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Is Richmond's transit progress more exceptional than we realize?

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Richmond's GRTC Pulse is averaging 36,000 riders a week, which apparently exceeds expectations. The sleek buses and their stops — “activity centers,” in bureaucratese — link the metropolitan area in useful and logical ways. Extensions of regular bus service to Short Pump, White Oak Village, and the airport are also welcome.

But if all this seeming success really pays off (there are many ways to define that), our local mass transit system will be bucking larger and worrisome national trends. And these trends have been developing for almost a century.

The use of mass transit has declined in this country since 1920, from 287 trips per urban resident per year to only 38 in 2017. There are a number of reasons for this falloff, which involve, but are not limited to, the movement of jobs from downtowns and the increase in the ownership of cars. Buses and subways used to carry a quarter of all workers to their jobs; now it's down to 5 percent.

New York City's subways are legendary, and Washington, D.C.'s Metro is a convenience for tourists, but in half of the nation's 50 largest urban areas, not even 3 percent of commuters take mass transit to work. Add in the smaller cities, and you find that mass transit, according to [a new study by the libertarian Cato Institute](#), is “nearly irrelevant to those regions except for the high taxes needed to support it.”

That's because these systems are expensive, especially given how few people actually use them. Taxpayers fork over \$50 billion a year to subsidize mass transit. This wasn't always the case.

Two years after its debut in 1888, Richmond's electric streetcar system — the first in the nation — was bought by Thomas Edison's General Electric and run as a profit-making business. That's the way mass transit worked in this country until 1964, when Congress created incentives for governments to get involved — and in 10 years, almost all the bus and trolley lines were owned outright or deeply subsidized by cities, Cato reports. And during that period — even adjusting for inflation — operating subsidies rose from less than \$2 billion in 1970 to more than \$30 billion in 2016.

Champions of mass transit will say that's only fair, since these systems make it possible for low-income residents to go to their jobs, run errands, and do all the other things that require getting from one place to another. But it isn't working out quite that way. According to Cato, Census data from 2010 found that people making \$75,000 and up are more likely to ride transit than any other income group, and the average income of transit passengers is 9 percent higher than the average for American workers. (If that's because the fares are too high, which is only one explanation and far from persuasive, then it would follow that the subsidies would have to increase.)

OK, but isn't mass transit better for the environment? Well, not really. It was in the 1970s, when pollution controls were nonexistent and people loved their gas guzzlers. But that's not the case today. The New York subway uses less energy and emits fewer greenhouse gases than would be the case if everybody roaring around Manhattan drove their cars, which wouldn't be possible anyway. The Cato report concludes that almost everywhere else, except in Portland and San Francisco on the mainland, mass transit uses more energy and emits more greenhouse gases per passenger mile than driving does, and that includes pickup trucks and SUVs.

Finally, mass transit is said to help revitalize decaying inner cities, raising property values and encouraging economic development. And there's some truth to that. Restaurants and retail can prosper when subway stations and bus stops make it more convenient for customers to get to them. But a transit advocate, UC-Berkeley's Robert Cervero, in a paper prepared for the Federal Transit Administration, found that such investments "rarely 'create' new growth, but more typically redistribute growth that would have taken place without the investment." Which means a new restaurant that opened where the new bus stop is might otherwise have been a dry cleaner, bowling alley, or doc-in-a-box somewhere else.

All civic-minded citizens wish our own vastly improved GRTC will continue to flourish as it promises to do. But even if it is the exception that proves the rule, the downside of such projects is worth considering as we face future public policy decisions.

It's something for the 20-something stockbroker to ponder as he takes the Pulse from his renovated loft apartment in the Arts District to his job in a Glen Allen office building.