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It's Been a Rough Year for Mass Transit.

With falling ridership and scrapped expansion projects, urban transit faces an uncertain future.

Writing in this space last June, I made a confident prediction about the trajectory of urbanism in two Southern cities. Nashville had just decisively rejected a $5 billion plan aimed at remaking its entire transportation system, one that would have added enough new light rail lines and bus routes to change metro Nashville from a car-dependent mishmash of sprawl into a 21st-century metropolis where many people would find cars unnecessary.

Meanwhile, metro Atlanta was making plans to try something similar, with its big suburban counties preparing to vote to extend rail service to those hugely populous but transit-deprived population centers. The implication was obvious. Atlanta's suburbs, after casting decades of anti-transit votes, were ready for change. Nashville was lagging years, if not decades, behind.

I got it wrong. This spring, voters in Gwinnett County, the nearly 1-million-resident behemoth thought to be central to the entire Atlanta project, turned down transit expansion and the extra sales tax it would have required. So much for the region's 21st-century turn toward urbanism. It wasn't that different from Nashville after all.

It's still possible that Gwinnett will reverse itself, or that the other metro counties will tilt the other way and keep the transit vision intact. But at this point, I doubt it.

This spring was a really bad time for transit activists and advocates almost everywhere. In April, the board of directors of the Regional Transit Commission of Southern Nevada rejected a light rail project that appeared to have public support. That was a few weeks after the city council in Phoenix, a beacon of transit success in the past few years, voted against a major expansion out into the western desert suburbs. In August, a popular referendum will decide whether the system needs to have any real expansion at all. At this point, it's looking like the anti-transit side could prevail.

In what may be the most discouraging decision of all, transit promoters in Durham, N.C., had to pull the plug, after nearly a decade of planning, on a transit project that would have run through Durham and adjoining Orange County. Duke University, a major sponsor, abruptly pulled its money out, invoking safety concerns.

But it's not just this bad project news that's turned 2019 into a season of national transit anxiety. It's the overall ridership numbers coming in from practically every part of the country. Data for the first three quarters of 2018 shows that total U.S. transit ridership was down 2.36 percent over those nine months. Heavy rail was down 2.86 percent; light rail, 3.97 percent. Bus trips were down 2.32 percent. The only category that came in higher was commuter rail.

The numbers from Los Angeles are perhaps the most alarming. Through the first three quarters of 2018, L.A.'s heavy rail subway lost 4.45 percent of its riders; the light rail system lost an even worse 5.21 percent — in a region that has perhaps staked more of its future on transit than any growing metro in the United States.

There are some intriguing anomalies in this largely bleak picture. The places in the South and the West that had seemed to be most bullish about transit expansion over the past decade — L.A., Phoenix, the North Carolina Research Triangle, and even Dallas and Las Vegas — have seen their prospects decline. But at the same time, and without much national attention, older cities with legacy transit systems long plagued by physical decay and poor maintenance have begun sprucing them up in hopes of generating a revival.

In the current decade, for example, Chicago has rebuilt more than a third of its subway and elevated tracks and redone 40 aging stations, at a cost of $7.2 billion. Boston, after a decade of haggling over the future of its Green Line, is hard at work spending more than $2 billion on a 4.7-mile extension and the rebuilding of 67 stations. Philadelphia's SEPTA has been spending $750 million a year since 2011 on a comprehensive modernization process. These cities know how bad the national ridership numbers look. They are gambling that all this expense and effort will make a difference. And Philadelphia's heavy rail system did post a gain in the second half of 2018.

Then, of course, there is New York. In March, the state legislature agreed to let the city begin imposing a congestion tax that could reach $15 on private vehicles that enter Manhattan below 60th Street during peak travel hours. Part of the rationale, obviously, is to reduce automobile congestion. But an equally crucial component is the money that congestion pricing will deliver to the debt-ridden Metropolitan Transit Authority — as much as a billion dollars a year, in addition to $15 billion in revenue projected to come in through new bonding authority.

So just as the Phoenixes of America are losing interest in building their modern lives on the pedestal of transit, the cities with creaky trains and rusty platforms are chasing the state of the art as a way to keep themselves healthy. There is a disconnect here, though. When it comes to transit, renewal and ridership are two very different things. The money that allows older cities to rebuild tracks and debut shiny new trains doesn't guarantee that people are going to come back and ride them. To complete that difficult transformation, cities will need to do a better job of figuring out just what has driven the riders away in the first place.

There isn't one answer. Transit's troubles stem from a whole complex of factors. But it's worth looking at them one by one.

The explanation behind falling transit numbers that gets tossed out most frequently is the rise of ride-hailing. People who used to commute to work by train or bus are taking Uber or Lyft instead. Obviously, that's a contributing factor to ridership declines. But it's happening mostly in a few big cities, and the ones with the biggest Uber and Lyft penetration are not necessarily the ones with the biggest transit declines. Besides, the cost of an Uber ride from a suburb into the city — $25 or more at peak hours in a crowded metropolis — suggests a ceiling on just how ubiquitous ride-sharing is actually going to be.

Telecommuting is another commonly suggested culprit, and there may be more to this one. The number of pure telecommuters is still relatively small — the latest data show that only about 3 percent of employees work from home most of the time. But the number of one-day-a-week telecommuters is huge and growing very fast. Taking transit to work four days a week instead of five represents a 20 percent falloff in ridership. So this obviously matters.

What may matter more, however, is the price of gas and the rising level of car ownership. In the summer of 2008, a gallon of gas sold in much of the United States for more than $4; in the summer of 2018, the price was down below $2.75. A decade ago, I thought the effect of declining gas prices wouldn't be that elastic: Once people started

driving less to save money, they'd keep doing that. But they haven't. A spike in gas prices still cuts our driving significantly; a plunge in those prices puts millions of people back on the road quickly.

Just as important, there's evidence that once the 2008 recession ended, Americans started buying more cars. A study last year by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that in the years from 2000 to 2015, but especially from 2010 to 2015, the number of household vehicles in metropolitan L.A. grew by 2.1 million — a higher rate than in previous decades. Most interesting of all: The growth was greatest among immigrant families.

When you think about it, you can see the reason for that. Immigrants, and poorer families in general, have been settling in less expensive inner suburbs rather than in the central cities where they used to cluster. As they do that, they move farther from the transit lines — especially bus lines — that carried them to work. They buy cars, and their bus-riding numbers go down. As the transportation scholar Yonah Freemark told me recently, "Poorer people are living in increasingly transit-hostile environments."

One might expect this trend to be counteracted by the number of single millennials who have chosen to live near city centers and aren't buying cars at all. That may be happening to an extent. But many of those millennials are settling so close to their jobs that they don't need transportation of any sort — except for their feet and maybe a scooter or bicycle. As Freemark puts it, "They are not a natural transit constituency."

None of this is to suggest that big-city transit systems are on the brink of imminent collapse. They remain indispensable civic institutions, and the older ones are doing exactly the right thing by restoring their capital investment, their level of service, their reliability and their reputations. In the long run, though, they need to worry about one other important thing: finding ways to get their service out to where their riders have gone.

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