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City Wasting Money on Buses Few Residents Ride

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VIA, San Antonio's transit agency, is in trouble. According to Federal Transit Administration data, the agency has spent tens of millions of dollars of your money to increase transit service by 17 percent since 2012, yet transit ridership (measured through the end of fiscal year 2019) has dropped by 24 percent.

Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff thinks he has a solution: Throw more money at it. He wants to shift a sales tax now dedicated to protecting the Edwards Aquifer to VIA. This would give the transit agency additional funds to squander as it watches ridership continue to drop.

Transit is already one of the most heavily subsidized industries in the country, costing taxpayers an average of \$5 every time someone steps aboard a public transit bus or train. Despite these subsidies, ridership is declining nationwide, though not nearly as fast as it is falling in San Antonio.

VIA, San Antonio's transit agency, is in trouble.

In 2017, VIA collected \$23.6 million in fares but spent more than \$205 million operating transit. It also spends an average of \$40 million a year on maintenance and capital improvements (mainly new buses).

Transit advocates will point out that driving is subsidized, too. Those subsidies should end, but they average only about a penny per passenger mile. By comparison, VIA subsidies average well over \$1 per passenger mile.

There's a good reason why VIA ridership is plummeting: Almost everyone today has a car. Census data reveal that, in 2018, only 2.7 percent of San Antonio workers lived in households that had no cars, well under the national average of 4.3 percent.

Moreover, just 27 percent of workers without cars took transit to work in 2018, down from 42 percent in 2012. In fact, more people who lived in households without cars drove alone to work — probably in employer-supplied vehicles — than took transit to work.

Although San Antonio's population has grown by 11 percent since 2012, the number of people who take transit to work has declined by 14 percent. In 2018, just 19,600 people in the San Antonio urban area relied on transit to get to work.

People have a good reason to shift from transit to cars. VIA buses average just 16 mph and don't always go where people need to go. Driving speeds in San Antonio average 33 mph, and cars can take you exactly where you want to go when you want to get there.

No wonder University of Minnesota researchers found the typical San Antonian can reach more than three times as many jobs in a 20-minute auto drive than they can reach in a 60-minute transit ride.

Wolff thinks it is more important to prop up a transit system that carries just 2 percent of the region's employees to work because, he says, spending more on transit "will do more for San Antonio environmentally."

In fact, the opposite is true. In 2017, VIA buses emitted more than twice as much greenhouse gases for every passenger mile as the average car and 80 percent more than the average SUV. That's because VIA buses carried an average of just five passengers — that is, they carried five passengers for every vehicle mile they operated.

It's possible VIA could take some actions to reverse, or at least slow, the decline in transit ridership. In 2015, Houston rerouted its bus system, increasing frequencies on routes that had the most riders and putting more routes on a grid so people don't have to go downtown every time they want to go from one neighborhood to another.

The result was a 6 percent increase in riders, compared with an 8 percent decline in the rest of the nation. Moreover, it didn't cost taxpayers anything because Houston merely rerouted existing buses.

Ending subsidies to VIA won't mean an end to transit. Instead, either VIA or private operators will continue to provide transit services where they can cover their costs.

Census data say that about 13,700 San Antonians who earn less than \$25,000 a year rely on transit to get to work. It would be far less expensive to give these people vouchers they could use for transit, taxis, Uber, Lyft or other transportation services than to keep subsidizing VIA.

People like Wolff seem to think that taxpayers exist to serve the transit system when, in fact, agencies such as VIA are supposed to serve us. If they aren't serving us anymore, it's time to stop throwing money at them.

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