



Jammed transit systems running on fumes

Underfunded buses, subways, trains strand some passengers by the wayside

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Transportation experts who have pushed mass transit since the 1970s are getting their wish as soaring gas prices persuade Americans to abandon their cars for buses and trains in record numbers. But as the adage says, be careful what you wish for.

Mass transit ridership is at its highest point in 50 years, according to research by the American Public Transportation Association. For many riders, it just got too expensive to drive.

"I do it to save gas whenever I can," said Cody Nunez, a student at Pasco High School in Kennewick, Wash. "I don't want to be paying \$50 every week."

Shevette Porter of Palm Beach County, Fla., recently bought a bus pass for the local Tri-Rail network. Ridership for the system in March was up 20 percent over March 2007; in April it was up 28 percent year over year.

"It's been costing \$150 a week just in gas," Porter said. "I'm losing time, but it's well worth it."

Not built for modern loads

The story is the same everywhere: In Seattle, commuter rail ridership recorded the biggest jump in the nation during the first quarter, with 28 percent more riders than during the same time last year. Ridership in Harrisburg, Pa., rose 17 percent. In Oakland, Calif., it rose 15.8 percent.

Nationwide, Americans took 2.6 billion bus, subway, commuter rail and light rail trips in the first three months of the year, 85 million more than in the same period in 2007, the American Public Transportation Association said. But it's not clear that the nation's transit systems are able to handle the load.

While many major cities have invested heavily in mass transit over the past 15 years, many more have not. Now that people are demanding service, there isn't the infrastructure to provide it.

"We're seeing it in a lot of other metropolitan areas where there just [aren't] viable transit options — places like Indianapolis, Orlando or Raleigh," said Robert Puentes, a transportation and urban planning scholar with the Brookings Institution, a public policy association in Washington. "They haven't put the money into it. They haven't put the resources into it."

Even those big cities with robust systems are struggling, Puentes said.

"There are major challenges in most of the older, established transit systems, places like New York or Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston — places that are really starting to show their age," he said.

No room on the bus

One of those places is Washington, D.C., where officials of the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority, serving the nation's capital and its suburbs in Maryland and Virginia, are studying contingency plans to deal with weekday ridership that is up during every part of the day over this time last year.

The authority's subway system, already under pressure from riders to add a fifth line, recorded an 8.5 percent increase in ridership in April over last year. Transit officials project that a fifth line could swell ridership by another 40 percent in Maryland.

Washington-area bus riders, meanwhile, complain of standing-room-only buses at any time of the day or

night, while buses are so full in Indianapolis that would-be riders are often refused entry, left to watch as buses drive off without them.

"I was standing there for about an hour," said Ryan Taber, who rides the Fishers Express bus from his home in Hamilton County to his job in downtown Indianapolis.

"No buses ever came by, so finally we stopped a bus going to Carmel and said, 'What's the deal?' And the driver said, 'The buses were full, so they didn't even come by this stop,'" Taber said.

Likewise in Austin, Texas, where "some of our operators are telling us that sometimes the buses are so full that they have to tell passengers to wait for the next bus," said Misty Whited, a spokeswoman for Capital Metro Transit.

More riders mean lower tax revenue

Mass transit is supposed to get cars off the road, and it's working: For the first time since 1980, the number of miles driven fell last year, from 3.014 trillion to 3.003 trillion, according to the Federal Highway Administration. The drop continued by another 2.3 percent in the first quarter of this year, the FHA said.

Meanwhile, 61 percent of drivers said in a poll by Quinnipiac University last month that they had cut back significantly on how much they drove because of high gas prices.

In the San Francisco Bay area, one of the most congested regions in the country, traffic has decreased while ridership on Bay Area Rapid Transit, ferries and buses has risen, said Bijan Sartipi, a district director for California Transportation Department.

"We see a relationship between gas prices and mass transit ridership," Sartipi said.

Steve Taubenkibel, a spokesman for Washington Metro, said, "Any time you can get more people off the roads, highways and on mass transit, it's a win-win for everybody."

Except when it isn't. That's because when gas prices go up, gas purchases go down. And while the price of a gallon of gas may soar, the tax levied on it remains the same. Less gas sold equals less tax revenue for states and municipalities.

So far this fiscal year, gas consumption is down about 3 percent in Indiana, costing the state about \$12 million, state Budget Director Chris Ruhl said. That's money that would have helped fund road construction and repair.

Even as national politicians debate suspending the federal gas tax to give drivers a break, many state officials are swinging in the opposition direction. Florida, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky and Maine have raised their gas taxes this year, while Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue vetoed a 2.9-cent increase in the state's 18.5 cent-a-gallon tax. Meanwhile, transportation planners in Ohio last month proposed raising the gas tax by up to 40 cents more per gallon.

Transit systems shell out at the pump

Worse, increased ridership means higher costs for transit systems. That's because it takes more fuel to move more passengers, and transit systems aren't getting a break at the pump.

Wichita Transit in Kansas, which has seen a 22 percent increase in ridership, has raised its weekly fuel purchase to 8,000 gallons. One recent delivery cost 30 cents a gallon more than it had the week before, officials said.

That caused the bus service to ask the city council for \$210,000 from a reserve fund, money it said was needed to keep buses on the street until July.

"The fuel prices have gone up so dramatically and drastically that even the dramatic increase in ridership is not making up as far as our fuel debt is concerned and our ability to purchase fuel," said Michael Vinson, the

system's acting director.

It all adds up to a conundrum for government officials — high fuel prices send passengers to mass transit but drive down tax revenue and strain fuel budgets.

"With gas at this level, rail and public transit has got to be a bigger and bigger part of our future," Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine said.

Answers aren't expected any time soon, Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty said. He added:

"We need a dramatically different energy policy for our country, and that's not going to happen overnight."

With Tom Costello of NBC News.

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