



In Our View: Public transit worthy investment, offers benefits

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In debates about public policy, transit is destined to occupy a prominent place. Arguments regarding the benefits and drawbacks speak to fundamental political philosophies about the differences between the public good and the public cost.

These discussions have been highlighted by plans for C-Tran to develop a Bus Rapid Transit line along Mill Plain Boulevard, echoing The Vine route along Fourth Plain Boulevard that debuted in 2017.

Indeed, public transit is never going to directly pay for itself. According to C-Tran's 2019 financial report, farebox payments covered 14.2 percent of the agency's operating costs. The sale of passes contributed additional revenue, but most of C-Tran's operations are subsidized by taxpayers.

This is typical for transit agencies throughout the United States. According to a 2018 report from the libertarian Cato Institute, federal, state and local taxes subsidized public transit with \$5 billion across the nation in 2016.

That requires an examination of the benefits provided by public transportation.

One is that it helps reduce traffic from passenger cars — and therefore congestion. Whenever you get frustrated while stuck behind a bus on a city street, imagine if five or 10 or 20 additional cars were on the road because bus service was not available. C-Tran recorded nearly 6 million passenger boardings in 2019, before the coronavirus pandemic caused a sharp drop in ridership last year.

Removing cars from the roads also helps reduce carbon emissions. A majority of C-Tran buses are hybrids, and the energy use is more efficient than having a single driver in an automobile. With the growing threat of climate change, reducing emissions provides crucial public benefits.

In the process, public transit provides essential access to jobs and businesses for people who otherwise would have limited transportation options. This is particularly important for low-income residents or those who are unable to drive — and it pays dividends.

According to the American Public Transit Association, an investment of \$10 million in public transportation generates about \$32 million in increased local business sales.

All of which demands some balance between public transportation and the accommodation of personal vehicles.

As the city of Vancouver's Rebecca Kennedy said: "Individual vehicle ownership and drive-alone trips aren't going away. We see that as a key option. But we also want people to have different kinds of options. Roads are really expensive to build, and in a built-out city, they're really expensive to make bigger."

Part of the discussion must be economic. Transit is a public investment for the public good, and it is one for which we all pay. C-Tran's 2019 budget shows more than \$60 million in taxpayer funding — accounting for about 80 percent of its revenue.

But another part of the discussion must be an examination of that public good. Transit ridership has declined in recent years, with experts saying much of that is due to the advent of ride-sharing companies. Yet transit remains a viable alternative for people with limited transportation options.

Critics note that mass transit was largely privatized and profitable until the 1960s, when ridership declined. Government then began to subsidize it. But such arguments are like pointing out that people used to ride in horse-drawn carriages and liked it; times change, and transportation changes with it.

Along the way, public transit has provided enormous benefits.