

A Tale of Two Transit Networks: Separate But Not Equal

by Scott Bogren

You had better have a car. In our society to be without a personal automobile is to be without basic services, without entertainment, without employment and without a prayer.

Public transportation in the United States is in crisis. Federal, state and local money for transportation is steadily shrinking. Public transportation providers around the country, feeling the pinch, are forced to raise fares, abandon routes or both. Doing more with less has become the industry's mantra.

But as many transit agencies face these difficult times, another dilemma has surfaced. Which transportation network to fund? The one designed to take often affluent suburban commuters out of their cars? Or the one taking the transit dependent population -- the poor, the elderly, people with disabilities and minorities -- to vital destinations like health care, education and employment? High tech, headline-grabbing rail projects or low-tech buses from yesterday's news?

Signs of impending disaster loom everywhere. Transit systems in cities like Greenville, S.C., are shutting down without any notice while others, like in Montgomery or Birmingham, Ala., are scaling back service so sharply as to be barely recognizable. The decline in overall transit ridership is only matched by the precipitous decline in federal and state subsidies. Today, more Americans are threatened by isolation than ever before. The vicious cycle of escalating costs and dwindling ridership and funds from governments and fareboxes has proven -- thus far -- an unyielding foe.

Why, you may ask, are we allowing our once effective public transportation network to unravel? Because transit riders -- particularly the transit dependent -- are the easiest people in our society to overlook. They have little political power and even less voice.

All the while, many urban transit agencies are building sleek new light-rail and subway projects in last-gasp efforts to win back choice riders (passengers who own automobiles and therefore ride public transit by choice). Many of these fancy new systems are stunningly subsidized, and misguided.

So where is public transportation shining? Around the periphery of society. Buses are often full in center cities, in isolated rural areas and on services for people with disabilities -- the areas that receive the tiniest federal and state handouts.

In short, public transportation has reached a crisis not only of funding, but of priorities. Is the goal to get people out of their personal automobiles or is it to transport people with no alternative? Ridership patterns of the past 20 years and today's funding realities tell us transit can't do both.

Geographic Inequities

Cities receive the predominance of federal transit funding. In fact, the largest urban areas (more than one million population) receive more than three out of every four dollars for public transportation, even though they make up roughly 38 percent of the total population according to the 1990 census.

The inequity is even more pronounced when rural areas are brought into the picture. Nearly 40 percent of all rural counties in this country have little or no public transportation (see map). In terms of funding per capita, the figures are startling. Persons living in the largest urban areas receive \$35 per capita while rural transportation funding per capita stands at \$1.50. Small-urban (towns of between 50,000 and 200,000 population) residents receive almost \$8 each.

To bring rural public transportation service levels equivalent to those of urban areas, funding would have to be dramatically increased -- CTAA estimates funding would need to be doubled. While such increases of \$100 million may seem hefty, FTA often spends billions of dollars on a single urban rail project.

To many rural public transit managers, it's a situation with which they've learned to cope.

"We've always been right at survival, no luxuries," says Rochelle Cotey, executive director of Alger County Public Transportation in Munising, Mich.

But when envisioning more funding, Cotey sees an important untapped market which she currently cannot serve due to lack of money.

"The economy here in the Upper Peninsula is becoming more and more service-job oriented and we need to be operating different hours," she says. "The usual morning and evening peaks for the workforce are changing and we need to change too. Right now, we can't."

In rural Nebraska, employment transportation is a dream.

"Most systems don't even address employment runs," says Nebraska Association of Transportation Providers Executive Director Marlene Gakle. "For many it's no car equals no job."

It's easy to overlook rural transportation riders. Ridership figures reveal that the transit dependent make up a disproportionate amount of rural passengers. In fact, senior citizens' and people with disabilities' relative share of rural ridership doubles their share of the rural population. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of all rural passengers have household incomes of less than \$15,000.

"With such limited resources, riders have to base many of their decisions according to the bus schedule," says Gakle. "There's no flexibility."

The poverty of transportation riders crosses geographic lines. In areas with populations from one million and below, more than half of all transit passengers have incomes of less than \$15,000 per year. In terms of ethnicity, minority riders (Black, Latino, Asian, Native American) account nationally for nearly 60 percent of all transit passengers.

The inequities in our current transportation system stretch across age, race and economic lines to create a highly unbalanced framework. And because transportation is so vital to basic quality of life issues like employment, health care, independence and more, the inequities compound into a sturdy barrier between many people and the good life.

Breaking Development: Settlement Gives L.A. Riders a Victory

After this issue of CTR went to press, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) and the coalition of groups representing bus riders agreed on September 25 to a sweeping plan that will settle the pending lawsuit accusing the MTA of neglecting minority riders.

The proposed consent decree, which must still be approved by a federal judge, would preserve the popular monthly pass at its original \$42, establish a new \$11 weekly pass, hold the cash fare for bus service at \$1.35 for at least two years and put at least 152 more buses on the streets. In addition, the MTA agreed to lower the bus fare from \$1.35 to 75¢ during off-peak hours on some routes serving the transit dependent. Bus riders around the city celebrated.

"We've put way too many of the resources into fixed rail and at the same time ignoring buses," says Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan.

U.S. District Judge Terry Hatter Jr. is expected to conduct a public hearing before formally approving the consent decree. Stay tuned to CTR for updates.

Equity Is Not Just a Rural Issue

The inequities are readily apparent in Los Angeles. Home to some of the world's most famous freeways, traffic snarls and smog, mass transit has always taken a backseat to the automobile in L.A. Nonetheless, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) operates more than 2,000 buses throughout the region and is undertaking a massively expensive endeavor to squeeze subways, light-rail lines and commuter trains into L.A.'s sprawling landscape.

In the summer of 1994, the MTA found itself in a financial crunch. Agency officials decided to both raise bus fares from \$1.10 to \$1.35 and eliminate the monthly bus pass program. In addition, the fare hike and proposed monthly pass elimination were accompanied by a cutback in bus service.

According to the MTA, the fare increase was necessary to deal with a \$126 million operating deficit. Monthly passes were proposed for elimination due to widespread fraud.

The Los Angeles Labor/Community Strategy Center and the L.A. Bus Riders Union, along with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates are suing the MTA. A temporary restraining order was issued that kept fares frozen for six months until a pre-trial compromise was reached: the MTA agreed to retain the monthly bus passes at \$49 (a seven dollar increase) in exchange for the full 25-cent fare hike. The trial is set for October 8.

"The suit challenges transportation racism and the creation of racist, separate and unequal public transportation systems in the way that Brown vs. Board of Education did for challenging racist structures of public education," says Strategy Center Director Eric Mann.

There is ample evidence that the MTA is subsidizing its commuter rail service on the backs of transit dependent bus riders. In 1995, the bus system provided the MTA with more than 90 percent of its total passengers, while the commuter rail service added 6 percent. Astoundingly, however, the MTA allocates more than 70 percent of its resources to commuter rail. All the while, L.A.'s 350,000 bus riders deal with peak hour bus overcrowding, aging equipment and shelter- and bench-less bus stops.

"Rail builders have ties to the MTA Board," says Martin Hernandez, an organizer with the Strategy Center. "City officials get campaign contributions from these companies."

Organizers with the Bus Riders Union are not only seeking less expensive bus service, but better and more frequent service. They clearly realize the critical

connection between mobility and quality of life. As jobs leave center cities and move to suburban industrial parks, transportation becomes a vital link.

"Where are the jobs?" says Hernandez. "You can't get to them from my neighborhood."

Organizers see the combination of rising fares and elimination of passes as a direct barrier to many inner city Los Angelenos' future. On a limited budget, a monthly pass can really help. The lack of a pass can easily double one's transportation spending. Judging purely from the allocation of limited resources, it seems the MTA values certain riders more than others. It's a national trend.

Second-Class Service

In Buffalo, N.Y., a 17-year-old girl was killed last December when she attempted to cross seven lanes of traffic from her Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA) bus stop to her job at a suburban mall's food court. It seems mall ownership wasn't interested in having any bus stops on their property. In fact, documents from the NFTA indicate that the mall's developer had considered allowing buses that serve suburban areas and charter buses from Canada to stop on mall property, but didn't want to provide access to poorer, predominantly black inner-city Buffalo neighborhoods.

Transit provides essential mobility to many of the poor, but transit accounted for less than 7 percent of trips made by low-income people in 1983... If public transit subsidies benefit anyone, they benefit affluent suburbanites, not the poor. A Los Angeles study determined that inner-city service, patronized largely by the poor, received less than 22 cents in total operating subsidy per passenger boarding, while express service, patronized largely by the affluent, received more than \$1.18 per boarding. A 1986 study showed that riders with incomes exceeding \$50,000 per year received 50 percent more in federal operating subsidies per transit trip than did low-income users of transit.

-- CATO Institute, False Dreams and Broken Promises .

"They just said no," says an NFTA spokesman. "They (the mall developers) said they would consider buses from the suburbs but they didn't want the Number 6 (from inner-city Buffalo) coming in."

Belatedly, all buses are now welcome at the mall, but not before public outrage and potential boycotts from local civil rights leaders threatened to cut into the mall's bottom line. And not before someone had to die. In the aftermath, two other Buffalo-area malls were found to have no public transit access. They, too, have changed.

A local newspaper, in an editorial, summed up the issue: "The (mall) folks hadn't said much about the city bus ban. But one could take a decent guess at their thinking. Anybody riding the bus probably couldn't afford a car. If you can't afford a car, you don't have much money, so you don't fit the ideal shopper demographic."

With the majority of job opportunities for people who are transit dependent swiftly moving from downtown to suburbs, the role of transportation becomes increasingly crucial. But as transit agencies are either shunned by areas because of who they transport or raise fares to unreasonable levels, the challenge for people to leave the transit-dependent class becomes more daunting. In some cities where the bus system largely serves the transit dependent, localities have found it easier just to slash routes, or sometimes end service all together.

Slim Funding and Transit Dependent Ridership Spell Doom

In Greenville, S.C., it all ended one Thursday last May. People who had been depending on Greenville Transit Authority (GTA) buses for years were left with absolutely no service. They waited by the bus stops, but no vehicles came. Trips to work, to shop, to the doctor were all canceled. To some local residents it was a disgrace; to others, it was about time.

"Let's face it, there are no choice riders in Greenville," says one local, who added, "and the bus riders were politically powerless."

In fact, there was little history of the middle class ever having used the Greenville Transit Authority's services. It was a system serving the working poor. Accordingly, when the axe fell, local area hotels were among the first to speak up in support of transit. Why? Much of their labor force had no way to get to work.

"There were people that lost their jobs, quite honestly; but in some instances, employers have helped. And those riders that have found a way will not go back to GTA because they don't think they can count on it," says Roy Tucker with the South Carolina Department of Transportation.

The immediate aftershocks were felt in Greenville-area health clinics, which were practically deserted. Many other vital social service programs like Medicaid were also adversely affected. In all, the system was dead for nearly a month.

A local editorial summed it up: "What emerges is two images of Greenville: One of a community eager to make itself a better place for people to live and work; another of a community lacking the willingness to support public transportation."

But mobility is not dead in Greenville. A skeleton system with six to eight routes, half the previous size, has been cobbled together. And led by the United Way, social service agencies are doing their best to make sure their clients find a way to vital services.

"Our role is to ensure that people have access to services and opportunities," says Katy Smith of the United Way of Greenville County. "We're doing volunteer transportation for medical appointments, the local Easter Seal Society is paying for taxis for dialysis patients and the senior center is handling congregate meals with volunteers."

But Smith is quick to make the point that these new arrangements are in no way long-term solutions.

"The working poor are still stuck and our transportation efforts are even less coordinated than they were before this crisis," she says.

Of course Greenville isn't the only small-urban area facing transportation funding shortfalls. Across the state of Alabama, which provides no state funding for transportation, several cities have dramatically scaled back service and raised fares. Montgomery and Birmingham are prime examples.

Last September, Birmingham's Metropolitan Area Express (MAX) cut service in half in response to dwindling federal subsidies. Saturday trips were canceled altogether. Much of this was done with little or no public input.

"The customer (rider) isn't even on the radar screen," says Jan Bell, executive director of the Alabama Kidney Foundation which relied upon MAX to get patients to vital dialysis treatments. "The indignity of it was unacceptable, people were losing their jobs."

A rider facing an uncertain future responded this way: "The people of Birmingham have a vision...to be able to get to work, make an appointment for the doctor, to be able to pick up groceries, just to be independent."

There were some in the community, though, that felt if the passengers couldn't pay for the services, they shouldn't receive any. Callous? Yes. Unusual? Hardly. Public transportation has become a polarizing issue.

In Montgomery, the city where Rosa Parks made her famous stand in 1955 for a seat in the front of the bus, the fight today is simply to keep that same bus moving.

Service has been cut by 50 percent, while fares have been jacked up by 50 percent. For many in the community, that's a pretty tough equation.

"Out of one side of their mouth, they're saying people should work," said one rider last summer. "But they're denying people the way to get to work."

Sometimes, however, even transit advocates are losing their perspective. When asked where transportation fits among the many priorities an urban area faces, a transit planner in Montgomery went so far as to wonder why people just couldn't buy cars and acknowledged that spending precious funds on transit is not a great bang for the buck.

It is interesting to note that none of these cities had any rail service. In all three cases, locals freely admit that the predominance of riders were (and are) the transit dependent, which made the decision to strangle service due to legitimate funding shortfalls easier.

Says Bell: "The history with buses here is pretty unique, transit translates into race."

In Birmingham, a Blue Ribbon Transit Committee has been formed to analyze the area's public transportation needs and make recommendations. In a recent report, the committee developed three options for the future of mobility in the city.

Options 1 and 2 involve creating a regional transportation authority empowered to shape regional transit policy and launch a paratransit consortium to coordinate human service and ADA transportation, working with the Metropolitan Planning Organization, local governments, the Alabama DOT and others. The major difference between the first two options is that in one, the authority operates exclusively as a policy-making organization; in the other, it becomes a direct supplier of transportation services. The third option presented by the committee simply reforms the current Birmingham Jefferson County Transit Authority.

Al Folcher, the chairman of the Blue Ribbon Committee has a detailed vision of how his group can positively affect the future of public transportation in Birmingham: "We want to be an organization that will meet the region's needs, with a consistent funding source that can't be messed with, to provide for a family of services within the area and to be accepted by the general public."

Rails to Riches

While some of the most vulnerable cities have been forced to effectively end service or totally re-think their mobility strategies, other more affluent areas have cast their future with expensive rail projects designed to attract the choice or suburban rider back onto public transportation.

Cities like Los Angeles, Dallas, St. Louis, Cleveland, Sacramento, Baltimore and Portland (among others) have either recently completed or are in the middle of high-dollar rail projects. Ironically, these new light rail projects often are simply re-tracing the tracks once plied by streetcars. Typically these new systems connect more affluent suburban areas with major employment corridors. And some of these new systems are even attracting riders. But at what cost?

In its discretionary programs the past two years, the Federal Transit Administration has spent \$2.7 billion on new rail projects -- including construction, rail cars, planning, etc. During the same time, the agency has spent \$680 million on new bus projects and bus facilities. The recognized formula for rail vs. bus funding in the discretionary program is four dollars to one. Additionally, in 1994, the 30 largest transportation agencies in the U.S. spent 66 percent more for each rail trip than they did on bus trips -- and these figures don't even count all of the costly construction and planning that goes into any rail project.

For example, Los Angeles' Red Line Subway project will cost \$2.8 billion. For the same money, one could purchase 60,000 lift-equipped paratransit buses or fund the entire rural public transportation program for the next 21 years. And what could an area like Greenville or Birmingham do with such money? At the time construction began in L.A., then Congresswoman Olympia Snowe from Maine estimated that if the rail project was 20 yards shorter, the entire public transit budget for her state could be funded. What could be done with a mile? It's all a question of priorities.

It seems certain that federal funding, though the cuts may have bottomed out, is unlikely to dramatically increase and operating assistance will be further scaled back. Funding two separate transit networks will not be feasible.

Mobility: A Civil Right

The framers of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) had it right when they decided to include mobility as a fundamental civil right. People with disabilities would be isolated from opportunity, they thought, without mandated transportation services. So why should other transit-dependent populations -- the elderly, rural residents, minorities, etc. -- be any different?

The quintessential American idea that you can't succeed unless you own a car just needs to be extended: economic potential is tied to mobility, not a car.

However, American affluence and dependence on the personal automobile are a definite hindrance to mobility being considered a right. The automobile culture that has been encouraged through energy policy, massive highway construction projects

and more won't easily fade. In many areas, parking is cheap, roads aren't terribly congested and air pollution is not a dire problem -- so why the need for public transit?

"(People think) everyone's always had a car and public transit is just for the needy," says Al Folcher, chair of the Blue Ribbon Transit Committee in Birmingham, Ala., about mass transit's challenge. "People just don't get the economic benefits that we can provide."

"Transportation is a basic human right," agrees Martin Hernandez in Los Angeles. "Not everybody can afford a car, but without it, you're stuck."

There's an issue beyond the automobile. Can we as a society afford to isolate large segments of the population, restricting their access to employment, health care, education and more? The answer, obviously, is no. And how can welfare-to-work strategies ever succeed if welfare recipients lack the means to get to work? Effective public transportation, clearly, is a fundamental right without which many of the rights we all take for granted are worthless. After all, the bus is not the end product, it is merely a tool to allow people to travel where necessity takes them.