobs. As Foye said in mid-March, such a drastic move would have been up to Gov. Andrew Cuomo, not up to him. Should the MTA have given out masks to workers more quickly? Likely, but it would be strange for a transit agency to bear the brunt of the criticism here when federal public health officials failed, too. The MTA eventually acted before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention changed course.

The more critical and constructive part is what happens next, not just for New York's transit system, but for transit systems across the country. New York must lead the way, if only because the region's economy can't recover unless its transit system recovers: 77% of the 3.8 million people who commute to Manhattan each day come via transit, not via private car. "New York is not like other cities," says Sarah Feinberg, acting president of New York City Transit, the MTA's subway and bus division. "Many people do not own a vehicle.... The fact that so many in the city are dependent on the transit system is both a feature and a bug."

But other dense, wealthy cities, and significant contributors to federal tax revenues, depend on transit. From Boston to San Francisco, Washington to Chicago, rail and bus networks keep even more people from clogging crowded downtown streets with cars. Even in car-centric

cities such as Houston and Detroit, bus networks get the poorest people in the workforce to and from their jobs without forcing them to incur the prohibitive monthly cost of owning and operating a car. Uber, Lyft, and other services won't fill the gap; they are expensive to use daily, and with 28 drivers dead in New York, hardly safer for workers or passengers.

Yet transit systems, and the regions they serve, face a hurdle: public fear, fear that will likely persist for months, if not years, after cities and states gradually start to reopen their economies. Tom Kozlik, head of municipal strategy at Hilltop Securities, a Dallas-based investment firm, voices concern from the perspective of an investor: "It is uncertain how willing riders will be to travel shoulder-to-shoulder standing on subways or riding on regional rail." Feinberg concurs: "It will take some time for ridership to feel comfortable and come back, just as it will take some time for people to be comfortable with restaurants, airplanes, sitting in a Broadway theater."

What can transit systems do? First, secure workplace safety. Federal public health officials should be providing support to transit systems to ascertain how employees and passengers have contracted the virus. Two months into the U.S. pandemic, though circumstantial evidence abounds, we still don't know: Are subway workers contracting COVID-19 from passengers, from fellow workers, or at home? Are they contracting it from surfaces or the air? How much protection do masks, gloves, and constant surface-cleaning afford?

The workforce needs a sure supply of medical-grade masks and gloves, optimally provided by the federal government. Longer-term, transit agencies will need to think about building enclosed booths for bus drivers, with person-



Transit systems may have to redesign infrastructure to minimize touch. In Washington and London, fare gates open automatically, eliminating the need to push turnstiles.



al air-circulation systems. The MTA is already experimenting with temperature checks for part of its workforce. As rapid-response testing develops, it and other transit agencies could potentially test workers daily, or have workers test themselves at home, making sure future waves of the pandemic, if they occur, don't spread widely.

Second, passenger health — and public perception. As the MTA's ill-fated early attempts to keep New Yorkers riding the subway show, those two things are not the same. The MTA should start handing out new, washable, reusable masks at major subway stations, as Spanish cities are doing. New York City should begin handing out millions of masks to residents in general, as Paris is doing, so that they can wear them in public, including on trains and buses.

Optimally, Washington would provide the equipment here, too: "I would love to see us have the ability and resources to hand out masks to every rider if they want one," Feinberg says. "But making sure my workforce has the supplies it needs is my top priority." Whether the MTA should require passengers to wear masks is a difficult question. "There are concerns about enforcement," notes Feinberg. But given a mask, most people will wear it. As passengers slowly come back to commuter rail, subway, and buses, the state could think about random temperature checks, too, and even, should the technology emerge, voluntary, rapid-response COVID-19 tests to assess continued community spread and respond to it.

Eventually, the MTA and other transit systems may have to redesign infrastructure to minimize touch. In

Washington and London, fare gates open automatically, eliminating the need to push turnstiles; in Paris, passengers pay for commuter-rail rides through a fare gate rather than by interacting with a conductor who must touch tickets handed to him by hundreds of passengers on a New York commuter-rail line. Even further in the future, mass-transit systems must think about automating subway lines, as in Italy's Turin and France's Lyon, to minimize worker contact with passengers further.

New York City's government, also responsible for policing the subways, must come to terms with its long-term public policy failures. Even on a good day, it is inhumane for the de Blasio administration to expect homeless adults, many of them suffering from mental illness, to find their only refuge in the subway. New York must firmly insist that no one uses the transit system unless they are going to and from an origin or destination (perhaps within a two-hour time limit) and firmly provide a humane alternative. Nor can New York tolerate the chronic low-level fare-beating that leads to other lawlessness; a fare-beater allegedly committed one of March's three subway murders, and a mentally ill homeless man may have committed the second, via an arson fire.

For now, though, the nation's transit systems need something simple: money. Washington doesn't generally subsidize transit systems' day-to-day operations; it prefers to encourage capital investment in projects such as new subway lines. Republicans, in particular, are historically suspicious of mass transit. But transit systems around the country, whether New York's sprawling network, the backbone of its tax-paying, private-sector economy, or Detroit's modest bus system, the backbone of its low-wage workforce, now face the same problem: Even with fare revenue unlikely to recover anytime soon, they must run more service, not less, as passengers trickle back, to avoid crowding. Without transit, prosperous blue cities fail, and without rich blue cities, the nation's most productive tax base falters. As for red-state, car-centric towns and suburbs: If dense blue cities fail, red states and cities will become more crowded with their former residents. ★

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Living in the Future

How this pandemic could change where we call home and how we work

By Howard Husock

Diseases, even pandemics, have historically been the dark underside of the vitality of great cities. The very term quarantine, based on the Italian words for “40 days,” originated in 14th-century Venice, when what was then the world’s greatest trading empire and wealthiest city tried to stem the import of the Black Plague by forcing visiting ships to wait that long before passengers could disembark. The cruise ships of their day sat in port, as do their contemporary equivalents.

The same concern about disease and urban density has, for more than a century, cast a long shadow over American housing policy. There is every reason to believe it will do so again as we deal with the long wake of COVID-19. Density has historically been a key way to provide inexpensive housing on a large scale. But as the plague-like concentration of COVID-19 amid the apartments and crowded subways of New York City

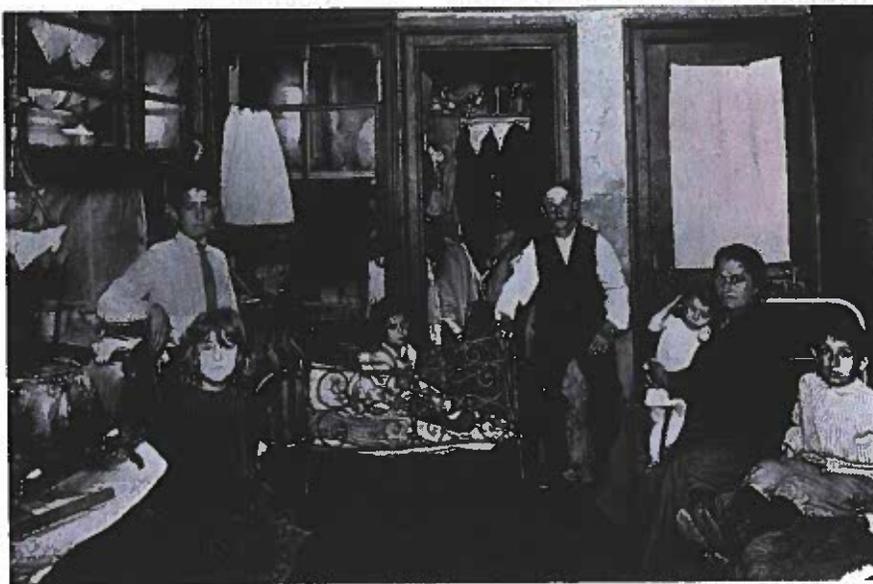
reminds us, density can be a threat to public health.

Just as the fruitless search for a tuberculosis “climate cure” led to the settling of Los Angeles and Denver, so might we see a retreat from the “densification” movement led by advocates of high-rise urban living and transit-oriented development. Such development portended the growth of more New York-style petri dishes. Yet we will still need to find ways to accommodate those of modest means and to make it possible for them to get to work. There are ways to do this, but they’ll require persuading municipalities to rethink their approach to building regulation.

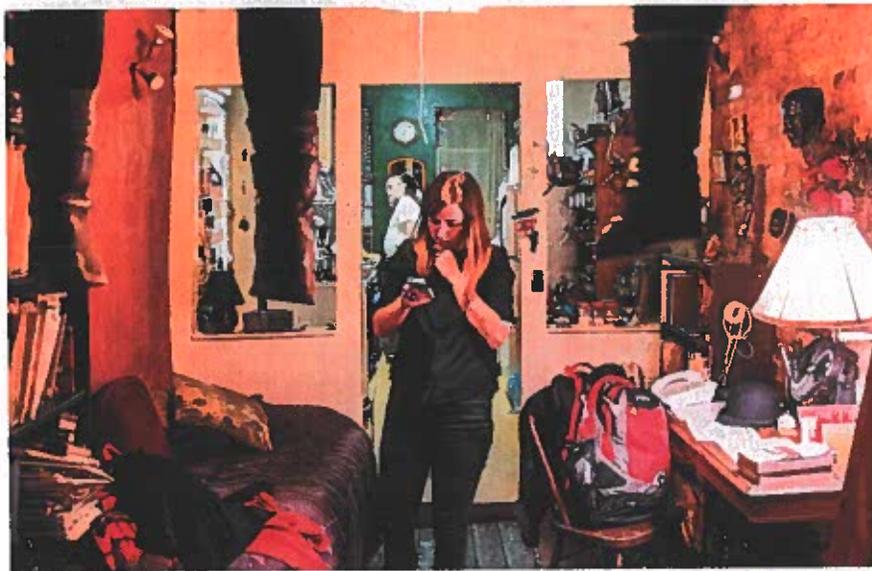
It is hard to exaggerate the role of disease and the fear of it in driving American housing policy since the 1890s. The housing reformers of that era — chief among them Jacob Riis, with his gripping 1890 photojournalistic account of New York’s Lower East Side, *How the Other Half Lives* — portrayed the slums not just as crowded and ill-lit, but as hotbeds of disease. “Poverty and penury are wedded everywhere to dirt and disease,” wrote Riis, calling attention to the concentrations

of typhus, smallpox, and “consumption” to be found in and around the tenements of Five Points and Mulberry Bend. By 1900, the housing reformer Lawrence Veiller, who would go on to become the leading advocate of municipal zoning to separate residential from industrial use and to ensure housing standards, would sponsor an exhibit replete with maps in which specific clusters of TB

“**We may see a retreat from the ‘densification’ movement led by advocates of high-rise urban living and transit-oriented development. Such development portended the growth of more New York-style Petri dishes.**”



Above, a Jacob Riis photo of a New York tenement in 1885; below, a woman and friends in a New York apartment in 2013.



spread through coughing amid crowds.

So it was that dense urban life came to be associated with disease, an association now being revived anew. One can, in fact, understand the arc of housing patterns and policy that played out over the 20th century as a flight from density, in part for just that reason. This became one of the justifications for the wholesale clearance of so-called slums that were actually thriving, working-class communities, such as Detroit's Black Bottom and Boston's West End. But its main antidote, beginning in the 1920s, was zoning. Veiller, as the leader of the National Housing Association, was the link between tenement housing reform and the adoption of densi-

ty-limiting zoning across the country.

The result was suburbanization — first inner-ring developments with small, multifamily structures and then, after World War II, the commuter suburb of single-family homes. Even these became, over time, less and less dense, as the small homes of first-generation suburbs such as Levittown, New York, were followed by the multiacre lots of exurbia. As the informative blog *Old Urbanist* notes, Levittown's small homes (they were just 800 square feet) were close enough together that 7,500 people lived in 1 square mile. By contrast, in the town of Easton, Connecticut, 2- and 3-acre zoning makes for a population "density" of just 260 per square mile.

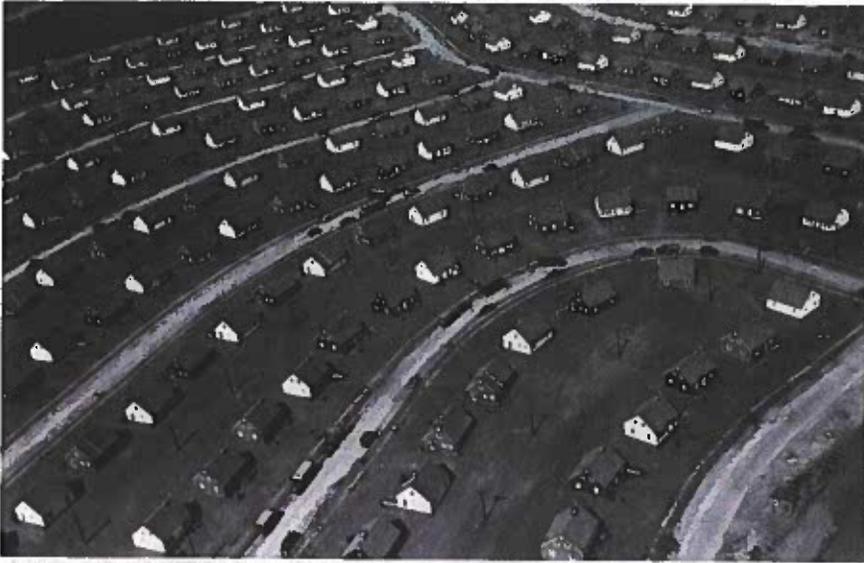
Americans, in other words, have long been on a flight from population density.

There had, however, lately been signs of change prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Most notable has been California's pro-density YIMBY ("yes in my backyard," a response to the all-too-common "not in my backyard" sentiment) movement, led by Bay Area state Sen. Scott Wiener. It advocates selective state preemption of local, low-density zoning so as to permit the construction of mid-rise apartment buildings along new transit lines, such as those already operating in San Jose, where housing prices are among the highest in the country. The underlying logic is undeniable: More residential units per acre means lower housing costs and could offer a way for emigrants from economically struggling parts of the country to move to booming Silicon Valley. The historic association of density with disease had seemed to be forgotten in our era of antibiotics and clean drinking water.

But Wiener's legislation to relax zoning and make possible "transit-oriented development" had failed to pass the California legislature three times, even before the COVID-19 outbreak. The virus seems sure to finish it off. Crowding will again be associated with disease — doubly so because YIMBY-ites and environmentalists are wedded to moving Americans to the trolleys and buses they will now, more than ever, want to avoid. Neither will this association be obviously misguided, especially because there is no reason to believe that there will not be deadly successors to the novel coronavirus, bringing with them new plagues.

So, what's next for housing policy and patterns, post-COVID? One should never bet against stagnation, of course. The California "model" could persist: low rates of new construction, long commutes for those who can only find inexpensive housing far from centers of employment.

But it's not hard to imagine other possibilities. If the COVID-19 outbreak has reinforced any trend, it is the further shift toward working from home for those who can. If even a portion of Google and Facebook employees leave Silicon Valley for the Columbia Valley in Washington state, for example — or any place in what is currently flyover country — and work remotely, the landscapers and baristas on whom they rely will have reason to live there as well. Of course, those lesser-paid employees will need affordable places to live, and some will still need to



Above, Levittown, New York, in 1947; below, a 2,700-square-foot, four-bedroom house in Wichita, Kansas, listed for sale at \$212,900.

get to company headquarters. This could lead to profound changes.

Cities experiencing decline but that have solid, inexpensive housing stock, good infrastructure, and amenities — think Buffalo, Cleveland, or certainly Chicago and Milwaukee — could be just as good work-from-home sites as Brooklyn or the Bay Area, both wildly overpriced at present. Any trend that lessens pressure on the cities that have been disproportionately thriving will matter greatly.

What follows further is less a prediction than a hope. We could, or should, see what might be called dispersed densification: new growth in what was once called “the poor side of town” or “the other side of the tracks.” Even in areas of continued high housing demand, there



is room, zoning permitting, for density that takes a form other than high-rise, one-bedroom buildings built along train tracks. Historically, healthy cities have offered a range of housing types. Two- or three-family homes, a small block of row homes or bungalows, offer lower-income families a chance to become property owners and build neighborhoods rather than getting just the “affordable, set-aside” units in New York apartment buildings. These homes would be as useful for lower-paid tech employees looking to raise a family and new immigrants working their way up. Of course, this will require modest zoning relaxation in some places that requires persuading small-town and city planning boards that it’s in their own interests to permit the construction of housing where teachers, police, firefighters, nurses, EMTs, and tradesmen can afford to live.

This is a vision of new and restored middle-class and working-class neighborhoods — not reservations for the

very poor (such as public housing). Yes, these are neighborhoods that will be somewhat denser than those filled out with single-family homes, but these will still be far less dense than clusters of apartment buildings, where, today, residents must worry about the virus germs lurking on elevator buttons. And, as Richard Florida has noted in *City Lab*, poor, dense places may always be at greater public health risk than wealthy ones, if only because the latter can get food delivered during lockdowns. (Although the New York neighborhoods where COVID-19 fatalities are highest, such as the Bronx, are also the places where underlying health conditions such as diabetes are also clustered.)

Such new residential patterns, both in already-wealthy cities and in cities that may see an influx of work-at-home newcomers, will undermine the case for costly new transit systems, which rely on super-density to make financial sense. That does not, however, mean that we will stick with single-passenger auto commuting. One can imagine that new transportation developments, such as the small, Uber-like, on-demand buses that are supplanting failing public bus systems in some places, will help employees get to jobs both near and far.

Put another way, if, as seems likely, higher-income employees simply take advantage of working remotely to fan out more broadly across the country, the housing market and the nature of cities will change dramatically. The peaks in places of high demand will fall. Demand may be spread out, making housing easier to afford. New construction of less-dense housing types may find a place in today’s highest-cost cities, and renovation may take off elsewhere.

Some will argue that this will undermine the intellectual and commercial innovation that has historically sprouted from the close contacts of cities. The popularity of Zoom meetings and flexible hours suggests otherwise.

Without a doubt, though, the coronavirus will have implications for where Americans want to live and work. The status quo ante is unlikely to return. ★

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