

Transit is fading as transportation options shift

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Traditional mass transit has been declining nationally since 2014, and Detroit would be foolish to waste resources on a dying transit model.

Fewer people are riding buses, streetcars and rail, and it doesn't seem to matter how much money is spent trying to reverse the trend.

According to American Public Transit Association data, traditional mass transit ridership declined nationally by 2 percent in 2018, including a drop in Detroit ridership. Since 2014, ridership has fallen 8 percent nationally despite U.S. population growth. Even high-density cities are not immune, as more citizens abandon mass transit in New York; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; San Francisco and Los Angeles.

More transit spending hasn't reversed the trend. Los Angeles increased a local sales tax in 2008 and again in 2016 to fund billions in expanded mass transit. After the 2016 tax hike, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti promised, "The car capital of the world will soon be home to a transit system that is the envy of the world." The result? L.A. mass transit ridership dropped 25 percent between 2012 and 2018, while private car ownership exploded from 1.7 to 2.4 cars per household.

Mayor Garcetti isn't alone in promising astronomical benefits from mass transit while delivering dismal results. Projections for mass transit ridership consistently fall almost comically short. The QLine streetcar in Detroit promised 8,000 riders per day and averages less than half that.

Many metro Detroit leaders are ignoring the evidence and advocating tax hikes to expand mass transit. They claim mass transit can solve regional economic and social ills despite all evidence to the contrary. For example, they cite old data from 2014 to assert mass transit attracts young people to a region. More recent studies indicate younger adults embraced mass transit due to income loss during the Great Recession, and abandoned it for cars as soon as the economy recovered or adopted newer options such as Uber and Lyft.

Claims that mass transit generates economic growth are frequently based on flawed studies that only count gains from transit spending while ignoring economic losses due to higher mass transit taxes. These studies are almost always funded by the mass transit industry.

Research by market-based organizations reveals different results. According to Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute, "Data from more than 300 urban areas show that the regions that grew

fastest in the 2000s were ones that had spent the least on transit in the 1990s, while the regions that spent the most on transit in the 1990s were among those that grew the slowest in the 2000s."

It's time metro Detroit leaders embraced reality: Traditional mass transit is dying and higher taxes, new trolleys, more buses and ghost dances will not reverse this reality.

As mass transit fades away, what will happen to people who can't drive due to age, disability or financial challenges? Even if Lansing's recent bipartisan auto insurance reforms succeed in lowering access to cars for many, there will still be those who cannot drive or afford a vehicle.

A growing number of local governments are partnering with private ride-hailing companies like Uber and Lyft to supplement existing mass transit. But only a few have completely replaced traditional mass transit with ride-hailing.

The Toronto suburb of Innisfil went all in on ride-hailing transit in 2017 by subsidizing Uber rides for the town's 37,000 residents instead of providing bus service. The program was too successful as more residents embraced the service than expected, stressing the municipalities' finances.

Why should taxpayers be forced to subsidize private Uber rides? Well, they shouldn't — at least for those who can afford to pay themselves. But if subsidies for ride-hailing were provided only to those with financial need, it would save taxpayers' money compared to our existing bus system. Detroit's bus systems require an 85 percent subsidy per rider, among the highest subsidies in the nation, because riders contribute such a small percentage of the cost.

A transit program that provides subsidized ride-hailing travel cards to people who qualify for food assistance or some other existing measure of economic need could improve lives and cost less. Riders would be required to pay for part of their ride, but would no longer freeze at bus stops or walk in rain for blocks to their destination after being dropped off by a bus. Ride-hailing companies would pick them up at their front door and deliver them directly at their destination, saving them a significant amount of time.

The future of transit isn't streetcars and buses, trains and trolleys. We should leapfrog past legacy mass transit and develop cost-effective, nimble transit policies that embrace rapidly evolving trends such as ride-hailing. The beneficiaries of such forward thinking would be citizens who need transit assistance, taxpayers and our economy.