



## Mass transit is collapsing everywhere

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Nationwide transit ridership in March 2018 was 5.9 percent below March 2017, according to the latest data published by the Federal Transit Administration. Following three years of steady declines, these numbers present a dire picture of the nation's transit industry.

Ridership declined in all of the nation's 38 largest urban areas (and the 39th, Providence, gained only 0.1 percent new riders). Transit systems in Austin, Boston, Charlotte, Cleveland, Miami, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, San Diego, and Tampa-St. Petersburg all suffered double-digit declines, with Austin losing 19.5 percent and Charlotte 15.4 percent despite being two of the fastest growing urban areas in the nation.

Data from 2017 showed that ridership in Seattle and Houston grew from 2016, providing hope to transit advocates that other regions could reverse ridership declines if they emulated the examples of those two cities. But transit systems in both Seattle and Houston lost riders in March 2017.

A recent article in Bloomberg claimed that the decline in ridership "is confined to buses," implying that cities can reverse the decline by building expensive rail transit systems. But that wasn't even true when the article was written (it admitted that heavy-rail ridership was declining), and the March data show all major forms of transit are declining: buses, commuter rail, light rail, and heavy rail.

Cities that have spent billions of dollars on rail transit have not been immune from the decline. Charlotte won new rail riders by opening a new light-rail line in March, but it lost 2.5 bus riders for every rail rider gained. Denver also lost about 2.5 bus riders for every new rail rider. Dallas, Los Angeles, Salt Lake, and several other regions lost both rail and bus riders.

Denver-area voters agreed in 2004 to spend billions building new rail transit lines, and the region has opened several lines since then. Yet by 2016 transit carried only about 10,000 more of the urban area's commuters to work than it did in 2000, while nearly 280,000 more commuters drove to work.

Transit apologists offer many excuses for ridership declines, such as low gas prices and crumbling infrastructure. But gas prices were 10 percent higher in March 2018 than March 2017 and ridership is declining even in areas with brand-new transit infrastructure.

The fundamental problem is that big-box transit — moving people in 60-passenger buses, 450-passenger light-rail trains or 1,500-passenger heavy-rail or commuter-rail trains — no longer works in American cities. Such transit made sense a century ago when most jobs were in

downtowns surrounded by dense residential areas. But today only New York City comes close to looking like that.

Modern urban areas have far more jobs scattered across the suburbs than concentrated in downtowns. Job location is only one of many factors people consider when deciding where to live. The result is jobs, residences, retail, schools, and other activity centers are widely dispersed.

The number of transit trips taken by the average urban resident declined from nearly 300 in 1918 to about 60 in 1964, when Congress began offering federal subsidies to transit. Since then, federal, state, and local governments have spent more than \$1.1 trillion on transit subsidies, yet trips per urban resident have fallen to about 38 in 2017.

Here's a stark reality: according to table B08141 of the 2016 American Community Survey, just 4.3 percent of American workers live in households without cars — and 58 percent of them don't rely on transit to get to work. Transit doesn't even work for people who don't have cars, much less is it able to compete for the business of most of those who do.

Some propose to redesign American cities to serve obsolete transit systems: forcing more jobs downtown, building high-density transit-oriented developments in transit corridors, and turning highway and street lanes into dedicated bus lanes. Yet huge changes in urban form are needed to get a small change in transit usage, and the benefits are trivial. Transit isn't particularly green, using more energy and producing more greenhouse gases, per passenger mile, than the average car.

Seattle has done the most to reshape itself into an early twentieth-century city. Draconian land-use policies and tax subsidies increased the city's population density by 25 percent since 2000 and increased the number of downtown jobs from 215,000 in 2010 to 281,000 in 2017. These policies came at a terrible price: housing is no longer affordable and traffic is practically gridlocked. The urban area gained 58,000 transit commuters since 2000, but it also gained 190,000 auto commuters.

It is time to stop thinking that transit is somehow morally superior to driving and that it deserves the \$50 billion in subsidies that it receives each year. Ending the subsidies would lead to a variety of private transit alternatives where people will use them and allow cities to concentrate on relieving congestion and making roads safer and cleaner for everyone else.

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