



THE PERFECT COMMUTE

Why More U.S. Cities Need to Embrace Bus-Rapid Transit

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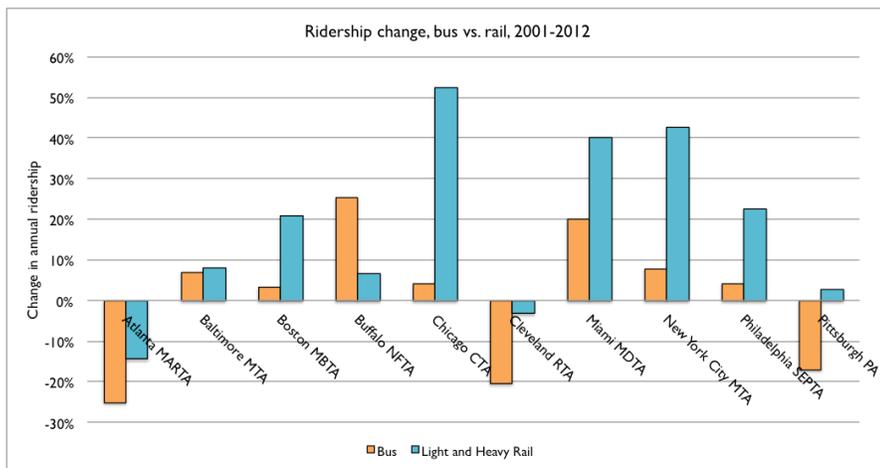


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American cities welcomed the automobile in the 20th century by yielding [much of their street space](#) to cars. The damage done by this approach can be measured in [rising pedestrian deaths](#) or [declining walking rates](#), but a less obviously legacy is the reluctance cities still show toward reshaping their streets — a resistance that's playing out full-bore in [local debates](#) over so-called bus-rapid transit lines. It's a feud that calls into question the street's very role in the modern city: Is it to convey automobiles, or is to provide mobility for everyone?

Bus-Rapid Transit lines, or BRT, are designed to address a flaw in most public bus systems: they're slowed down by the automobile traffic that surrounds them. Stuck in lanes shared with cars, caught up at frequent traffic lights, and often stopping every block, buses too often fail to attract riders who have an alternative. Slow speeds, infrequent arrival, and a generally low service level too often make buses less appealing than rail.

The following chart, compiled with data from the American Public Transportation Association, shows that of ten U.S. cities that had rail systems in 2001 that have not since been significantly expanded, only one (Buffalo) had faster growth in ridership on its buses than its rail lines:



What BRT attempts to do is ape the benefits of rail service at a much lower cost, and in [city after city](#), BRT services have indeed increased ridership. But effective BRT requires giving buses some street space previously allocated to cars, so they can operate in their own exclusive lanes, and taking lanes from cars has proven politically toxic. Even in otherwise progressive places like [Berkeley](#) and [New York](#), BRT projects have been subject to incredibly contentious public meetings and hostile press. Drivers have complained about the prospect of increasing congestion and business owners have moaned about lost sales.

(Several cities [discussing bus improvements](#) they term "BRT," from [El Paso](#) to [Grand Rapids](#), are investing in marginal improvements that will certainly improve bus service but that don't generally meet the [international BRT standard](#) because they don't give buses exclusive lanes.)

Taking street space from cars and giving it to buses *will* change the commuting habits of the people who currently drive there. It will slow down cars a bit and it will encourage people to drive on other streets. It will also likely make auto-oriented retail stores (i.e. those with lots of parking) less appealing. But making room for BRT will also do something else: it will make taking the bus a lot more convenient and increase the number of people walking down the street to get to stations.



In research [we conducted](#) at the Metropolitan Planning Council, we found that a new, \$160 million BRT line on [Chicago's Ashland Avenue](#) — a route that already serves more than 30,000 daily riders — would dramatically improve the effectiveness of the city's transit system. For people living near several stations, the number of jobs accessible within a 20-minute transit commute would increase by more than 80 percent. The line itself would increase the number of people living and working within a quarter mile of a rapid transit station by 80,000 and 25,000, respectively — hardly a drop in the bucket.

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Though specific to Chicago, these results speak to the potential of BRT for increasing transit access, reducing transportation costs, and easing commutes — all at a relatively limited cost. Rail is far more expensive

to build than BRT, and highways around the country serving [considerably fewer people](#) often cost five to ten times more to construct.

Indeed, all of the improvements offered by BRT alter the landscape of the neighborhoods through which lines run. They make public transportation more convenient and — truth be told — more useful for people in a way that current services are not. And businesses fearful of fewer cars driving down streets with BRT should comfort themselves with the fact that more transit users typically means [more economic activity](#), not less.

But this requires rethinking the way our cities work. The automobile orientation that defined 20th-century American street planning is comfortable to many city residents because they've grown used to the expectation that it should be easy to get around by car, even if that means degrading bus service and making walking more difficult. Yet that orientation, which has unsurprisingly reduced the share of people using transit, has also degraded the viability of our urban cores, resulting in a loss of population in many major central cities.

The rush to realign our cities toward the needs of the private automobile has been ineffective mostly because the suburbs — less dense and with more parking — make more sense for drivers. With projects like BRT, we have an opportunity to play to the great advantages of dense, urban environments, where transit is truly effective in connecting people to jobs and other needs, if given the chance to thrive.