

# San Antonio Express-News

## Rail transit not the transportation San Antonio needs

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Proposals to build rail transit in San Antonio fly in the face of falling transit ridership, as well as experiences in other cities showing that the high cost of rail transit can accelerate this decline. Low fuel prices and competition from ride-hailing services such as Uber and Lyft contributed to a 22 percent decrease in San Antonio transit riders between 2012 and 2016, and ridership has fallen further in 2017.

San Antonio's transit collapse is far from unique: Ridership is falling in every major urban area but Seattle. Ridership has declined more than 20 percent in Austin, Cleveland, Sacramento, California, and St. Louis, and more than 15 percent in Atlanta, Charlotte, North Carolina, Los Angeles, Miami and Washington, showing that trains haven't immunized transit from this decline.

In fact, the high cost of rail has often forced transit agencies to cannibalize their bus systems to pay for its construction and service its debt. Los Angeles gained new transit riders from opening recent light-rail lines, but cutbacks in bus service resulted in a loss of nearly four bus riders for every rail rider it gained.

Urban areas from Atlanta to San Jose, California, have repeated this pattern: They opened new rail lines with great fanfare, then quietly reduced bus service, and transit ridership stagnated or fell. Even in Portland, Oregon, where rail transit is supposedly successful, the share of workers who take transit to work declined from 10 percent when Portland transit consisted solely of buses, to 8 percent today when the city has five light-rail lines, plus streetcars and a commuter train.

Transit's share of Dallas-Fort Worth commuting went from a meager 2.7 percent before building rail to an even more pathetic 1.7 percent in 2016.

San Antonio's rate of transit commuting today is greater than either Dallas-Fort Worth's or Houston's, and tied with Austin's. Houston's share of transit commuters was greater than San Antonio's before Houston built rail transit; now it is less.

Low-income and minority workers depend on buses, while cities build rail to entice middle-class commuters out of their cars. Such transit apartheid is ignored by rail advocates who are more interested in grandiose construction projects than in actually improving transportation.

Neither low gas prices nor ride-hailing is going away anytime soon. In fact, the loss of transit riders to ride-hailing services will rapidly accelerate as shared, driverless cars replace human-driven vehicles. Companies as diverse as Ford, Google and Uber are racing to put driverless cars in cities within five years that will be both more convenient and less costly than transit. It's

highly likely that by 2030, most publicly subsidized mass transit outside of the New York urban area will disappear.

In short, this isn't an auspicious time for San Antonio to plan rail transit. On one hand, San Antonio's transit is already doing a better job of moving people to work than Dallas-Fort Worth's or Houston's. On the other hand, San Antonio is smart to have not spent billions of dollars building a rail system that, a few years from now, will be running empty trains or rusting away.

San Antonio was the nation's first large city to convert streetcars to buses in 1933 because buses were and are faster, safer and less expensive. Today, San Antonio is just as smart to remain one of the nation's largest urban areas to withstand pressure from a rail lobby that seeks profits over sound transportation.

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