



Transit use zooms as economy recovers

If that headline surprises you, it shouldn't. Rail options are growing, and the American commuters who've tried mass transit love it.

By Jim Motavalli
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Riding both the Boston and New York subways last week, I was struck by how many people are using public transit these days. The subway cars were packed everywhere. And the statistics bear that out: in the first quarter of 2014, light rail continued its dizzying climb, up 3.2 percent from the same period last year. Subways and elevated rail were up 1.8 percent, and commuter rail up 1.1 percent. Bus ridership in larger cities was up 2.1 percent. In 2013, 10.65 billion passenger trips were taken, the highest number since 1956.

There's something happening here, but we don't know exactly what it is, to paraphrase the Buffalo Springfield song. It was easy to explain transit's ruddy good health when the economy was tanking — driving wasn't an option for many who were out of work — but now we're hearing that unemployment was dramatically down in the most recent report. In June, the rate fell to a near-six-year low of 6.1 percent, and 288,000 jobs were created.

I think I have a handle on what's going on here. As people tried transit — many for the first time — during the worst of the recession, many of them were amazed at this great alternative to driving. The downside of America rediscovering its cities is the traffic congestion that comes with it. Some did the math and realized that commuting by rail or bus was cheaper than owning a car, when all the hidden costs are factored in, and you'll be less aggravated and can do work on the ride in.

The cities with the highest commuter transit ridership are also among those doing best in the rocky economy. In New York City, 55.6 percent of commuters take transit (saving an average of \$15,054 annually). In Washington, D.C., 38.3 percent are riding (saving \$10,257). In Boston, 32.8 percent are straphangers (saving \$13,143).

Virginia Miller, a spokeswoman for the American Public Transit Association, tells me, "Since nearly 60 percent of trips taken on public transportation are for work commutes, it is common to see public transportation ridership go up when the local economy improves."

The wonders of mass transit are coupled with a growing number of options for commuters in many cities. Phoenix' Metro Light Rail, for instance, opened only in 2008, and already it carried 14 million passengers in 2013 and is the 12th most popular system in the U.S. Lynx Rapid Transit in Charlotte, North Carolina, opened 2007: 5 million passengers, 25th on the list. Tide Light Rail in Norfolk, Virginia, opened 2011: 1.6 million riders, 29th on the list.

Against this backdrop, we have the curious phenomenon of cities and counties wanting to get in on transit but not wanting to pay for it. Let's look at Atlanta, where fast-growing Clayton County is enjoying the ride on Atlanta's MARTA transit, but only DeKalb and Fulton county taxpayers are anteing up. The MARTA board rejected an offer of a half-penny charge taken out of Clayton's sales tax, and now the voters will get to vote in November on whether to offer a whole penny.

The lesson here is that commuters want transit options, even as they hate taxes going up. I guess commuters aren't drinking the conservative Kool Aid, which maintains that transit is a waste of money. This is a usual suspect, Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute, who's spent decades railing against transit funding (including for Atlanta): Taxpayers lose because their money is wasted on rail when buses could do the same thing for less. Transit riders lose when transit agencies cut bus service to pay for rail. Commuters lose when money spent on rail, which does nothing to relieve congestion, delays projects that actually can reduce congestion. Light rail is a giant hoax that makes rail contractors rich and taxpayers poor.

I note that Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), another libertarian, introduced amendments to the transportation bill that would gut transit funding (including bike and pedestrian programs) in favor of bridge repair. And according to MARTA, "Under H.R. 7, however, public transit funding would receive a one-time appropriation with no funding for public transportation after 2016."

Since commuter trains have never and can't possibly pay for themselves out of the farebox — anywhere in the world — this is completely nutsy. Even the most conservative European party would reject it. Congress hasn't been able to pass a highway bill because it's so dysfunctional, and meanwhile the Highway Trust Fund — which pays for road and bridge repairs out of a long-outdated 18.4 cents a gallon gas tax (last raised in 1993) — is running out of money.

So what we have is dwindling revenue for roads because a) Americans are driving less in their more fuel-efficient cars; and b) taking mass transit and finding they like it as an alternative to the congested roads. So is the answer tearing up our transit lines, as Randal O'Toole would have us do? A thousand times no. Here, on video, are yet more reasons for the booming transit ridership. Younger Americans are more urban, and they like the idea of not owning a car.