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COVID-19 is no excuse to bail out urban transit

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Among the many special interest groups lining up for a share of the trillion-dollar bailout bills is the transit industry. Transit agencies are demanding that Congress give them at least a \$25 billion bailout. New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) alone wants a \$4 billion bailout.

Transit, however, neither needs nor deserves a bailout. It doesn't need it because it already gets two-thirds of its operating costs from taxpayers, so it could cut service by a third and keep operating even if no one rode its buses and trains. Even the most efficient operations, such as the New York MTA, get almost half their operating funds from taxpayers, so they could cut service by a third and keep operating off tax dollars and the fares paid by those customers who are still riding.

Nor is a bailout needed to help transit employees. Transit agencies tend to hire too few transit operators and then pay huge amounts in overtime. A few years ago, the New York Times reported that, thanks to overtime, more than 8,000 MTA employees earn more than \$100,000 a year, and some more than \$200,000. At the same time, the highest paid city employee in Madison, Wisconsin was a bus driver.

The solution is for transit agencies to cut service to a level they can afford and keep all their employees on the payroll, but for only 40 hours a week. Some employees might not be able to keep up the lavish lifestyles they've been living, but everyone is making sacrifices in this pandemic.

Another reason transit doesn't deserve a bailout is because it has consistently put its own interests ahead of its customers. Transit agencies in New York, Washington, Boston, and elsewhere have known for years that their infrastructure was deteriorating, yet instead of fixing it they decided to build new infrastructure that they can't afford to maintain.

New York decided to spend \$16.8 billion on the Second Avenue subway rather than restore its existing subway system. Virginia and Maryland, which contribute to the DC Metrorail system, decided to build the \$6.8 billion Silver Line and \$2.5 billion Purple Line rather than maintain the core Metrorail network. Boston decided to spend \$2.3 billion building a new light-rail line to Medford rather than maintain its decrepit and unsafe rail system.

The transit industry's approach to the recent pandemic is similarly selfish. Instead of telling people the truth—which is that they are safest traveling in their own vehicles—transit agencies have encouraged people to ignore the risks of riding transit. Denver's Regional Transit District promises

that it is “wiping down its handrails” once a day, which is reassuring so long as each bus and rail vehicle only carries one passenger a day. Seattle’s Sound Transit responded firmly to the crisis by “putting posters on vehicles reminding everyone” to wash their hands.

The reality is that there’s not much room for transit in a world of social distancing. We saw the same problem with natural disasters, which are another reason to encourage autos over transit. When Hurricane Katrina hit, New Orleans had the second-lowest rate of auto ownership of any major city in the country. Those with cars got out; those who relied on transit did not. When Hurricane Rita hit a few weeks later, Houston, with one the nation’s highest rates of auto ownership, saw four million people successfully evacuate.

Whether it be earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, or volcanoes, just about every part of the country is at risk of some natural disaster or another. Automobiles are the best way to get people away from such disasters and the best way to deliver emergency supplies to those who stay.

Cars are also more energy efficient, per passenger mile, than transit in 484 out of the nation’s 488 urban areas and more climate-friendly in 480 out of those areas. And low-income people don’t particularly need transit. As a demographic group they have been shifting to driving: people who earn under \$35,000 a year were significantly less likely to commute by transit in 2018 than 2010, while transit’s major growth market is people who earn more than \$75,000 a year.

Instead of bailing out transit, it’s time to start thinking about phasing out the subsidies we give it. Private transit will still exist in those cities where people use it. But we need to stop treating transit like it is some kind of magical talisman that will solve all of our problems when in fact it is just a selfish special interest group that is parasitizing our cities.

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