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TRANSIT'S 40-YEAR RECORD LOW

By WENDELL COX

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In recent years, the American Public Transportation Association and transit agencies have been pumping out press releases about record ridership. At the national level, a recurring theme has been that ridership has reached a 40-year record.

So it was to have been expected that when the results of the 2000 U.S. Census were announced, a large increase would be shown in the number of people using transit to get to work. The news is out, and there is a record—a record low. Not in the 40-year history of census journey-to-work information have fewer people used transit to get to work. As a result, transit's work trip market share is also at a record low, and is probably at the lowest rate since before the streetcar was invented in the 1880s. Now, just 4.7 percent of people use transit to get to work.

During the 1990s, 13 million additional workers began using cars to get to work. This compares to a slight decline in transit use and a 10 percent market share loss, from 5.3 percent in 1990 to 4.7 percent in 2000. Transit is clearly not reducing traffic congestion, because to do that requires getting people who drive to work out of their cars, something that no census has ever shown.

What makes these dismal results more significant is that the nation has been embarked on an expensive campaign to build urban rail systems. The reality is that, not even where the new systems have been built has transit made much difference.

The nation's most expensive new rail system is in Washington, D.C. Ten billion dollars and 100 miles of subway, not to mention two new light rail lines, have not been

enough to stem the decline. Today transit's work trip market share in D.C. is 30 percent lower than when there were only buses.

Portland, Oregon, has not only built two new light rail lines but also has embarked on smart growth strategies to limit sprawl and to not expand highways. All of this was to attract people out of their cars. Yet today more people than ever drive alone to work in Portland, and transit's market share is lower than before the rail system was built.

Perhaps the most surprising result was in Dallas, which opened three light rail lines and a commuter rail line in the 1990s. The local transit-media complex has produced an unending litany of success stories. But in at least one measure, success eluded them—3,100 fewer workers commuted by transit in 2000 than in 1990.

The results are little different in Florida. Transit's work trip market share in Miami fell from 4.4 percent to 3.9 percent during the 1990s, and is down 25 percent from before Metrorail, Metromover, and Tri-Rail, when only bus service was provided. Other major metropolitan areas have even smaller shares, under 2 percent. Jacksonville deserves special mention. There, local transit officials built the Skytrain system, claiming that it would carry 42,000 people. The reality is less than 2,500. It's no wonder that Florida's largest market share loss occurred in Jacksonville, at more than one-third. Tampa-St. Petersburg, where enthusiasm for rail is strong, saw its miniscule market share decline from 1.5 percent to 1.4 percent. The only good news was in Orlando, where market share rose from 1.6 to 1.7 percent. But this does not indicate that it is time to start building rail. At

this rate, Orlando will approach Miami's small transit market share sometime in the 23rd century.

These results do not indicate that transit has no place. Transit is very effective where the conditions are right—very large and dense downtown areas and high density cores that are served by auto-competitive transit. For example, more than one-half of commuters to Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Chicago use transit.

But outside these areas, little of the modern urban area is conducive to auto-competitive transit. The story is no different even in Europe, where Americans visiting rail-oriented tourist cores miss the suburbs where most people live, work, and commute by car because auto-competitive transit service is so scarce. The reality is that, at least as it regards attracting people from cars, transit is about downtown. But, on average, only 10 percent of employment is downtown and most job growth is in the suburbs. As a result, despite the hype, there is no prospect for transit to reduce traffic congestion. That has been clear for decades.

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