

Can mass transit survive COVID?

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In April, Congress allocated \$25 billion to help mass transit agencies nationwide pay their operating costs as they try to cope with the devastating loss of ridership and revenue from the coronavirus pandemic. But the future of mass transit in the Age of COVID-19 is uncertain at best.

The Virginia Railway Express, the 12th largest commuter rail system in the U.S. that transported 20,000 people daily just two months ago, experienced a 97 percent drop in ridership in April. VRE is continuing to run four round-trip trains each weekday on a modified schedule on its Fredericksburg and Manassas lines and the Commonwealth of Virginia has also provided \$11 million in emergency funding for struggling bus and train routes, including VRE.

Meanwhile, Metro shut down its entire Silver Line and Orange Line stations in Virginia west of Ballston because of “historically low” ridership due to the pandemic, according to General Manager and CEO Paul Wiedefeld. The D.C. transit agency is using the lull to finish the Silver Line and rebuild aging Orange Line platforms. But Metro is now bracing for a possible 50 percent reduction in revenue amounting to what could be a \$438 million loss during the next fiscal year.

And transportation experts are now asking whether riders will ever return to commuter trains in sufficient numbers to make them economically viable. The perception of riding in an enclosed train car with a lot of other passengers has changed dramatically from an easy, safe, and comfortable commute to a heightened risk of contagion.

And not without good reason. New York’s subway system “seeded the massive coronavirus epidemic,” according to a study released in April by Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist Jeffrey E. Harris. “New York City’s multi-tentacled subway system was a major disseminator—if not the principal transmission vehicle—of coronavirus infection during the initial takeoff of the massive epidemic that became evident throughout the city during March,” he wrote.

Harris superimposed maps of NYC’s 4,600 subway turnstile entries on ZIP-code-level maps of reported outbreaks and found them to be “strongly consistent with subway-facilitated disease propagationThe flattening of the epidemic curve in Manhattan two weeks after that borough had cut its subway ridership by 65 percent adds tellingly to the circumstantial evidence.”

And reductions in service like VRE and Metro instituted apparently make things worse. When the New York Metropolitan Transit Agency “reduced its service to accommodate reduced demand ... it most likely accelerated the spread of coronavirus throughout the city” by increasing train car density which, coupled with numerous local stops, allowed a few infected people to spread the virus to many others,” he added.

A prior study in Finland in 2018 noted that “the continuously increasing global air travel facilitates the quick and sometimes uncontrollable spread of naturally or intentionally released person-to-person transmissible pathogens around the world, while mass transportation systems offer an effective way of accelerating the spread of infectious diseases within communities.” The rapid spread of COVID-19 from China was an object lesson in how fast airlines and trains helped spread the virus all around the globe.

Randal O’Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, even argues that the \$25 billion Congress authorized to bail out transit agencies is a waste of money. “Effectively, Congress rewarded the [transit] agencies for spreading disease. It would have been better to use that money to help transit-dependent essential workers buy a car so they could have a safe way of getting to work.”

This country, this state, and this region have an enormous investment in mass transit. But it will also take a long time after lockdown orders are lifted before VRE and Metro commuters feel comfortable taking a commuter train to work again.

And if some predictions come true, and many employers continue their telework policies long after the pandemic is over, commuter rail may wind up being yet another casualty of this insidious disease.