The emerging market for transportation choices

Transit is returning to its central place in the life of cities. With more people using buses, streetcars, and light rail than ever before, our street design paradigm is shifting to give transit the space it deserves. People are choosing to live, work, and play in walkable neighborhoods, and cities are prioritizing highly productive modes like transit as the key to efficient, sustainable mobility for growing urban populations.¹

A sea change is happening in America. It is widely publicized that Millennials are driving less and have a strong preference for living in cities again. The younger generation, who grew up in the suburbs, carted around in minivans, are defying their upbringing. As adults, they are flocking to places that invest in safe, interesting streets, public spaces, and fast, reliable public transit.

A national survey² of attitudes about transit even discovered that parents of Millennials (14 - 30 year olds) are more likely to use transit compared to parents of Gen Xers.

We identify a group of environmentally conscious, outgoing people, largely in their 30s and 40s, who are open to taking transit but find the service inconvenient or inadequate. We conclude that policymakers and transit providers could most easily increase transit ridership by focusing on this group.

¹ NACTO Transit Street Design Guide, 2016
Cities that are hotbeds of economic activity, including Cleveland, are rediscovering locations where transit has a positive return on investment. The $221 million HealthTech Corridor and its bus-rapid line (2008), has supported downtown’s renaissance as a neighborhood. In the last decade, downtown’s residential base grew from 4,000 to 14,000 people. In the same time period, employment in the HealthTech Corridor doubled.

Leveraging employment and population density is certainly one way the city can encourage more growth in transit use. Another successful example is the “BRT-lite” project known as the Cleveland State University Line serving Lakewood and Cleveland -- its 43% rider growth in the first 12-months is a case of smart, strategic investment in new and improved transit service.

The big picture

In analyzing the nation’s transportation needs, a 2014 National Economic Council report found that “infrastructure is not keeping pace with the demands of a growing economy.” They note how people are suffering from greater anxiety due to the distance they travel between home and employment. The distance and spread out development make it nearly impossible to offer an alternative: 45% of Americans now lack access to transit. As a result of the country’s priorities, a significant share of the population have been excluded from recent investments.

In its plan to add 80 miles of bikeways, Cleveland has started to recognize that people -- particularly those living near transit -- are multi-modal. Yes, Millennials but also low-to-moderate income households have led a surge. 10.7 billion rides were taken on transit (2013) -- an all-time U.S. record.

When surveyed, 14-31 year olds have clearly stated their preferences. They may not abandoned driving outright, but they want a variety of transportation options where they choose to live.

Age is a bigger factor than what part of the country you live in when it comes to your attitude toward transit. Yet despite all the ballyhoo about young people being attracted to transit because of smartphones and apps, it turns out they think the most important attraction of transit is its reliability and speed. They prioritize having a bus that comes frequently over an app that tells them it’s coming in an hour.

For that reason, a growing group of cities -- Denver, Kansas City, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis-St. Paul -- are investing in transportation choices.

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3 From a 2016 Cleveland State University Center for Population Dynamics report.

4 The American Public Transit Association which surveyed Millennials and found that 4 out of 5 plan to choose a place to live after college where they have options to daily driving. In a poll of Ohio college students, The Public Interest Research Group confirmed that 86 percent will choose to live where they can get around without driving.

5 Ibid (Transit Center)
Despite data and trends pointing this way, Ohio has been moving in the opposite direction. From 1990 to 2010, the state invested heavily in highways. ODOT added 324 lane miles of highway in Northeast Ohio during a time when population held steady. It has steadily eroded the region’s population density (-24%). In a comprehensive study of the region’s priorities, Vibrant NEO 2040 found that:

Northeast Ohio has increased the amount of developed land in the region by 4-5% and regional job growth has been relatively low. Even with growth in the number of people working and a slight expansion in the amount of land on which they could work, Northeast Ohio’s rate of employed people per developed acre declined by 11.6% from 1979 to 2006.

It is especially problematic for Northeast Ohio if it expects to attract young talent here. As the region sprawls outward, it dims the prospects of using public transit. The Fund for Our Economic Future discovered that only 28% of Northeast Ohioans are able to access a job using our region’s transit systems. The situation is more dire for City of Cleveland residents. The region’s job sprawl has excluded many city residents from reaching service sector jobs in outlying areas -- taking a bus requires a lot of fortitude and time.

As a result, fewer people are riding the bus: In 2016, GCRTA provided 600,000 fewer bus trips: an 8% drop compared to 2015. The drop was precipitous in the second half of the year, from July (when the RNC arrived) through August when RTA cut service and increased fares.

**Northeast Ohio - the long journey home**

If demand for dense, walkable communities and public transit are in demand, how does it scan that Northeast Ohio continues to build in such low densities and design streets for the exclusive domain of the car?

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6 Vibrant NEO 2040 report
Sprawl without growth has left Greater Cleveland with a legacy of vacant units, mounting transportation costs, government debt, and tens of thousands of excess properties. Perversely, these development trends hurt municipal revenues and cripple local capacity to regulate land use development and transportation investments. Nevertheless, the Ohio Department of Development and NOACA project these trends to continue through 2030.

This map from the Ohio Department of Development offers insight. It shows how we have been enslaved to a past trend -- showing outmigration is the future. Policy has ensured the trend over 50 years - supplying most of the funding to new roads and highways. In making plans for the future, highways and expansions are almost assured to receive more funding than fixing roads.

But, what if the region wants to do things differently? What if we choose to incentivize shorter trips or prefer to build more pedestrian friendly streets and transit lines?

Transit-oriented development succeeds in bolstering economic activity and is essential to building thriving places. Northeast Ohio will need to re-examine it goals to achieve more “TOD” success stories. Like those other mid sized cities, Cleveland has an opportunity to fix its roads and meet the rising tide for vibrant, walkable transit-connected places.

Fixing our current roads should appeal to all political ends of the spectrum who are concerned about resource efficiency. TOD translates goals of managing the demand for transportation. We can do this and meet the rising tide for vibrant, walkable places.