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Is Transit Doomed in the U.S.? Discuss.

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Randal O'Toole, the well-known anti-transit gadfly, recently joined transportation consultant Jarrett Walker in Washington, D.C., for a debate about the future of public transit. The rival pundits have sparred about public transportation many times on their Antiplanner and Human Transit blogs, but this was the first time they'd ever met; they even ate breakfast together at the Lincoln Waffle Shop across from Ford's Theatre.

As it turns out, the men have more in common than you might think: For starters, both began thinking about urban transportation in Portland, Oregon.

Before he became one of the best-known American critics of government-operated transit, O'Toole was an Oregon State student intern, working on a transportation plan for the city in the 1970s; at the same time, Walker was a Portland teenager living through a commuter revolution that would inspire him to become a go-to international consultant for redesigning transit networks (and an occasional CityLab contributor).

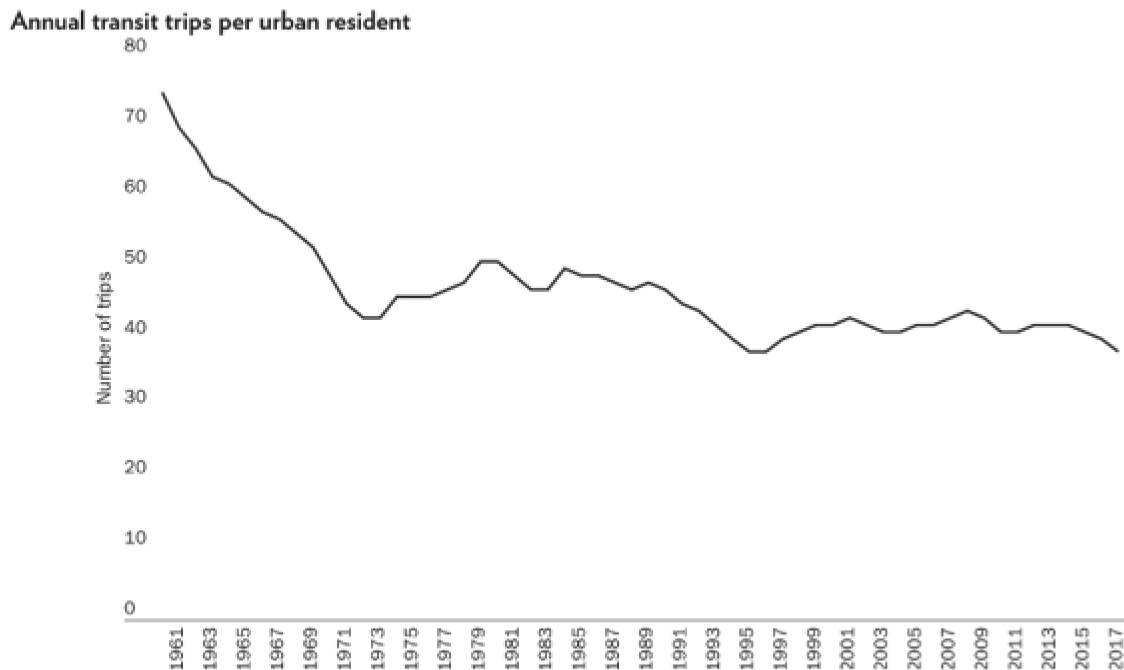
O'Toole says he sees in Walker another path he could have taken. "In a sense, Jarrett's work is an extension of what I was doing in 1970s: finding low-cost ways to increase ridership," said O'Toole. "If my life had gone a little different, I might be doing the same thing."

Today the two Oregonians live only 150 miles apart, but they met in nation's capital for two quasi-debates: a briefing at Capitol Hill and a forum at the libertarian Cato Institute, with which O'Toole has been affiliated since 1995. The discussions come at a critical time for mass transit in the U.S.: ride-hailing and other technologies have lured away riders in many cities, even as the Trump administration has stalled federal support.

O'Toole opened with a whirlwind of statistical bullet points documenting the transit death spiral. He seized on the latest national transit ridership data, but his message was vintage O'Toole: Government funding of public buses, trains, light rail, and streetcars has failed and should stop. "I'm fundamentally pessimistic about the future of the transit industry," O'Toole said. "Transit ridership has been declining steadily and it's declining in all major urban areas, whether it's rail or bus. I don't see hope of recovery because the forces that are causing it to decline are not going away."

Subsidies can’t overcome what shapes people’s preferences, O’Toole argued, and what people want is to live out in the suburbs and drive their cars. In recent years, transit ridership has really only grown in places where there’s been a dramatic boom in downtown jobs, such as Seattle.

Proof of this principle: city buses that drive around nearly empty. “We’re still buying 40-passenger buses, but the average number of people riding a bus today is about nine people at one time,” O’Toole said. “Occasionally, they might be full at rush hour, but they’re mostly not.”



There they go. (O’Toole/Cato Institute)

“I think transit agencies right now are running on hot air,” O’Toole said. By his rough calculations, the fundamental promises of public transportation—that they increase job accessibility for lower-income working people and reduce carbon emissions—aren’t actually panning out, and most cities should mothball their fleets. “Transit will survive in New York, and it may survive in five or six other urban areas, but transportation planners in the other 430 urban areas in the United States need to start thinking about planning a shutdown of their transit systems.”

But wouldn’t that strand millions of working people who can’t afford a private car? Not so—O’Toole predicts that microtransit services and driverless cars can fill the gaps. Also: Remember those viral stories of good Samaritans giving people free cars? Everyone just do that. “It turns out you want to make sure someone can become employed and stay employable, give them a cheap car,” he said. “Don’t give them a free transit pass because odds are a transit pass won’t get them to where they want to go.”

For Walker, a consultant who works on improving transit systems in cities around the world, the narrative that O’Toole spins about declining transit ridership doesn’t frame the story quite right—it’s zoomed out too far. “A lot of what seems like an urban-rural culture war is actually

just people at different densities understandably trying to solve the immediate problems of where they live. The national statistics are useless. [The decline of urban trips since 1976] is also a history of urban density, of course, because transit is a response to density."

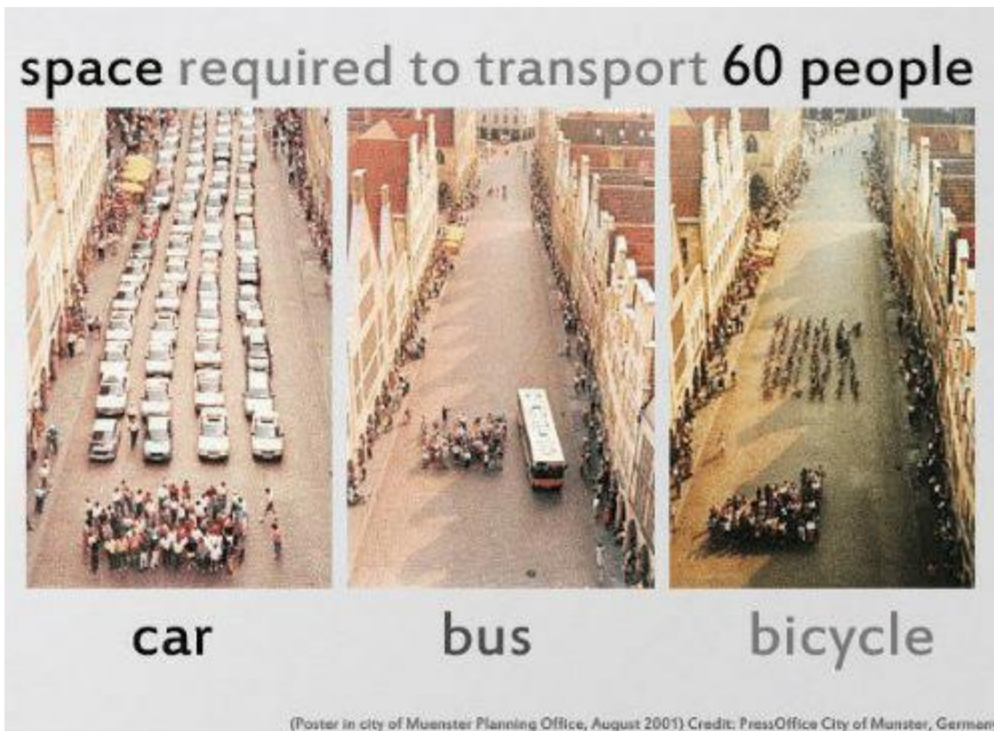
"It doesn't matter how many people want to drive cars—it's how many will be able to drive cars. It cannot continue this way because we will run out of space."

Since that change, he said, ridership has fluctuated within a reasonable range. "I don't think we're looking at a catastrophe," Walker said. While "transit death spirals can occur," they only become truly fatal when local leadership fails to respond appropriately. Take Seattle, for example, whose ridership growth has defied national trends. "Once you get to the point where everyone is screaming about transit, which is where Seattle was 15 years ago, leadership responds to it."

Walker's book *Human Transit* might be the closest thing that transportation planners have to a pocket Constitution, and he argues that the principles behind his work are simple geometry and biology. "If we think of personal freedom as an outcome, that is something that we can define mathematically." Public transit is about solving a question to which cities already know the answer: "How many adult elephants would fit in a wine glass?"

Our reaction to that absurd question, Walker said, is visceral, because it's an axiomatic certainty about physical space, something that we'll still know the answer to in the future. The same goes for cars in cities. "The definition of a city is lots of people living close together. A city is shortage of space per person," he said. "It doesn't matter how many people want to drive cars—it's how many will be able to drive cars. It cannot continue this way because we will run out of space."

Yeah, he's talking about that classic congestion meme.



Credit: City of Munster, Germany

Technology won‘t change geometry, whether the cars are privately owned, hailed from an app, or driven by a robot. There's just not enough space to accommodate them, and we won't gain any more space from increasing travel speeds or decreasing stopping space. In fact, driverless cars could make congestion much worse, thanks to induced demand.

“If you make a desired thing easier, people will do it more,” Walker said. “It's the reason you cannot let the market decide, because we will run out of room more quickly than you can imagine.” He used an axiom of biology: “The basic math of life is you have to spend less energy seeking a resource than you will get from that resource. If life can get a resource more easily with less effort, it does.”

That same scenario could also play out in the consumption of land, rather than road space. “Randal lives in a cabin in the woods in Camp Sherman, and I could afford that cabin in the woods too, but the reason I don't is because it would horrible to drive out there on the weekends,” Walker said. “But if I didn't have to drive, I might, and so would everyone else in Portland. And we'd chop down the woods.”

Yeah, but what about all those mostly empty buses roaming around town? The notion of public transit as innately wasteful misses how the goals of ridership and coverage intersect as it relates to service. “It's a very common misunderstanding about transit economics. People see that empty bus and they think that transit is wasteful,” Walker said. “But it is much better for the bus to be too big than for the bus to be too small for whatever demand you're going to incur that day. It also costs a lot of money to pay drivers to take the bus back to the garage and switch it out for a different-sized bus.”

Rather than directly rebutting each bullet point on O'Toole's laundry list, Walker made a more values-based case, stressing that the big problems public transportation systems now face come down to just a few things: emissions, labor, and space. And those can be addressed with fleets of electric vehicles that are either large—think electric buses—or small e-boosted bikes and scooters. He's optimistic about self-driving technology, but believes that their truly transformative deployment will be in city bus fleets, where they could dramatically trim labor costs.

The arguing between the two parties, such as it was, was generally civil, and the two pundits also found some points of agreement. Both said that we ought to be paying the real cost of roads through congestion pricing (though Walker argued that the funds raised from this should go to public transit as an alternative). And Walker stressed that transit, and the mobility it offers, is fundamentally about freedom, which is an idea that libertarians might sympathize with. "If you believe in the free market, you've got to face the fact that the free market is telling us that you've got to build more places that will need transit. If San Francisco were such a horrible place, it would not be so expensive to live there."

The two also found one other bit of semi-common ground on urban federalism, and the notion that dense cities should make their own decisions. "There probably is more of a future for flexible funding," Walker said. "Where the federal government stops telling us how much money we can have for highways and for transit and just tells communities, here's money for transportation."

In an email afterward, O'Toole said that, while Walker's arguments didn't sway his opinions, "I learned a lot from him, mainly in private conversations about the state of transportation in various cities around the world. I doubt that it will happen, but it would be fun to visit a few of those cities with him so we could see the world through each other's eyes."

In the end, the gap between their transit worldviews looks a lot like the urban-rural divide. "Jarrett and I fundamentally agree on a lot of things," O'Toole said at the debate. "I think our disagreements come from his spending more time looking at really dense areas, and my spending more time looking at low-density areas."

"Let's understand that we all live our own perspectives and our own values," Walker responded. "We both live in Oregon. I live in the middle of Portland. Randal gets to live out in the woods."

O'Toole cut in. "By the way, when I lived in Portland, I did have a cabin in the woods and it only took me 40 minutes to get there," he said. "And it would have been faster if they'd built the Mount Hood Freeway instead of the light rail line."

"It would have been a lot faster if we tore down a whole swath of neighborhoods that are now worth a combined market value of probably several billion," Walker said. "Those are the choices; we all get to make choices."