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Mass Transit

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Commuter Rail Comes of Age

Unlike urban transit, whose ridership continues to erode, commuter and regional rail services are booming. More commuters are riding rails than ever before. Since 1989, eight urban areas have launched commuter rail service, bringing the total of metro areas with regional rail to 15. New rail operations are being considered in several other metropolitan areas. But commuter rail is also a prime factor behind something that transit advocates do not like to talk much about: growing metropolitan decentralization, a.k.a "suburban sprawl."

If growth of ridership is a measure of transportation success (as it surely is), then the commuter rail industry deserves the laurels. According to a recent study by the American Public Transit Association, 2.1 million daily riders use commuter rail in the United States, up 6 percent from 1997. Heaviest use is registered by the systems in Boston, the Tri-State region of New York-New Jersey-Connecticut, Chicago, Philadelphia and Toronto, but virtually all commuter rail systems have experienced ridership gains lately.

As recently as 1980, commuter rail operations existed only in five U.S. cities: New York, New Jersey, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston. By the end of 1998 new commuter rail systems were operating in Southern California, the San Francisco Bay Area, Silicon Valley, Dallas-Fort Worth, Fort Lauderdale-Miami, Maryland, and Northern Virginia. New commuter rail services are being planned in Seattle, Raleigh-Durham and Colorado. Examining some of these new systems provides a clue to why commuter rail is blossoming.

Virginia Railway Express

The Virginia Railway Express (VRE) lines, totaling almost 100 miles, extend deep into the fast growing exurban counties of Prince William and Fauquier, with terminals at Fredericksburg and Manassas, a distance of

some 50 miles from its downtown terminal at Union Station in Washington DC. Service between Washington DC and Northern Virginia began in the summer of 1992. After service disruptions in the mid-90s turned many patrons away, things are looking up once again, with average daily boardings of over 7,300 in January 1999.

Altamont Commuter Express

With housing prices soaring in the Silicon Valley, many workers are seeking affordable housing across Altamont Pass in the San Joaquin Valley, some 50 miles to the east. The Altamont Commuter Express (ACE), which was launched in October 1998, offers an alternative to the unpredictable and delay-ridden auto commute on the major highway connecting Stockton and San Jose. Ridership, currently averaging 900 boardings per day, continues to grow, as more and more workers in search of affordable housing relocate to the Valley, thanks, in part to the new rail service.

Massachusetts

In Boston, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) continues to expand its commuter rail service, with 12 routes totaling 368 route miles now in operation and 125,000 boardings on a typical weekday. Twenty-five years ago ridership was reported at about 30,000, a measure of how important commuter rail service

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has become. New residential and commercial developments are sprouting along the new commuter lines that extend as far as Ipswich and Newburyport in the north and Worcester in the west, a distance of 50 miles. Service as far as Fall River and New Bedford is planned in the next few years.

South Florida's Tri-Rail

Begun in 1989 as a temporary mitigation measure to alleviate traffic congestion during the reconstruction of a parallel highway, Tri-Rail serves the busy travel corridor connecting Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach. The system has experienced dramatic growth over the past five years. Starting with an average of 2,500 passengers a day, Tri-Rail now carries 14,000 daily riders.

Southern California's Metrolink

Metrolink, the 6-year old commuter rail service in the Los Angeles area, operates a far flung network of lines radiating from the downtown Union Station as far as Santa Clarita in the northwest and San Bernardino and Riverside in the east, a distance of some 60 miles. The system covers 416 miles, serving commuters in Riverside, Orange, San Bernardino, and Ventura Counties. Six years ago, Metrolink started service with 2,300 daily passengers. Today, it carries 27,000 daily riders.

Dallas-Forth Worth

The Trinity Railway Express, launched just 18 months ago, represents the first commuter rail service between Fort Worth and Dallas. Riders are currently using the first phase of the service, which connects Dallas' Union Station to Irving, a distance of some 20 miles. Although sparked by the need to reduce traffic congestion, the commuter rail line also has spurred new development opportunities along the corridor.

Puget Sound Region

The next new start commuter rail service will be in Seattle. Sound Transit plans to start its Sounder rail commuter service by the end of 1999. Trains will run between Tacoma and Seattle and eventually will be extended south from Tacoma to Lakewood and north to Everett, to serve the rapidly expanding exurban population.

Facilitating commuter rail expansion has been the use of diesel-powered cars ("DMUs") built to light rail standards. On existing freight tracks they can be an attractive, low-cost alternative to conventional commuter rail. DMU services are being planned on an existing 33-mile Conrail line between Trenton and Camden NJ, in the Los Angeles-San Diego corridor between Escondido and

Oceanside, and on an abandoned 43 mile freight line between Aspen and Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

Commentary

The success of these systems tends to confirm what demographers have been telling us for some time: the fastest growth is occurring in the once rural counties, beyond the outer edges of metropolitan areas. A study by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies shows that for the first time since the 1970s, the pace of growth in exurban and semi-rural areas is approaching the growth rate of urban areas, an indication that more and more Americans are bypassing the city in their choice of where to live (*State of the Nation's Housing, 1999*).

Families that move into these places are leaving the suburbs, much as an earlier generation of suburbanites fled the city. Some move in search of more affordable housing, others say they want more space and a safer and healthier environment for their children. Unwilling to face extra-long commutes by automobile, these new exurbanites are what creates demand for commuter rail. Commuter rail, in turn, is the enabler that permits families to move beyond the confines of the suburbs.

"Politicians who advocate expansion of rail transit systems, and urge in the same breath that we adopt more aggressive steps to control suburban sprawl, are not being honest with themselves or the public"

The irony inherent in the success of commuter rail has not escaped some political observers. "Politicians who advocate expansion of rail transit systems, and urge in the same breath that we adopt more aggressive steps to control suburban sprawl, are not being honest with themselves or the public," remarked one MPO official in an obvious allusion to Vice President Gore, who called for more spending on rail transit in a recent speech condemning suburban sprawl (at the National Town Meeting in Detroit sponsored by the President's Council on Sustainable Development, May 4). "Those who demonize the highways as an instrument of sprawl ought to be reminded that their favored alternative, rail transit, has an equally decentralizing effect." ■