



As Government signals big light rail spend, public transport concerns grow in US

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How Queen St in Auckland may look if light rail is introduced. Critics in the US say billions spent on light rail in their country has been wasted.

As the Government signals it wants to spend billions on light rail in Auckland and billions less on major roading projects in the decade ahead, worries about the future of public transport are growing in the US.

Those concerns were summed up by a story in The Washington Post last month, headlined Falling transit ridership poses an 'emergency' for cities, experts fear.

The article was based on a report from New York-based public transport advocacy group TransitCenter, using data from the US Department of Transportation's National Transit Database.

"Researchers concluded factors such as lower fuel costs, increased teleworking, higher car ownership and the rise of alternatives such as Uber and Lyft are pulling people off trains and buses at record levels," the article said.

Data showed 2017 was the lowest year of overall transit ridership in the US since 2005. A 5 per cent decline in bus ridership was the main problem, but some commentators suggest the figures indicate light rail is also struggling, given the heavy investment in the mode in recent years.

Streetsblog USA - very much pro-public transport - essentially reinforced the message that transit in the US has problems. It ran an article in March headlined Only a Few American Cities are Growing Transit Ridership - Here's What They're Doing Right.

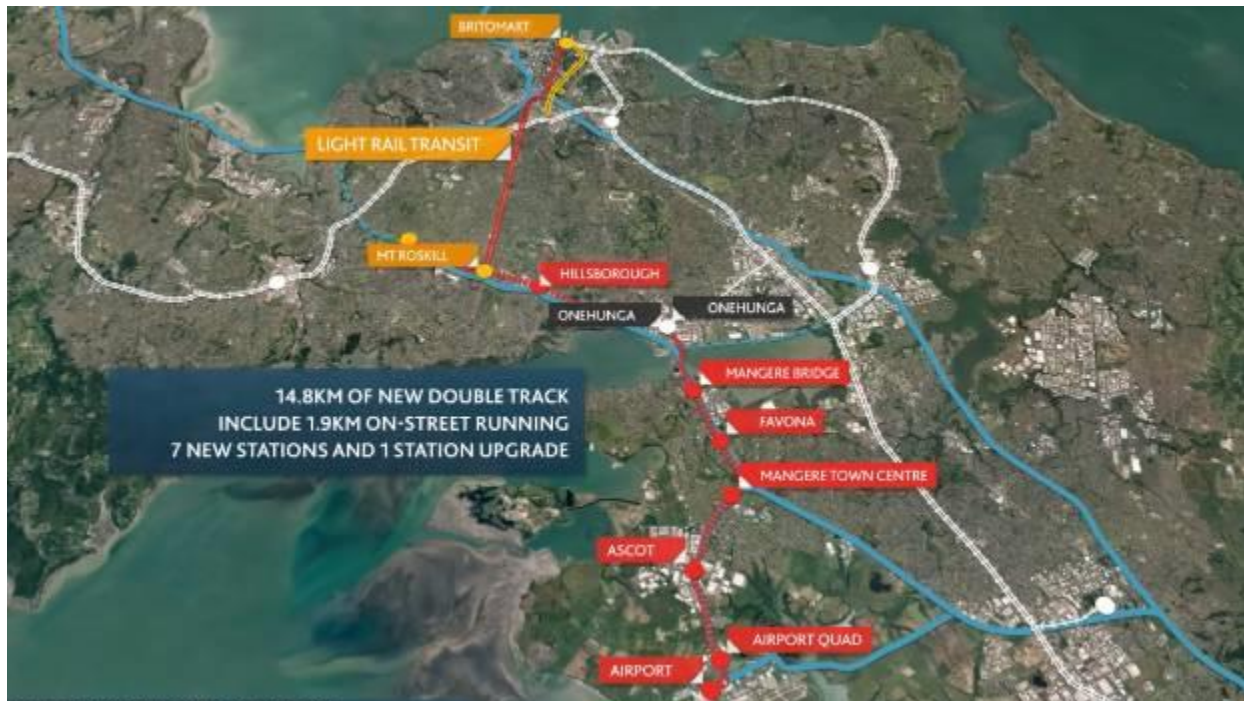
The two cities where public transport use was growing well were Seattle and Phoenix. What they had done was spend large amounts of money and made big increases in their public transport networks, the article said.

In Auckland, the 91.6 million public transport boardings for the year to February were up 6.9 per cent from a year earlier, Auckland Transport data shows.

The 20.3m train boardings were up 10 per cent, bus boardings were up 6.8 per cent to 65.2m, and ferry boardings dropped 0.9 per cent to 6.1m.

In the US, the debate about light rail is particularly fierce, with skeptics often suggesting buses will do the job perfectly well if organised properly, as well as being lower cost and more flexible.

In its transport policy for the 2017 election, Labour said light rail to Auckland Airport was part of a range of projects that would ease congestion. "A world-class city in the 21st century needs a rail connection from its CBD to its airport."



A light rail line from downtown Auckland has been planned in two sections - the first from downtown to Mt Roskill, and the 14.8km section from Mt Roskill to the airport.

Auckland Transport said light rail would have fewer stops, but be more frequent and travel faster than buses. Light rail also had much greater capacity than buses and cars.

Even with the introduction of double-decker buses, most bus routes into the city centre would reach capacity in the early 2020s.

"The stress on the system at that time will be such that only the introduction of a mode that can move more people in fewer vehicles and that can use the sole under-used City Centre corridor – Queen Street – will provide more than very marginal relief."

Auckland Mayor Phil Goff said light rail would help decongest the city's roads, and allow for more intensive housing development around transport hubs.

In March 2017 - under the National-led government - the NZ Transport Agency and Auckland Transport agreed there would be a staged transition from bus to light rail from the airport to the

city centre. It would be based on demand and capacity, and that a route along Dominion Rd was preferred.

Among the most forceful opponents of light rail in the US is Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. O'Toole blogs as The Antiplanner' "dedicated to the sunset of government planning". He's a big supporter of buses over light rail.

Last October Cato published a paper of his called The Coming Transit Apocalypse. In it he said public transport use in the US had been falling since 2014, with many major systems having "catastrophic declines".

Ride-hailing services, such as Uber, were the most serious threat "as some predict that within five years those ride-hailing services will begin using driverless cars, which will reduce their fares to rates competitive with transit, but with far more convenient service".

He made the extreme prediction: "This makes it likely that outside of a few very dense areas, such as New York City, transit will be extinct by the year 2030."

He did note that in 2014, transit ridership in the US reached its highest level since 1956, with 10.75 billion trips, but was not impressed. "This is hardly a great achievement, however, as increased urban populations meant that annual transit trips per urban resident declined from 98 in 1956 to 42 in 2014."

Rail transit projects were notorious for cost overruns, and weren't a solution for congestion, O'Toole said.

Part of the reason congestion had grown was because many urban areas spent most of their transportation money on public transport systems that carried only a small per cent of passengers and almost no freight, rather than on roads.

In a similar vein is a report published last July by private Chapman University in California, called The Great Train Robbery, written by high profile urbanists Joel Kotkin and Wendell Cox.

According to that report, many new transit lines, including light rail, built in US cities had not reduced the percentage of people who commuted alone by private car.

"The focus on new rail services rather than on buses has failed to improve basic mobility for those who need it and has been associated with a decline in transit's share of commutes in some cities."

"Among the 19 (US) metropolitan areas that have opened substantially new urban rail systems since 1980, transit's share of work trips has declined on average from 4.7 per cent to 4.6 per cent, and remains less than the national average of 5.2 per cent," Kotkin and Cox said. "At the same time, the drive alone share of work trips has risen from 73.0 per cent to 76.6 per cent."

In a separate report last August, Cox said those results were not surprising, considering transit's generally slower travel, compared to cars, and the much smaller number of jobs that could be reached.

Kotkin and Cox accepted rail was important in cities with large "legacy" urban cores - New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Boston and Washington. But they also said cities these days were dispersed, with 75 per cent of jobs - and 81 per cent of job growth - in US cities in the suburbs and exurbs - areas beyond city limits.

A report for Auckland Council, published last November, quoted Infometrics data, which said the Auckland city centre had 14 per cent of the region's employment - 110,126 of the 787,500 total.

An Auckland Transport report said more than a third of employment growth in Auckland between 2013 and 2046 - about 100,000 jobs - was expected to be within 5km of the city centre.

An objective of Auckland's unitary plan is to have a "compact urban form". As part of that it aims to "reinforce the hierarchy of centres and corridors".

One of the plan's policies is to: "Encourage commercial growth and development in the city centre, metropolitan and town centres, and enable retail activities on identified growth corridors, to provide the primary focus for Auckland's commercial growth."

While the start of construction on light rail is still some time away, big investment is being made into another rail project, the Central Rail Link. Concept drawings for the Aotea Station, which is part of that project, were published in March.

There are contrary views about where people are going to live and work in future.

In a 2016 brief, major US management consultancy Bain & Company predicted rapid falls in the cost of distance. It suggested that change had the potential to trigger a major lifestyle shift away from city centres in the US and Europe.

As the catalyst for that change, it cited robotics, 3D printing, delivery drones, logistics technology, autonomous vehicles, and low-Earth-orbit satellites.

US Census Bureau data showed the migration away from city centres in the US had begun, while a sampling of European data indicated the movement away from central cities was even stronger in many parts of Western Europe than in the US, Bain said.

The Bain experts were optimistic about the future of the cores of some cities - those with large, walkable urban cores, such as New York, San Francisco, London and Paris. But they will be "inhabited by an affluent cohort able to choose where to live without financial constraints".

According to O'Toole, "urban planners use rail as an excuse to redevelop neighbourhoods to higher densities".

Rail transit was promoted by social engineers who wanted to reform American lifestyles by reducing the amount of driving people did, and increasing the proportion of people living in multifamily housing, such as apartments, he said.

"Urban planning always fails. They can't predict the future. So instead of predicting it, they try to envision it and they envision a past that they understand. Then they try to impose that on the future by passing all kinds of regulations and all kinds of laws."