

Why Community and Public Transportation Should Be Fare-Free

by Dave Olsen

The time has come to stop making people pay to take public transit.

Why do we have any barriers to using buses and urban trains? The threat of global warming is no longer in doubt. The hue and cry of the traffic-jammed driver grows louder every commute. And politicians are getting the message. San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom has ordered his staff to seriously examine the costs of charging people to ride public transit. And Michael Bloomberg, mayor of New York, recently voiced to a reporter his top dream: “I would have mass transit be given away for nothing and charge an awful lot for bringing an automobile into the city.”

Consider this sampling of communities providing free rides on trolleys, buses, trams and ferries: Staten Island, N.Y.; Island County, Wash.; Chapel Hill, N.C.; Vail, Colo.; Logan and Cache Valley, Utah; Clemson, S.C.; Commerce, Calif.; Châteauroux, Vitry, and Compiègne, France; Hasselt, Belgium; Lubben, Germany; Mariehamn, Finland; Nova Gorica, Slovenia; Türi, Estonia; and Övertorneå, Sweden.

Transit officials in parts of Belgium and the state of Washington have advanced fare-free transit in their communities for years.

Raising Fares Kills Ridership

As even conservatives like California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger trumpet a green agenda, more people are taking a hard look at just how many of their tax dollars subsidize the private car versus less polluting buses and trains. You have to figure in roads, parking and other infrastructure, tax breaks for car and fuel companies, as well as subsidies for car-carrying ferries and federal income tax reductions and write-offs for companies that use motor vehicles.

By some estimates, the government subsidy to each private vehicle owner is about \$3,700, while a common cost for providing a single trip by transit is about \$5.

Yet big or small, most transit systems are scraping by or on the brink of financial collapse, paradoxically because of their reliance on the farebox. Revenue for any system drops when ridership dips or when fares are increased. Yes, when fares are increased. Most often the dip in ridership is caused by a fare hike.

To understand this cycle better, let's imagine that you are in charge of a transit system. You feel pressure to increase service or to maintain service despite increasing costs. You need to raise more money. Politically and practically, for most systems, the easiest way is to raise fares. But soon

after, ridership goes down. It drops 3.8 percent for every 10 percent increase in fares, researchers have found. Which means you either haven't gained much new revenue, or worse, you've started spiraling downward.

Fare-free Success Stories

Recently I met the people who run Island Transit in Whidbey Island, Wash., and rode their fare-free bus system. It's a serious operation with 56 buses and 101 vans. Ridership tops a million a year. Its operating budget is \$8,392,677 – none of it from fares, all from a 0.6 percent sales tax collected in Island County.

Despite the pressure to conform, the pressure to make users pay and the pressure from conservative politicians at all levels, Island Transit has been fare-free from day one and is proudly so 20 years later. Not one Island Transit bus, shelter or van has advertising on it. All of Island Transit's buses are bike rack equipped and wheelchair accessible. For folks with disabilities, Island Transit also offers a paratransit service with door-to-door service.

Done right, fare-free transit can transform society, says Patrick Condon, an expert on sustainable urban development who knows the system in Amherst, Mass. “Free transit changed the region for the better. Students, teens and the elderly were able to

move much more freely through the region. Some ascribed the resurgence of Northampton, Mass, at least in part, to the availability of free transit. Fares in that region would have provided such a small percentage of capital and operating costs that their loss was made up for by contributions by the major institutions to benefit: the five colleges in the region,” says Condon, a professor at the University of British Columbia.

Another success story, a decade old, can be found in Hasselt, Belgium. This city of 70,000 residents, with 300,000 commuters from the surrounding area, has made traveling by bus easy, affordable and efficient. Now, people in Hasselt often speak of “their” bus system and with good reason. The Boulevard Shuttle leaves you waiting for at most five minutes, the Central Shuttle has a 10-minute frequency, and systemwide you never have to wait more than a half an hour.

A prime lesson offered by Hasselt is the fact that it radically improved the bus system as well as its walking and cycling infrastructure before it removed the fareboxes. In 1996, there were only three bus routes with about 18,000 service hours/year. Today, there are 11 routes with more than 95,000 service hours/year.

The Hasselt City Council’s principal aim in introducing free public transport was to promote the new bus system to such a degree that it would catch on and become the natural option for getting around. And it did – immediately. On the first day, bus ridership increased 783 percent! The first full year of free-fare transit saw an increase of 900 percent over the previous year; by 2001, the increase was up to 1,223 percent, and ridership continues to go up every day.

The Costs of Collecting Fares

A prime reason to quit charging people to take the bus is that collecting bus fares costs a lot of money. It takes both machines and people to sell, make and distribute tickets and collect, count and deposit cash.

King County’s Metro Transit System, which includes the city of Seattle

and an estimated population of just under 2 million, concludes, after a comprehensive assessment, that the cost of collecting fares will hit about \$8 million this year – enough to buy 18 new buses.

A major analysis of U.S. public transit systems found that for larger systems, fare collection costs can be as high as 22 percent of the revenue collected. Another study showed that New York City’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority spends roughly \$200 million a year just to collect money from transit riders. What about switching to “smart card” technology? Wouldn’t that save money? In Toronto, the city’s Transit Commission estimates the switch will cost almost \$250 million (or about 520 new buses) for card readers, vending machines and retrofits, and over \$10 million a year (22 new buses) after that, which has some transit authorities saying the money could be better used in improving service.

Mr. Olson has written extensively on fare-free transit and is a bicycling and walking enthusiast and advocate. This article was originally published at the website www.thetyee.ca and also at www.alternet.org.

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