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What Really Matters for Increasing Transit Ridership

ERIC JAFFE MAY 21, 2012 7 COMMENTS



At first glance Broward County, Florida, doesn't look like the friendliest place for public transportation. The metro area just north of Miami has a couple downtown areas — Fort Lauderdale and Hollywood — but lacks a strong central business district. It also lacks much transit-oriented development. On the contrary, Broward has a very typical postwar, auto-oriented design marked by wide highways and sprawl.

Looks can, of course, be deceiving. As it happens, Broward County has one of the strongest transit systems among other mid-sized metro areas in the United States (population: 1 to 5 million). Compared to 26 other bus-only metros in its class, Broward trails only Orlando and Las Vegas in terms of cost-effectiveness, outperforming higher-profile places like Austin, Charlotte, Indianapolis, and Phoenix. Its buses are full, as measured by per capita ridership, and they've stayed that way in recent years, even as transit in general has struggled.

So what's the key to Broward's success? That's the question at the heart of a report published online earlier this month [in the journal *Urban Studies*](#). A Florida State research team led by urban planning scholar Gregory Thompson considered the history of Broward County transit and evaluated its performance on a number of metrics. What they found, in short, is further evidence in favor of multi-destination systems that get people from home to work rather than simply from home to downtown:

The analysis of transit work trip demand in Broward County indicates that the reason BCT [Broward County Transit] performs so well compared with most of its peers is that its multideestination route structure directly connects the county's residential areas with the dispersed jobs to which they travel. ... In Broward County, workers use transit to get to jobs in a multitude of locations that do not possess the built environment characteristics long thought to be important by most scholars in determining transit ridership.

It wasn't always like this in Broward. In the 1970s the county's bus routes focused on getting people to Fort Lauderdale, Hollywood, and later down to Miami, as per the conventional transit wisdom of the day. When ridership failed to increase, the transit authority restructured the system into a grid that traversed high-density (if not the highest) employment areas. The shift made sense considering that most Broward residents are so-called transit-dependents: among riders, 60 percent are from households that make under \$20,000 a year, and about half don't own a car.

Thompson and colleagues analyzed more than 40,000 bus trips taken in Broward circa the 2000 Census. (While the age of this data is a drawback of the study, there's evidence that Broward's system changed little from 2000 to 2005.) Much of what they found isn't all that surprising: population, median income, employment, and to some extent parking fees near work were all significant factors when it came to transit ridership.

So was in-vehicle travel time. While this isn't surprising either, Thompson and company consider it perhaps the most critical aspect of Broward's transit success. A short, direct trip means, first, that Broward residents can actually get to their jobs (or get out to find jobs), and second, that these same people don't have to depend on friends or family to drive them to work (which in turn saves resources and frees these folks to get to jobs of their own). That travel time was a significant factor but transfer time was *not* underscores the efficiency of multi-destination grids. Contrary to popular wisdom, connections can often save time and reduce a system's complexity (a point Jarrett Walker [hammers home](#) in his book, *Human Transit*.)

In a word, Broward County de-centralized its transit system. Instead of clinging to the belief that all jobs were downtown, it accepted that people need to access jobs in all kinds of places throughout a metro area. We've seen this before: Tallahassee recently reached this conclusion, as [Emily Badger points out](#); Atlanta's transit system also demonstrates the effectiveness of a multi-destination approach, as [Thompson and colleagues have found](#). But since this realization remains the exception and not the norm, it bears repeating.

Thompson and colleagues use their findings to make an intriguing policy point. At a time when cities are struggling to attract transit riders, many policy options focus on the need to increase smart growth. While a [wholesale war on sprawl](#) may be important for the long-term success of cities, a simple shift to a multi-destination transit system might have a more immediate impact on ridership (not to mention more politically palatability). The researchers conclude:

Simply put, the results of this study suggest that most US transit managers of bus-only transit systems and urban planners interested in transit are focusing on the wrong policy variables for improving transit ridership. More walkable, more mixed use environments are important amenities to encourage more transit use, but the most important consideration is easy access to employment. ... Before we try to change the built environment, we need to make sure transit takes riders where they need to go.

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Eric Jaffe is a contributing writer to The Atlantic Cities and the author of *The King's Best Highway: The Lost History of the Boston Post Road, the Route That Made America*. He lives in New York. [All posts »](#)

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