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Public Transit: Myth and Reality

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A few nights ago, I went to see a few urban planners and politicians talk about the future growth of Jacksonville. At least two of them repeated the old chestnut: "Everybody says they need [public] transit and they want it, but they want it for the other guy to take it." This remark illustrates a common view: the status quo is unchangeable, because transit ridership is eternally fixed at the current low level. This view, however, is dead wrong.

Why? Because in fact, transit ridership is very responsive to service quality and other factors that make transit more convenient or less convenient. We know this because we know that in places with lots of buses and trains, lots of people use them. For example, 52.8% of New York City residents use a bus or train to get to work. Similarly, in cities with extensive subway systems such as Washington, Philadelphia, and Chicago, transit's "market share" hovers around 30%.

On the other hand, where transit service is weak (as in most suburbs of those cities) ridership is lower. In other words, transit ridership is elastic- it goes up and down with transit service.

And nationally, when transit service is reduced, ridership suffers. For example, in the early 1990s, the federal government reduced support for transit while at the same time ordering local transit agencies to provide special transit services for disabled riders, thus reducing the resources available for non-disabled riders. As a result, transit ridership declined by about 10 percent between 1990 and 1995. Since 1995, the federal government has increased spending on transportation infrastructure on all types: as a result, transit ridership has regained its lost ground and then some.

Another factor affecting transit service is the competition: when high gas prices make driving more expensive, fewer people drive and more take transit. How do we know this? Because that's exactly what people did in 2008. Americans took 10.7 billion transit trips that year as gas prices soared, a 4 percent increase over 2007 and a 38 percent increase since 1995. Ridership increases were not limited to cities with fancy rail systems: for example, 2008 bus ridership increased by 17 percent in Cocoa Beach and 8 percent in Sarasota.

In Jacksonville, of course, transit ridership is lower than in most big cities - but this is due not to some intangible attitude that permeates people's minds as soon as they move to Jacksonville, but to a few tangible realities.

One such reality is simply lack of service: there is no rail service, most buses run once an hour, and stop running late at night. (I note that JTA is planning to make some buses run more frequently, starting in May; for details go to <http://www.jtafla.com/pdf/Proposed%20May%202009%20Service%20Changes.pdf>). This means By contrast, a subway system is more user-friendly: if you show up at a subway station in Atlanta or New York or Washington, you know that a train will show up reasonably soon.

Moreover, our bus system does not serve enough places. With the exception of one or

two routes, JTA is limited to Duval County. So if you live or work in St. Johns or Clay County, you are more or less out of luck. (St. Johns does have its own bus company, but its service hours are even more limited than those of JTA).

All of these problems, of course, could be resolved by more money: we could build light rail or streetcars, or pay for buses to run more frequently. But other difficulties arise from the urban form of Jacksonville.

First of all, our downtown is not the region's dominant job center. But because most bus routes end downtown, it logically follows that if you work anywhere else, you probably will have to change buses to get to work: for example, if you live in the Beaches, you will have to change buses downtown in order to get to my office in Baymeadows. Given how infrequently most buses run, having to change buses often means a two-hour commute.

The remark in my first paragraph about transit being for the "other guy" was in response to an online survey asking people if they would ride a bus if it was available- but the question was a misleading one, because it failed to distinguish good bus service (say, every 10 minutes with no transfers) and the not-so-good bus service that my hypothetical Beaches resident has (taking a bus that runs only once an hour, and then undergoing a two-hour commute due to the necessity of changing buses). I suspect that many people would be glad to use the first kind of service, but not so interested in the second. So the people who thought the question referred to good bus service may have answered the question "yes" and the people who thought the question referred to two-hour commutes may have answered the same question "no"- even though both groups may have felt the same way.

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to this problem, since obviously not everyone can work downtown. A rail system (though perhaps too expensive to be practical) would be helpful for people whose jobs were located on rail stops; they would have a good reason to live near other rail stops so they could use the new service.

Second, Jacksonville does not have as much population density as cities with higher transit ridership. The concept of "density" has been widely misunderstood; some people think that any increase in density means sky-blocking skyscrapers everywhere. But all density means, in this context, is that lots of people live near a rail stop or a bus stop. If lots of people live near the transit stop, more people will ride transit. We know this we know that because the cities with the highest transit ridership (New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, and San Francisco) have at least 10,000 or so people per square mile, which means that any transit stop will have lots of potential riders nearby. Jacksonville, by contrast, has only 1000 people per square mile. Thus, it seems unlikely that Jacksonville will have New York-size ridership anytime soon.

On the other hand, some low-density cities and suburbs have increased transit ridership by allowing increased density near transit stations. For example, Bethesda, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, has a subway stop. The blocks closest to the subway stop are dominated by high-rises; then a few blocks later you have smaller apartments and condos, then a few blocks later you have small single-family homes, and finally the blocks furthest from the train are dominated by typical suburban houses. In other words, a good transit system does not mean that everyone lives in high-rises or smaller houses- just the

people closest to the transit stations. So if Jacksonville does invest in commuter rail, light rail, or bus rapid transit, it can attain decent levels of ridership by zoning the land around those transit stations for lots of housing- for example, high-rises or mid-rises as opposed to the typical five-house-per-acre subdivision. This sort of zoning would not involve higher regionwide density at all, but would merely redistribute our density so that the areas closest to the transit stations have the most people, while the areas further from the transit stations get to maintain the status quo.

In sum, transit ridership is a function of two factors: (1) how much service does the transit system provide? and (2) how many people live and work near transit stops? Good service plus compact development means more riders; spread-out development and bad service means fewer riders.