

## Largesse?

Contributed by Mark Winston  
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A very good and timely article appeared today in the Journal, dedicated to the regional intercity transit system for the Triad, PART. The reason I display the graph below (courtesy of TRAC) is that the article in today's paper included a noteworthy quote from a UNCC Geography professor, calling the \$2.4 Million that various Triad municipalities spend on this system "just another form of government largesse".

Really? Well, he's in good company. The vast majority of car owners feel quite strongly that government transit subsidies are a waste of their money. Robert Moses based his whole career on the opinion that shiny auto expressways were inherently a superior mode of moving people around, and today his idea has mostly won, as evidenced by the insane disparity between what the government spends on train and local transit versus its highway-construction "largesse".

Now look closely at that graph: We will conveniently ignore the massive subsidies given to air carriers in this article. Instead let's focus specifically on the discrepancy between subsidies between ground-based mass transit, and privately-owned autos.

First things first: no matter what you might believe, there are two distinct uses to both modes of transportation. One is private passenger use, and one is commercial use. The most important thing you can take away from this, if nothing else, is that the most important part of having an intercity transit infrastructure is its use in transporting goods and materials for commercial enterprises.

Intriguingly, the idea of a publicly-managed transcontinental network of private passenger autoways was not even on anyone's radar before the middle of the last century. Because of this, commercial enterprises in need of reliable methods of conducting business across large geographic areas or between cities had to develop their own transit networks. This is what railroads grew out of. The most important things railroads ever transported did not have arms and legs and luggage. Rather, moving people on railroads was a method of generating additional marginal revenue on infrastructure that existed primarily to transport material and goods. After many years, realizing that passenger service could easily be scrapped at the whim of a rail baron's balance sheet, the government put in place regulations requiring railroads to carry passengers and to maintain minimum regularity to their schedules in order to be permitted the privilege of existing.

It's thus no coincidence that after the 1950s, when the US government first set about expending massive resources for the construction of a national highway network, that railroads all started to go bust. Businesses began insourcing their shipping needs by buying their own trucks and moving goods on highways rather than by rail. And despite the federal subsidies being directed very specifically at suburban development and improved suburban commuter auto transit (essentially subsidizing the automobile industry by providing infrastructure upon which its goods could be put to use), the government still maintained its rules requiring passenger service by all major rail networks.

No one (that I know of) disputes that this is what led by the 1970s to the near obliteration of the national rail network. Just about every major rail line was on the verge of bankruptcy due to the need to maintain passenger service on empty tracks with empty trains. First the federal government stole the railroads' means of income, then it forced the railroads to continue operating in absence of any method of generating revenue. Amtrak exists because, in order to prevent their total dissolution, they agreed to lend their infrastructure to a government agency (on very agreeable terms) in exchange for no longer being responsible for passenger rail.

And now, in our new century, most metropolitan regions are finally assembling a civic argument for the return of mass transit. But the general feeling for those now in positions of influence - born, for the most part, after the auto age had already taken hold - is that mass transit is a waste of money. A form of welfare statism and government meddling in what people should be left to do on their own (eg, move around).

And yet, the very article that inspired this rant quite clearly exposes the fallacy of this line of reasoning, without even using such stark examples as the graph above: PART is running a service that moves 1200 commuters throughout the Triad every day - over 300,000 passengers per year - for an annual cost of \$2.4 million. And passengers reimburse the system a quarter million dollars of that money back through fares (making the cost per commute about \$8.00 - probably far less than a day's 2-way private auto commute from Winston to Greensboro in the average SUV, when car costs, insurance and fuel are figured). That same \$2.4 million would, per this same article, buy "less than a mile of new highway

pavement, and only a few hundred feet of interstate". And those people using that new highway or interstate would NOT be reimbursing the state or local governments for the use of that infrastructure through fares or tolls.

So, every time you start up your car as you get ready to head to work, think not of how much you wish they would widen that freeway you're stuck in traffic on. Instead, think of how much more efficient your commute would be if there were 20-30 busses using that roadbed (or a couple rail lines using up half of it), transporting three times the people in half the space as 100 cars. Chances are you are NOT the only one who commutes in the direction you do, or to the office you work in, or from the street you live on. If you did, you wouldn't be stuck in traffic. Then think of the huge amount of tax money your government spends to make your commute take much longer, at much higher cost, than those who are actually using that "subsidized" public transit system. Maybe you should support your government's rare efforts at throwing money at quite efficient and cost-effective projects - even against dire odds of public opinion and industry inertia.

That \$8.00 transit commute is massively expensive if you think about it. If more than .002% of commuters were using a regional mass transit system, its prospects would rise and costs would fall precipitously as it scaled and became more efficient in its method of allocating resources. This would be easily reflected in both fare reductions and in reductions of subsidy per passenger mile.

Do you really want the government to stop paying for "useless" mass transit schemes like Amtrak and PART? Consider your answer carefully, since one day you might have to defend it in the face of calls to replace your "useless", "wasteful" and "inefficient" interstate with a nice shiny rail line...