Ghost Train: The Case Against Mass Transit Subsidies

By “Coach Vance” Trefethen

*Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially reform its transportation policy.*

The federal government sends money to the states to subsidize mass transit from the Federal Transit Administration ($12 billion/year) and the Highway Trust Fund ($8 billion/year). Both of these are a waste of money because mass transit is not an economical way to move Americans in this century, and because federal funding distorts decision-making at the local level. Highways are where Americans move and it should be prioritized in funding.

Mass transit fails for several reasons. First, nobody rides. Sure, maybe a lot of people in Manhattan do, but in most places, most of the time, only a tiny percentage of the travel Americans do every day is on mass transit. Subsidies represent the many paying a lot of money so that a few can ride around in mostly empty buses and trains.

Second, when the federal government funds things, they appear "free," and states tend to build them without proper accounting for their actual costs or potential ridership. A lot of useless projects get built that would have never been done if the local citizens had been taxed to pay for their own project. Abolishing federal subsidies and devolving responsibility back to the states and cities would make them more accountable and responsible, since they would be spending their own money and accountable to their own voters. They would build transit projects people would actually use, or spend the money on highways that people actually use, rather than trains almost no one uses.

Negatives will argue that most of the Affirmative's analysis is incorrect, and that even if its dollars and cents calculations were right, there are still ample social justifications for transit. First, transit is an economic benefit to communities that build it. It generates jobs and economic activity that would not have otherwise occurred. Second, increased highway construction as the solution to congestion is a mirage. Every time you build a highway, within a short time it fills up with cars and the congestion is just as bad as it was before. The only way to get those cars off the road is to offer them an alternative to driving, which is mass transit. Finally, even if mass transit didn't pay for itself with economic growth, it would still be worth doing because of the social benefits it provides to the poor and disadvantaged. Those who can't afford cars or who cannot drive due to disabilities need a way to get to their jobs so they can be productive members of society. Mass transit fills that key social need.

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Ghost Train: The Case Against Mass Transit Subsidies

Commuters pay billions in taxes to subsidize empty mass transit trains that run by while they sit stuck in traffic on congested highways. Please join my partner and me as we affirm that: The United States federal government should substantially reform its transportation policy.

OBSERVATION 1. We offer the following DEFINITIONS.

**Policy**: “a high-level overall plan embracing the general goals and acceptable procedures especially of a governmental body” (*Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, copyright 2017* [*http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/policy*](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/policy))  
  
**Substantial**: “considerable in quantity” (*Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, copyright 2017* [*http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/substantially*](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/substantially)*)*

**Transportation**: “means of conveyance or travel from one place to another” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dict. 2017* [*https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transportation*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transportation)*)*

OBSERVATION 2. INHERENCY, or the structure of the Status Quo.

FACT 1. The Federal Transit Administration

The FTA spends $12 billion on transit subsidies.

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

The Department of Transportation's Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has an annual budget of $12 billion, most which is spent on subsidies to state and local governments.Through these subsidies and related regulations, federal policymakers play a major role in shaping urban transportation choices.

FACT 2. The Highway Trust Fund

Despite its name, the Highway Trust Fund has $8 billion diverted for mass transit

Michael Sargent 2015 (Policy Analyst, Transportation & Infrastructure, Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies, Heritage Foundation) 11 May 2015 “Highway Trust Fund Basics: A Primer on Federal Surface Transportation Spending” <http://www.heritage.org/transportation/report/highway-trust-fund-basics-primer-federal-surface-transportation-spending>

In fiscal year (FY) 2015, Highway Trust Fund spending is projected to reach $52 billion. The Highway Account is expected to spend $44 billion, but take in only $34 billion in revenue and interest, while the Mass Transit Account is expected to spend $8 billion compared with $5 billion in revenue, resulting in a combined deficit of $13 billion.

OBSERVATION 3. We offer the following PLAN implemented by Congress and the President

1. Congress votes to eliminate mass transit subsidies from the Federal Transit Administration and the Highway Trust Fund.  
2. The Highway Trust Fund’s Mass Transit Account is shifted back to highway funding  
3. Enforcement through existing agencies and normal means  
4. Plan is phased in over 10 years beginning next October 1.  
5. Affirmative speeches may clarify

OBSERVATION 4. JUSTIFICATIONS

JUSTIFICATION 1. Waste of money

1. The Problem: Federal transit funding is expensive and less efficient than other solutions

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

Transit funding is not a proper function of the federal government, and it distorts state and local decision-making. Federal funding encourages state and local governments to pursue high-cost and less-efficient transportation solutions — in particular, rail transit. Outside of a few hyper-dense cities in the world, rail transit is a luxury for the few paid for by everyone. Commuter trains and subways may be necessary to keep Manhattan moving, but that does not mean that the rest of the nation should subsidize them. Outside of New York City, rail transit makes little economic sense.

1. The Solution: Ending federal transit subsidies results in better management by the States

Chris Edwards 2014 (master’s degree in economics; former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee) 6 May 2014 “Rethinking Federal Highway and Transit Funding” <https://www.cato.org/publications/testimony/rethinking-federal-highway-transit-funding>

Aid distorts state and local decision-making. Federal aid for urban transit covers about 40 percent of capital costs, on average, but just 6 percent of operating costs. That bias has tilted local governments toward expensive transit options, such as rail systems, and against more flexible and efficient bus systems. High-speed rail is another federal effort to induce states to spend money on uneconomical infrastructure. Without federal aid, the states would rely on their own funding for transportation, and they would make more efficient decisions based on local needs.

JUSTIFICATION 2. Economic Growth

1. Link: Highways neglected. Transit funding steals needed money from highways, where travelers actually are

*Katherine Kersten 2014 (attorney, is a senior fellow at the*[Center of the American Experiment](http://www.americanexperiment.org/)*) 9 Apr 2014 “*There is no renaissance in U.S. public-transit use” <https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2014/04/there-no-renaissance-us-public-transit-use>

Transit carries just 1 percent or so of urban travel, but already receives more than 20 percent of federal surface transportation dollars, he says. America does have a transportation funding problem. But it’s misallocation of the transportation dollars we already spend — with too little going to roadways that almost everyone uses — not a lack of spending on transit.

1. Plan Solves: Without transit subsidies, States will invest more on highways

Yonah Freemark 2013 (Master of Science in Transportation, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering; Master of City Planning, Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT.) 25 Jan 2013 “The Federal Role in Surface Transportation Funding” <http://www.thetransportpolitic.com/2013/01/25/the-federal-role-in-surface-transportation-funding/>

Were the federal funding system devolved, some progressive states such as New York and California could increase the share of funding aimed towards transit. Yet the evidence suggests that [when most states are given the option by the federal government to determine how funding is spent, they direct the large majority of financing to roads](http://www.thetransportpolitic.com/2012/07/26/state-decision-making-in-the-context-of-federal-transportation-funding/).

1. The Impact: Economic growth. More highways means more economic benefits compared to transit

Randal O’Toole 2014. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkeley) 18 June 2014 “Debunking the Induced-Demand Myth” <https://www.cato.org/blog/debunking-induced-demand-myth>

We know that every car on the road has someone in it who is going somewhere that is important to them. Increasing the number of cars on the road means more people are getting to do things that are important to them. Provided we aren’t subsidizing that travel (and, as I’ve [shown before](http://ti.org/antiplanner/?p=88), subsidies per passenger mile are small and probably zero for freeways), then increasing highway capacity leads to net economic benefits because it generates travel that wouldn’t have taken place otherwise. By comparison, building expensive transit systems aimed at getting people out of their less-expensive cars generates zero economic benefits if it generates no new travel. Only new travel generates economic benefits, so people who argue that new roads induce new travel are actually arguing that new roads create economic benefits.

JUSTIFICATION 3. Ghost Trains

Massive subsidies for empty buses and trains

Marc Scribner 2016 (senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute; BA in economics and philosophy from George Washington Univ.) 3 Apr 2016 “[If You Build It, They Won't Come: The Failure of Field of Dreams Transit Planning](https://cei.org/blog/if-you-built-it-they-wont-come-failure-field-dreams-transit-planning)” <https://cei.org/blog/if-you-built-it-they-wont-come-failure-field-dreams-transit-planning>

Following decades of excessive local government fare regulation that led to a terminal decline in the private mass transit industry, government began taking over the responsibilities performed by now-bankrupt private mass transit companies following the [Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964](https://research.archives.gov/id/299892). Over the span of a decade, the mostly-private mass transit industry was largely replaced by government transit monopolies. Since then, politicians at the federal, state, and local levels have poured trillions of dollars of taxpayer funds into mass transit systems. By 2014, [28 percent of total surface transportation funds](https://cei.org/sites/default/files/Marc%20Scribner%20-%20Reimagining%20Surface%20Transportation%20Reauthorization.pdf#page=4) were spent on mass transit, with the majority of those dollars coming from fuel taxes paid by drivers. Yet, despite receiving more than one-fourth of the funding, mass transit still represents [less than 2 percent of trips taken nationwide](http://nhts.ornl.gov/2009/pub/stt.pdf#page=25). Even when one looks only at commuting, where trains and buses do best, mass transit’s national mode share is [less than 5 percent](http://traveltrends.transportation.org/Documents/CA10-4.pdf#page=8)—down from more than 6 percent in 1980.

**END QUOTE. He goes on to conclude later in the same context QUOTE:**

The trillions spent on mass transit have given governments many more empty buses and trains, but very little in terms of additional ridership.

JUSTIFICATION 4. Better private solutions

Without federal subsidies, better private transit solutions would spring up to replace inefficient government programs

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

Public transit agencies encourage people to believe that if their subsidies disappeared, people without cars would lack any mobility. In fact, private transit would spring up to take the place of government transit, and it would be superior to government transit. It would be more likely to offer door-to-door service, operate during more hours of the day, and provide more limited or nonstop services to popular destinations. American taxpayers can no longer afford costly and inefficient government transit systems, particularly rail transit systems. Federal subsidies ought to be eliminated and local governments should open transit to private and entrepreneurial solutions to relieving congestion.

JUSTIFICATION 5. Better public solutions

Transit systems with lower subsidies operate better. Lower subsidies means they have to design the system to attract more riders

Prof. David Levinson and Prof. David King 2013 (Levinson - School of Civil Engineering at the University of Sydney, Australia. King – Assistant Professor of Urban Planning, Columbia Univ.) The case for (and against) public subsidy for public transport 22 Apr 2013 <https://streets.mn/2013/04/22/the-case-for-and-against-public-subsidy-for-public-transport/>

The primary reason for operating subsidy for US systems now seems to be “that’s the way we do it here,” which is not a proper justification. Many of the cities around the world—and in North America if we look to Canada, where the Toronto system is required to maintain 75% farebox recovery in order to receive provincial subsidy for the remaining costs—have much higher farebox recovery, fewer operating subsidies and much higher ridership, which suggests a justification for less subsidy and higher fares: planning without prices leads to bad planning.

2A Evidence: End Mass Transit Subsidies

OPENING QUOTES / AFFIRMATIVE PHILOSOPHY

The fact that there’s a problem doesn’t mean it’s a “federal” problem

Chris Edwards 2014 (master’s degree in economics; former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee) 6 May 2014 “Rethinking Federal Highway and Transit Funding” <https://www.cato.org/publications/testimony/rethinking-federal-highway-transit-funding>

A mistake that advocates of transportation aid often make is to assume that common problems are automatically “national priorities” that need federal action. But as a believer in constitutional federalism, President Reagan noted the fallacy of those sorts of claims in a 1987 executive order:  
*It is important to recognize the distinction between problems of national scope (which may justify federal action) and problems that are merely common to the states (which will not justify federal action because individual states, acting individually or together, can effectively deal with them).*  
It is true, for example, that traffic congestion is a problem facing many cities across the nation. It is a common problem. But that does not mean that there has to be a top-down solution imposed from Washington.

INHERENCY

A/T “Trump is cutting the budget” – Trump’s budget won’t pass Congress

NEWSWEEK 2017 (journalist Mirren Gidda)13 March 2017 TRUMP’S CONTROVERSIAL BUDGET IS UNLIKELY TO PASS CONGRESS <http://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-us-budget-cuts-defense-spending-epa-567108>

Not all Republicans are cheering Trump’s vision. Senator Lindsey Graham described the president’s spending plans as “dead on arrival,” singling out the cuts to the State Department as particularly problematic. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell agreed with Graham’s prediction, saying the budget probably wouldn’t pass the Republican-controlled Congress.

HARMS / SIGNIFICANCE

A/T “Trains in Europe” – Europeans don’t use it – they prefer cars

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

European rail lines may be convenient for tourists, but the average European rarely uses them. In 2004, the average American traveled 87 miles on rail transit; the average European just 101 miles. This difference hardly commends Europe as an example of successful rail transit. Moreover, the share of European travel on rail transit declined from 1.4 percent in 1980 to 1.1 percent in 2000. Meanwhile, the share of European travel using automobiles increased from 76.4 to 78.3 percent.

High Cost: If more people used rail transit, cities would go bankrupt

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

Today's government-owned rail transit systems make no financial or transportation sense. They only work because few people use them and everyone else subsidizes them. Because rail transit costs at least four times as much, per passenger mile, as driving, it means that if everyone rode today's rail systems instead of automobiles, cities would go bankrupt trying to keep the systems running.

Empty Trains: L.A. and Denver increased spending on commuter rail… and usage went down!

Angie Schmitt 2017 (journalist) 24 Feb 2017 “Transit Ridership Falling Everywhere — But Not in Cities With Redesigned Bus Networks” <http://usa.streetsblog.org/2017/02/24/transit-ridership-falling-everywhere-but-not-in-cities-with-redesigned-bus-networks/>

The new FTA data suggest that the attention Houston and Seattle pay to their bus systems distinguishes them from other cities that have expanded rail transit. Los Angeles, which has spent billions on new light rail, saw a 7.6 percent decline in transit ridership in 2016. And in Denver, which added a commuter rail line to the airport last year, ridership fell 1.2 percent.

Subsidies don’t link to increased transit usage. Ridership fluctuates up and down independent of subsidies

Randal O’Toole 2014 (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) 28 Mar 2014 “The Transit Train Wreck” <https://www.cato.org/blog/transit-train-wreck>

APTA is correct that transit ridership bottomed out in 1995, at least according to its numbers. (Federal Transit Administration numbers are a little different and show ridership bottoming out in 1993.) But it is a stretch to say that subsidies are responsible for the growth in ridership since 1995 (or ‘93). Both operating and capital subsidies to transit have grown steadily since the mid 1960s, but ridership hasn’t always followed. In particular, ridership declined through 1972 to about 6.6 million trips, then increased through 1980 to about 8.5 million trips, hovered around there for about a decade, then declined from 8.9 million trips in 1989 to 7.8 million trips in 1995, then increased to 10.5 million trips in 2008, and has hovered around there since then. If increased subsidies were responsible for the increase after 1995, why didn’t increased subsidies lead to increased ridership between 1965 and 1972 or between 1989 and 1995?

Investment in public transportation doesn’t lead to ridership growth. Examples: Charlotte, Dallas, Portland

Randal O’Toole 2014 (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) 28 Mar 2014 “The Transit Train Wreck” <https://www.cato.org/blog/transit-train-wreck> (brackets added)

APTA’s [American Public Transportation Association] answer to why subsidies boosted ridership in the last two decades but didn’t necessarily do it before then is found in its claim that “Cities that have invested in high frequency public transportation and transit-oriented development policies are experiencing significant ridership growth.” But this simply isn’t true: as I’ve [previously noted](https://www.cato.org/blog/lessons-new-transit-data), 2013 transit ridership declined in Charlotte, Dallas, Portland and several other cities that have invested in such transit.

American Public Transit Association admits: Transit ridership declining nationwide

Scott Suttell 2017 (journalist) “Public transit ridership nationwide fell 2.3% in 2016; in Cleveland, the drop was steeper” 11 Apr 2017 CRAIN’S CLEVELAND BUSINESS <http://www.crainscleveland.com/article/20170411/BLOGS03/170419957/public-transit-ridership-nationwide-fell-2-3-in-2016-in-cleveland>

[Data](http://www.apta.com/resources/statistics/Documents/Ridership/2016-q4-ridership-APTA.pdf) from the [American Public Transit Association](http://www.apta.com/Pages/default.aspx) show that overall ridership on all forms of transit — heavy rail, light rail, commuter rail, trolleys and buses — fell 2.3% in 2016 from 2015 levels. Gains in light rail (3.4%), commuter rail (1.6%) and trolleys (1.8%) were not enough to offset drops in the two largest modes of transit: heavy rail, which fell by 1.6%, and buses, which dropped a steep 4.1%.

Nearly every city in the U.S., including New York and L.A., have declining transit usage

Laura Bliss 2017 (journalist) 24 Feb 2017 What's Behind Declining Transit Ridership Nationwide? <https://www.citylab.com/transportation/2017/02/whats-behind-declining-transit-ridership-nationwide/517701/>

New York City’s subway system has posted its first dip in ridership since 2009, according to data from the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/m/metropolitan_transportation_authority/index.html?inline=nyt-org). The news follows a news week full of reported transit passenger declines in Los Angeles and San Francisco. And, for years, nearly every city in the U.S. (with a few notable exceptions) has posted negative percent changes, too.

Taxpayers pay for empty buses and trains cruising around that we can’t afford to maintain

Randal O’Toole 2014 (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) 28 Mar 2014 “The Transit Train Wreck” <https://www.cato.org/blog/transit-train-wreck>

What do we get for all these subsidies? We get transit systems that run nearly empty buses and trains much of the day so that, on average, they are no more energy efficient or climate friendly than driving. We get construction of expensive transit systems that cities like Chicago can’t afford to maintain.

Rail transit projects are notorious for cost overruns

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

Rail transit projects are notorious for cost overruns. According to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), federally subsidized rail projects built between 1980 and 2015 had overruns averaging 50 percent.Moreover, there has been no tendency for estimates to improve, as overruns since 2010 have been greater than in previous decades. By comparison, a study by Danish planning professor Bent Flyvbjerg found that overruns for North American highway projects averaged just 8 percent.

SOLVENCY / ADVOCACY

The Mass Transit Account of the Highway Trust Fund spends money on projects that should be left to the States

Michael Sargent 2015 (Policy Analyst, Transportation & Infrastructure, Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies, Heritage Foundation) 11 May 2015 “Highway Trust Fund Basics: A Primer on Federal Surface Transportation Spending” <http://www.heritage.org/transportation/report/highway-trust-fund-basics-primer-federal-surface-transportation-spending>

Congress and the states divert roughly 25 percent of the Highway Trust Fund spending to non-highway projects that are not federal priorities. The largest of these diversions is the Mass Transit Account, which spent some $8 billion in 2014 on buses, rail, streetcars, and other projects that should fall under the responsibility of municipal or state governments.

We should end federal transit subsidies and focus on other options

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

The federal government should end its transit subsidies, and American cities should focus on finding economically sound and consumer-driven approaches to easing congestion. Policymakers at all levels should work to revive private transit options for cities, and they should allow consumers to make transportation choices in a neutral and competitive market environment.

Eliminate the $9 billion in transit spending from the Highway Trust Fund (HTF) and give it back to highways

Chris Edwards 2014 (master’s degree in economics; former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee) 6 May 2014 “Rethinking Federal Highway and Transit Funding” <https://www.cato.org/publications/testimony/rethinking-federal-highway-transit-funding>

A good way to cut HTF spending to close the gap with revenues would be to end federal aid for transit and other non-highway spending. Transit formula grants from the HTF are about $9 billion annually. The idea behind the Highway Revenue Act of 1956, which established the HTF, was that federal fuel taxes would be user charges to fund the building of the Interstate Highway System. But from the 1970s onward, fuel taxes have been siphoned off for non-highway purposes, particularly with the creation of the transit program in 1982. About one-quarter of HTF spending today is for non-highway purposes.

Ending federal transit subsidies would force less wasteful, more efficient, economical decision-making at the state level

Chris Edwards 2014 (master’s degree in economics; former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee) 6 May 2014 “Rethinking Federal Highway and Transit Funding” <https://www.cato.org/publications/testimony/rethinking-federal-highway-transit-funding>

Aid distorts state and local decision-making. Federal aid for urban transit covers about 40 percent of capital costs, on average, but just 6 percent of operating costs. That bias has tilted local governments toward expensive transit options, such as rail systems, and against more flexible and efficient bus systems. High-speed rail is another federal effort to induce states to spend money on uneconomical infrastructure. Without federal aid, the states would rely on their own funding for transportation, and they would make more efficient decisions based on local needs.

Reducing subsidies is key to improving customer service for mass transit

Randal O’Toole 2014 (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) 28 Mar 2014 “The Transit Train Wreck” <https://www.cato.org/blog/transit-train-wreck>

Fundamentally, we get a system that’s broken because no one is beholden to the customers whose fares cover, on average, a mere 25 percent of the costs. Instead, they cater to the politicians who allocate the other 75 percent to agencies based on political muscle and back room payoffs. (Does anyone think that their mayor wouldn’t take [bribes](http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/26/justice/charlotte-mayor-alleged-corruption/), or at least campaign contributions, from railcar manufacturers and contractors in exchange for their support for rail boondoggles?) Contrary to APTA’s claims, the transit industry is in deep trouble and must be reformed by reducing, not increasing, subsidies so that transit agencies will be responsive to users, not politicians.

Ending federal transit subsidies would spur innovations and cost savings at the local level

Chris Edwards 2014 (master’s degree in economics; former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee) 6 May 2014 “Rethinking Federal Highway and Transit Funding” <https://www.cato.org/publications/testimony/rethinking-federal-highway-transit-funding>

Solutions for America’s urban transit should be found at the state, local, and private levels. Before the 1960s, most urban bus and rail services in America were privately owned and operated. But that ended with the passage of the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964. The Act provided subsidies only to government-owned bus and rail systems, not private systems.That prompted state and local governments across the country to take over the private systems, swiftly ending more than a century of private transit investment in America’s cities. That is unfortunate because government-run bus and rail systems miss out on the innovations and cost savings that entrepreneurs could bring. Removing federal aid from the transit equation would have the beneficial effect of encouraging cities to experiment with private transit options. It would also remove current distortions that federal aid creates for local decision-making about transit.

DISAVANTAGE RESPONSES

Big response to all Disads: Transit accounts for less than 2% of travel in urban areas

Randal O’Toole 2017 (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) 11 Jan 2017 Reason #1 why most Americans don’t ride transit: It’s slow <https://donpettygrove.blogspot.com/2017/01/reason-1-why-most-americans-dont-ride.html>

There’s a myth that Americans have some kind of irrational love affair with their cars, and they don’t ride transit because of that irrationality. In fact, there are very good reasons why autos provide well over 95 percent of mechanized travel in urban areas while transit provides less than two percent. One of the most important reasons is that transit is slow. Most transit is slower than driving, and a lot of transit is slower than cycling.

A/T “The poor lose mobility without transit subsidies” – Private transit would replace it with better options

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

Public transit agencies encourage people to believe that if their subsidies disappeared, people without cars would lack any mobility. In fact, private transit would spring up to take the place of government transit, and it would be superior to government transit. It would be more likely to offer door-to-door service, operate during more hours of the day, and provide more limited or nonstop services to popular destinations. American taxpayers can no longer afford costly and inefficient government transit systems, particularly rail transit systems. Federal subsidies ought to be eliminated and local governments should open transit to private and entrepreneurial solutions to relieving congestion.

A/T “Rail moves people more efficiently” – Based on inflated estimates. Actually, freeways are more efficient

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

Rail advocates claim that rail lines can move as many people as several freeway lanes, but to make that claim they use a double standard: comparing full railcars with the average occupancy of commuter automobiles. In fact, like automobiles, the average transit vehicle carries far fewer people than its capacity. Most rail cars and buses carried an average of less than one-sixth of their capacity in 2014.Even sport utility vehicles do better than that. When calculated using full automobiles and full trains, a single freeway lane can move more people per hour than most light-rail lines, while four freeway lanes can move more people than most subway or elevated lines. When calculated using automobiles and trains with average occupancy rates, a single freeway lane moves several times as many people as a light-rail line, and two freeway lanes move more people than the busiest subway lines in the United States.

A/T “Rail is cheaper than buses” – Not when you consider the long term maintenance costs

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Transit agencies generally go heavy into debt to fund rail projects by issuing long-term bonds. But the costs do not end when the bonds are paid off: rail lines must be completely replaced, rebuilt, or rehabilitated about every 30 years. Except for the right-of-way, everything — cars, tracks, roadbed, stations, electrical facilities — must be replaced or upgraded.

**END QUOTE. He goes on later in the same context to conclude QUOTE:**

Rehabilitation costs do not increase the capacities of transit systems, and thus should be considered maintenance costs. But the FTA allows transit agencies to count rehabilitation as a capital cost. The significance is that when rail advocates claim, as they often do, that rail lines cost less to operate and maintain than buses, they are ignoring these long-term maintenance costs.

A/T “Lost economic development” –It only redistributes existing economic growth that would happen anyway

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

Rail advocates say that rail transit stimulates economic development. They often point to a streetcar line built in downtown Portland, Oregon, that supposedly stimulated $1.5 billion worth of new development. In fact, much of that development was subsidized with hundreds of millions of dollars of tax-increment financing and other developer subsidies. It is not likely that the streetcar alone would have generated the developments without the subsidies. Does any rail transit stimulate new development? In the mid-1990s, the FTA asked this question of Robert Cervero, who is a strong proponent of transit-oriented developments, and Samuel Seskin, who works for Parsons Brinkerhoff, the consulting firm that has had a hand in many major rail transit projects over the decades. Despite their bias in favor of rail transit, the authors found that "urban rail transit investments rarely 'create' new growth," and at best, it may "redistribute growth that would have taken place without the investment."

A/T “Need to get people out of cars” – Transit won’t do it. It doesn’t get people where they need to go

Wendell Cox 2017 (former member of the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission) “[Los Angeles Traffic: Likely To Worsen with Higher Densities](http://opportunityurbanism.org/2017/03/los-angeles-traffic-worse-with-high-density-growth/) “ <http://opportunityurbanism.org/2017/03/los-angeles-traffic-worse-with-high-density-growth/>

There are two principal reasons the transit has not been able to attract drivers out of their cars and reduce freeway volumes. The first is that, for the most part, you cannot get from here to there on transit. That is, most jobs and places people are traveling cannot be conveniently accessed by transit. The [University of Minnesota Accessibility Laboratory](http://www.newgeography.com/content/005520-access-city) has found that 43.3 percent of jobs in the Los Angeles metropolitan area can be reached by car within 30 minutes. By contrast. Only 0.7 percent of jobs can be reached by transit within 30 minutes. In other words, the accessibility provided by cars is much greater than that of transit. For every job that can be reached by transit within 30 minutes, nearly 60 times as many jobs can be reached by car (Figure 3).

A/T “Cars and air pollution” – Turn: Rail is less efficient at reducing car usage than a bus

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

Rail advocates claim that buses will not entice middle-class automobile drivers out of their cars, but that rail can. In reality, improvements in bus service can attract as many new transit riders as rail construction — and at a far lower cost. A survey found that the median income of Washington, D.C., Metrorail riders was 47 percent higher than Metrobus riders, and that 98 percent of rail riders owned an automobile compared with only 80 percent of bus riders.For those who want to get middle-class commuters out of their cars, this is a Pyrrhic victory, considering that the fossil-fuel-generated electricity used to power the Metrorail system emits more carbon dioxide per passenger mile than the average SUV.

A/T “Cars and pollution” – Turn: Rail pollutes as bad or worse than cars

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkeley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

Many people take it for granted that rail transit is good for the environment. The reality is that rail transit uses about as much energy and emits about as much pollution per passenger mile as automobiles. Most transit systems are actually brown compared with the latest cars. The Washington Metro rail system, for example, uses more energy per passenger mile than the average car, and generating electricity to power the system emits more greenhouse gases than the average sports utility vehicle.

A/T “More highways = more cars on them” – That’s great. It means more economic benefit

Randal O’Toole 2014. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkeley) 18 June 2014 “Debunking the Induced-Demand Myth” <https://www.cato.org/blog/debunking-induced-demand-myth>

We know that every car on the road has someone in it who is going somewhere that is important to them. Increasing the number of cars on the road means more people are getting to do things that are important to them. Provided we aren’t subsidizing that travel (and, as I’ve [shown before](http://ti.org/antiplanner/?p=88), subsidies per passenger mile are small and probably zero for freeways), then increasing highway capacity leads to net economic benefits because it generates travel that wouldn’t have taken place otherwise. By comparison, building expensive transit systems aimed at getting people out of their less-expensive cars generates zero economic benefits if it generates no new travel. Only new travel generates economic benefits, so people who argue that new roads induce new travel are actually arguing that new roads create economic benefits.

A/T “Capacity generates its own demand – highways fill up as fast as they’re built” – If so, all highways would be full all over the country

Randal O’Toole 2014. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkeley) 18 June 2014 “Debunking the Induced-Demand Myth” <https://www.cato.org/blog/debunking-induced-demand-myth>

If it were true, as Mann claims, that capacity generates its own demand, then freeways would be equally congested all over the country. Yet this is far from true. While Los Angeles freeways support more than 22,000 daily miles of driving per lane mile, Pittsburgh freeways host less than 9,000 miles per lane mile. Nor are the numbers consistent over time within an urban area, as Duranton & Turner’s elasticities would predict. Instead, many urban areas, including Miami, Las Vegas, and Sacramento, saw miles of driving per lane mile more than double between 1983 and 2003; the average growth was 50 percent, and some grew less than 20 percent, which again suggests that both elasticities and standard errors are much different than found by Duranton & Turner.

Transit subsidies will not solve traffic congestion

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

Today, city governments that are frustrated with automobiles and congestion are turning to the 19th century technology of rail transit for relief. But pumping subsidies into rail transit is based on a nostalgic view of the past, and it is not economically or environmentally sound. It will not solve America's congestion woes.

Few places need high-capacity transit: Rail lines can’t replace any substantial number of cars

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

However, few places really need such high-capacity transit. People look at the freeway during rush hour and think, "If only we had a rail line, all those people could ride." But the reality is that all the people in those cars have different origins and destinations. They may all be in this freeway corridor now, but a rail line will only serve a tiny number of them because most do not both live and work near a rail station.

Don’t need rail to avoid congestion

Randal O’Toole 2017. (Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; former visiting scholar at Univ. of Calif.-Berkley) “Urban Transit” 4 Jan 2017 <https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/urban-transit>

More importantly, the premise that we need rail because buses cannot avoid congestion is incorrect. Most major urban freeway systems have high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes or high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes. HOT lane tolls are adjusted to ensure that the lanes do not become congested. An urban area with a network of HOV or HOT lanes as a part of every freeway could allow buses to avoid congestion throughout the region. Such HOV or HOT lanes cost less than rail lines, and the congestion relief they provide benefits everyone.

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