



Ensuring Oklahoma's Rail Transit Future

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OKC: READY FOR REGIONAL TRANSIT

By OnTrac

In 1927, commuting to and from Oklahoma City by automobile was a challenging adventure practiced by the daring few.



But in 2017, hundreds of thousands of people do it every working day.



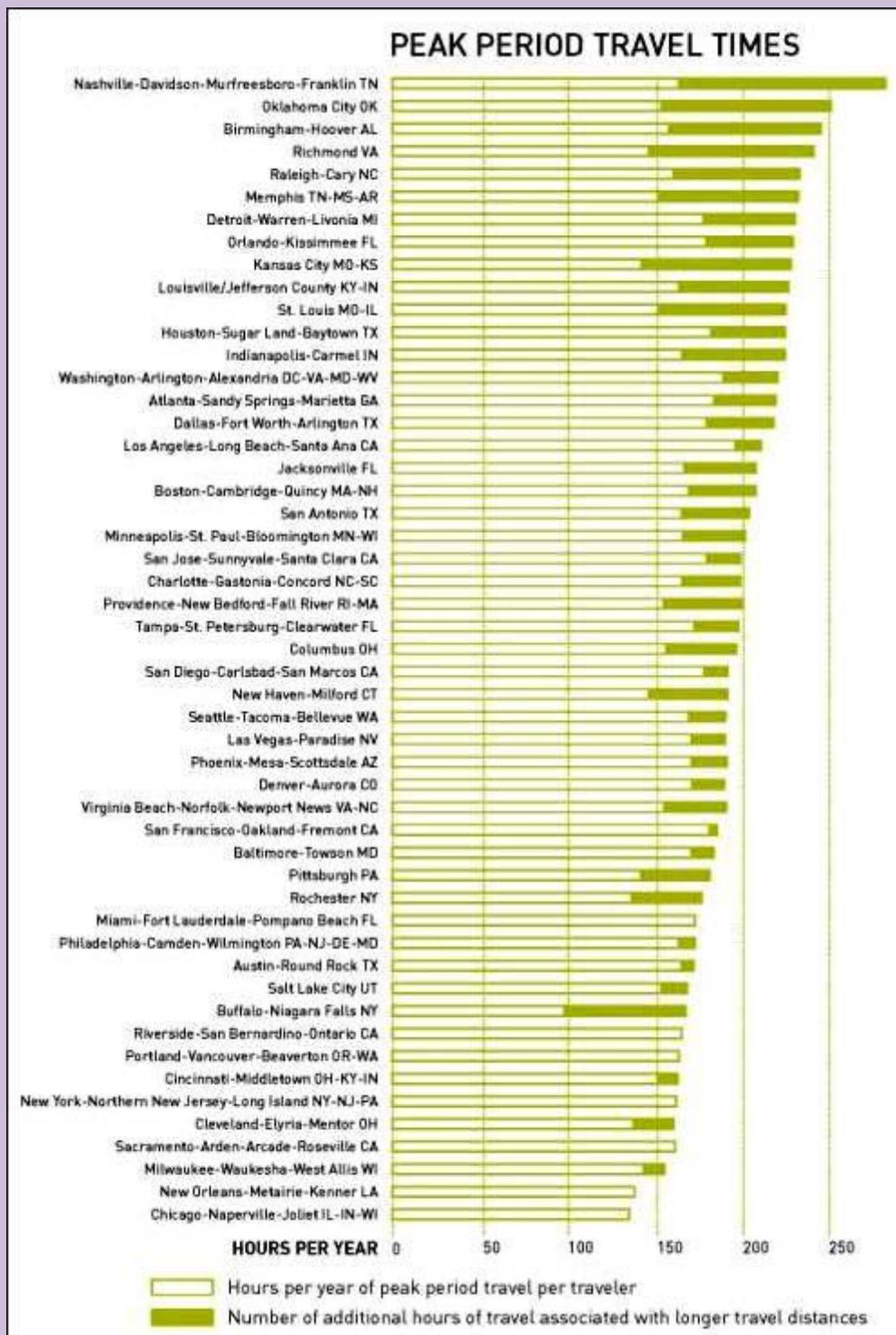
Today, more people commute on a daily basis throughout the Oklahoma City metro area than the combined populations of Norman, Edmond and Midwest City. The majority of those commuters are traveling to and from Oklahoma City for critical needs, such as employment, education and health care. The rest travel for entertainment, sports, dining, shopping and visiting family and friends. For all of these reasons and more, commuters are the life-blood of Oklahoma City's economic heart. Without access to safe and efficient means of travel for the citizens of the metro area, Oklahoma City's economy and quality of life would suffer.

For the last seventy years, that access has simply meant automobiles and an ever-expanding highway and road system. But as all large, growing cities eventually discover, the population tipping point is eventually reached where traffic conditions become so congested that travel efficiency begins a steady decline, causing both economic and quality of life impacts. Much like our own bodies that require the efficient, unimpeded flow of blood to our heart to survive, cities that fail to implement transportation system solutions to counter the negative impacts caused by ever-increasing traffic congestion will see their economic health and quality of life begin a downward slide.

To prevent that decline from happening, cities all across the country have implemented effective transit solutions to provide their citizens with alternative choices for their transportation needs, including bus, bus rapid transit, modern streetcar, commuter rail and light rail. Working closely together with their neighboring communities, numerous pier cities, such as Salt Lake City, Charlotte, Denver and Dallas, have successfully created comprehensive regional rail-based transit systems to provide safe and efficient transportation options for their citizens.



For those who don't drive significant distances within the Oklahoma City metro area during the week, traffic congestion may seem to be an issue only experienced in other cities. But for those who regularly commute to, from and within Oklahoma City, traffic congestion is a very real and growing problem. During peak period travel times, Oklahoma City's highways and roads frequently fill to capacity, with traffic flow grinding to a near halt and commuters experiencing long travel delays due to serious traffic congestion. A [recent report for CEOs for Cities](#) looked specifically at the time spent in traffic during peak period travel times in the nation's 51 largest metro areas. That report found that Oklahoma City ranked second as one of the worst cities for peak period travel times. Those excessive, stressful, wasted hours of time spent in traffic cause significant negative impacts to our citizens and our communities, both in terms of the affect it has on the work, health, family life and leisure time of those individuals, as well as on the businesses, agencies and organizations for whom they work and support.

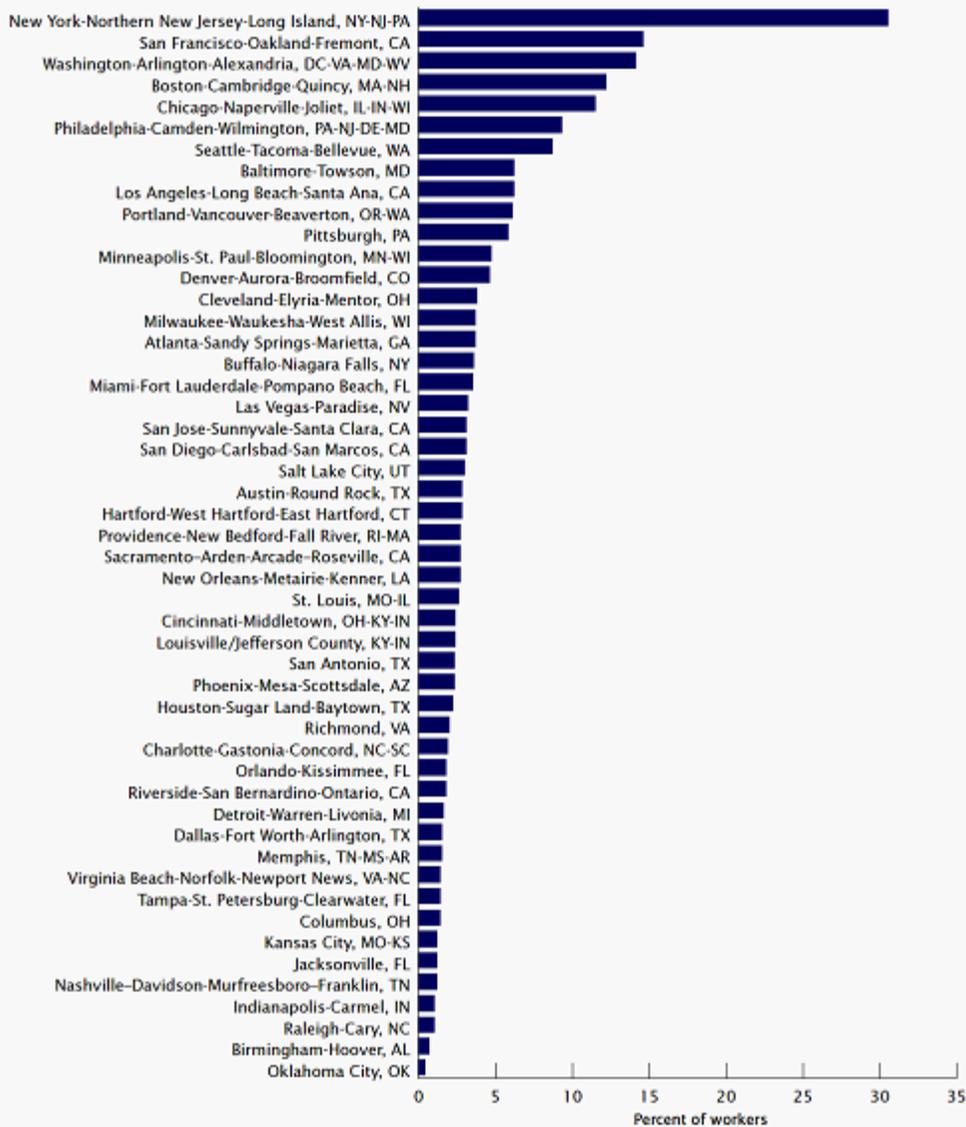


It wasn't always that way. By the 1940's, Oklahoma City had a well-developed regional transit system involving extensive local and interurban streetcar lines and a small bus system serving much of core Oklahoma City, as well as many of the surrounding communities, including Norman, Edmond, Yukon, El Reno and Guthrie. But with the growth of the auto industry following World War II, Oklahoma City abandoned its streetcar system in 1947 to make way for the future of transportation: automobiles and highways. With the coming of the Interstate System in the 1960s, the future had fully arrived and the need for an extensive transit system, whether it be rail or bus, within the

Oklahoma City metro area became an obsolete thing of the past. Along with that future though, came growth and sprawl, as Oklahoma City's expanding interstate highway system soon made daily long-distance commuting within the metro area a relatively easy thing to do for the masses. But as we approach the year 2020, Oklahoma City is beginning to see a different future on its transportation horizon: serious traffic congestion and the need for a regional transit system solution. Currently, the Oklahoma City metro area ranks last in public transportation usage by its workforce out of the top 50 largest metro areas in the country, primarily as a result of the lack of a regional transit system. Left in our current transportation state, negative economic and quality of life impacts will only increase as traffic congestion continues to worsen throughout the region.

Figure 6.

Public Transportation Usage for the 50 Largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas: 2009
 (Workers 16 years and over. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see www.census.gov/acs/www/)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009.

Fortunately though, many of the Oklahoma City metro area's municipal leaders now recognize the value and importance of having a regional rail-based transit system as an integral part of our region's overall transportation network. They understand that to have vibrant and populated urban center, a regional rail-based transit system is essential to supporting those who wish to live, visit and work there. They also realize that the city core and its surrounding suburbs are not each islands unto themselves, but are unique and essential components of the greater metropolitan area. As such, they understand that what is good for one is most often good for all, whether it's attracting new businesses, jobs, and residents or reducing air pollution or protecting fresh water supplies or ensuring an effective transportation system for their citizens. They know the truth of the matter: that an effective regional rail-based transit system brings improved quality of life and economic benefits for the entire metropolitan area, such as:

Increased Property Values and Tax Revenues

Rail transit encourages high density, high value mixed-use development and creates business and real estate development opportunities, which in turn raises property values, increases business revenues and generates significant new local and state tax revenues.

Greater Regional Economic Competitiveness

Rail transit allows businesses to attract labor and customers from a larger geographic area. In the shift from the old economy, where access to raw materials and minimizing costs were the key components of production, to the new knowledge-based economy of turning new ideas into products quickly, labor has become the single most critical factor of production. Rail transit helps to attract and retain knowledgeable and motivated workers. A dense labor market draws high value businesses. Likewise, a dense job market draws highly skilled workers that businesses require. Studies show that business locations near high quality urban settings with clean, efficient rail transportation are a priority for young knowledge workers who are choosing a job. Competition is intensifying between cities and regions to create the amenities and the business climate that will attract highly skilled workers.

Accelerated Urban Revitalization

People and businesses want to locate near rail transit. More people, more businesses, more activity and more local spending serves as a revitalization catalyst for urban areas. Urban areas served by rail transit experience significant revitalization. Economic vitality in a city also brings economic benefits to its suburbs. Rail transit is an important component in developing a vibrant regional economy by linking cities with suburbs, where nearly half of the American work force lives.

Reduced Traffic Congestion

Rail transit gives people a convenient and inexpensive option for dealing with traffic congestion. In avoiding traffic congestion, people can be more productive and improve their quality of life. This is an important amenity that strengthens businesses as they work to attract and retain good employees, many of whom prefer employment locations that have modern rail options. More than half of all rail transit passengers are commuting to work at peak hours. This helps to reduce traffic at the most congested times by removing the train passengers from the roads. In looking ahead to the future, traffic congestion and delays are expected even with the expansion of highways. As a region grows, the additional traffic will cause more inconvenience and delays. Conversely, with rail transit, as a region grows and travel demands increase, trains are easily lengthened and the number of trips increased. Even adding additional track is much less expensive than adding lanes of highway. The added rail service that is prompted by growth improves convenience and mobility for all citizens.

Less Parking Demand

Parking costs and availability are becoming a top business priority in urban areas. Businesses spend millions of dollars providing parking to employees and shuttling employees from off-site parking lots. Urban retail businesses suffer as customers perception of parking hassles keeps them from visiting downtown. Rail transit provides a clean, easy, reliable transportation option that benefits both the rail user who no longer needs to deal with parking issues, and the auto user who has more parking made available by the rail user. Many businesses in cities served by rail transit offer employees a small portion of the company's parking cost savings as a reward for using rail transit.

A Better Environment

When people use rail transit instead of a car, they are reducing the air and water pollution that results from driving automobiles. Rail transit releases far fewer pollutants into the atmosphere than do cars. Rail transit improves air quality, which reduces environmental, health and economic impacts caused by air pollution.

Smarter Growth

Dense, transit-oriented development is a more efficient use of our natural resources, resulting in less energy used, less air and water pollution, and less land consumed. Developing in a compact manner and fully utilizing existing infrastructure instead of building new infrastructure in far-reaching areas is a much more efficient use of tax dollars. Rail transit and transit-oriented development improves access to jobs and vital services for those who cannot or choose not to drive, removing a substantial barrier to independence for many and providing an additional labor pool for businesses.

The concern expressed by some that development of a rail-based regional transit system would somehow encourage sprawl or be economically detrimental to Oklahoma City is unfounded. Excessive sprawl has already happened and the Interstate Highway System is mostly to blame. In fact, an effective rail-based regional transit system will encourage just the opposite by causing those who prefer an urban lifestyle to move to a revitalized downtown. That's because urban dwellers predominantly favor and depend on such a transit system to support the non-auto dependant lifestyle they prefer and to provide them the mobility they need for travel throughout the metro area. That urban growth in turn will result in significant economic benefits for Oklahoma City, and the regional transit system fueling that growth will be equally beneficial to the surrounding metro area communities and their residents. If one of the goals is to reduce sprawl and grow the core, the best way to accomplish that is to stop expanding our highways and invest in a rail-based regional transit system.

As Oklahoma City continues it's phenomenal transformation and growth into a modern big-league city, it's time to bring Oklahoma City and the entire metropolitan area into the 21st Century of transportation by developing an effective rail-based regional transit system to serve our citizens and ensure our economic and transportation future. That future will begin to arrive next year, as Oklahoma City's new modern streetcar system begins operation and renovations are completed on Santa Fe Station, Oklahoma City's future intermodal hub. More importantly, 2018 could very well be the year that metro-area city leaders finalize current joint planning efforts to establish a new regional transit authority to develop and manage a regional transit system. And that's a good thing. For when it comes to transit system development, we can't afford to wait until traffic congestion and its associated economic and quality of life impacts are unbearable. If we do, it will already be too late.

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