

Commentary

Missouri transit could learn from Illinois’ funding approach

By JUNE MCALLISTER FOWLER and ROSE WINDMILLER

Addressing equity issues comes down to leveling a playing field that has been notoriously and historically unequal in the St. Louis region. Public transit is one of the assets in the community that does that in a positive and present way that people can see. It is all about creating connections and decreasing distance.

For those in the community who are challenged by various life circumstances, public transportation is a way to connect people to not only where they want to go, but where they need to go. Access to employment is a sustainable way to uplift a community.

You can put all kinds of different programs in place – and that is important to do – but until people have a job, and the ability to get to that job, life will continue to be difficult. A safe, integrated and affordable public transportation system is critical to providing that access for people



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who depend on it as not only their best means of transportation, but sometimes their only means of transportation. And, without this type of access there are some unintended consequences to not only the economy, but to the quality of life in impacted communities.

Transit access and expansion is an ongoing infrastructure project. It deserves the community’s attention, support, vigilance and ongoing dedication to making it more equitable for everyone.

We need to continue to examine the system and its services. Is it on time? Is it meeting community needs? Is it safe? Is it going to job centers that people need to get to? How can Metro Transit partner with Citizens for Modern Transit and other organizations to make improvements? How do we get the community to understand that the region needs a viable public transit system – whether they choose to use it or not?

Everyone needs to be an advocate for transit. As part of that process, we need to respectfully listen to the naysayers and not discount their arguments. We need to meet people where they are and learn, grow and evolve based on the concerns they voice. We need to find a way for the community to embrace transit like it once did when ridership was increasing month-to-month and year-to-year. We need to get more people on the train and buses and, as a region, support future options related to additional light rail lines, bus routes or other innovative forms of public transit,

including a collaboration of rideshare programs.

It is also important that we secure a dedicated and sustainable funding allocation from the state of Missouri. In fact, Missouri would do well to take a lesson from its next-door neighbors in Illinois with respect to funding transportation. We must have local and regional elected officials who support public transit not only with funding but with really good public policy.

As we address disparity issues and determine how to move forward as a community, and as a region, public transit must continue to be part of the conversation. We must create those connections with transit, while decreasing distances geographically, economically and socially. Now is not the time to abandon our trains and buses.

June McAllister Fowler is past chair of Citizens for Modern Transit, and Rose Windmiller is chair of Bi-State Development’s Board of Commissioners.

National Freight Strategic Plan will strengthen competitiveness

By MARY LAMIE

We commend the U.S. Department of Transportation for announcing the first-ever National Freight Strategic Plan (in



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September). This historic initiative will go a long way toward strengthening national and regional competitiveness amidst continued growth in freight demand.

There is no question America’s ability to compete is dependent on adequate infrastructure to move freight safely and efficiently. The St. Louis region’s freight network alone annually carries 210 million tons of inbound and outbound freight valued at \$6 billion.

The St. Louis Regional Freightway works to enhance the freight network in

eastern Missouri and southwestern Illinois to accommodate anticipated growth.

As a pivotal hub in the national freight network we are excited to see this plan for improving the safety, security and resilience of the national freight system. USDOT efforts to build this plan affirm our proven strategy.

The St. Louis region is delivering safe, reliable transportation following guiding principles in the Plan by establishing partnerships bridging government boundaries, public and private sector, industries and modes of transportation. In the last 24 months, nearly one billion dollars have been invested in the region’s roadways, rail, barge terminals and airports. Many projects funded have been identified in the St. Louis Regional Freightway’s Priority Projects List, a nationally recognized tool to align and amplify advocacy for support and funding for critical infrastructure improvements.

Current projects include the \$222 million replacement of the Merchants

Bridge over the Mississippi River, one of America’s primary east-west rail corridors serving the country’s third largest rail hub. The public-private partnership delivering this project is an example of success under the National Freight Strategic Plan. Hundreds of millions more dollars are supporting projects along the Interstate 270/Interstate 70 Corridor — one of the nation’s primary east-west manufacturing and logistics corridors.

Unprecedented collaboration between the Missouri and Illinois Departments of Transportation is a key example of the multi-jurisdictional success the new plan will foster, and it supports AB-InBev, Boeing, World Wide Technology, Procter & Gamble, Amazon and others which have facilities along the bi-state corridor.

We also continue to develop partnerships to establish new transportation links with coastal ports to facilitate cargo movement between America’s Heartland and overseas destinations via the inland waterway system with containerized

cargo. The St. Louis region shares the USDOT National Freight Strategic Plan goal to lower costs to businesses and consumers and to boost the competitiveness of American goods abroad, and we will do that by maximizing our strategic location on the Mississippi River. We are within 500 miles of 80 percent of agriculture and livestock production in the country and home to the Ag Coast of America and the nation’s most efficient port system, third largest rail hub and two international airports. Almost \$40 million in recent BUILD Grant awards will further enhance our strategic advantages.

With USDOT support, we see regions like the bi-state St. Louis area continuing to support the global supply chain through cost- effective, fast, and reliable transportation.

Mary Lamie is executive vice president of Multi Modal Enterprises at Bi-State Development and heads the St. Louis Regional Freightway.

Municipal quandary: the need to reboot and rebuild public transit

By AARON M. RENN

It’s no secret that the coronavirus pandemic has walloped public transit. Transit networks and ridership are heavily oriented around central business districts, which are presently ghost towns in most cities. White-collar office workers are overwhelmingly working from home. And with business travel, conventions and other events mostly cancelled, entertainment venues shuttered and restaurants closed or barely scraping by, the hospitality sector that employs so many service workers is moribund. Add to that public concern that transit itself may be a vector for spreading the virus, and ridership has been even further depressed.

The net result has been to cut the legs out from under transit demand in many places. Commuter-rail systems have been particularly hard-hit: Chicago’s Metra carried just 7,000 passengers on March 31, a 97.6 percent decrease from the same day in 2019. But even at better-performing bus systems in smaller cities that predominantly serve riders who don’t own cars and are disproportionately among the essential workers who must show up at job sites, ridership has declined significantly. In Indianapolis in August, for example, it was down 43 percent year over year.

This loss of riders is producing a

financial crisis for many systems, one that calls for long-term rethinking of how transit is paid for and operated. Funding from the CARES Act, the federal coronavirus relief legislation passed in March, has helped cover budget gaps to date. But this is proving insufficient for larger transit systems like New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Most of the largest systems earn at least 30 percent of their revenue from fares, a figure that rises to nearly half for some systems. This is not the case for most smaller systems, where the farebox share of revenue can be less than 25 percent; those systems are simply not as exposed to loss of fare revenue. But as the government tax dollars that make up the bulk of their funding take a hit, financial challenges will come for them as well.

While additional bridge funding to transit is warranted and should be rapidly approved by Congress, realistically transit ridership may take a long time to recover. Many companies are looking at permanently increasing the share of their employees working remotely. Although the jury is still out on how much of a permanent upshift in work-from-home there will be, it seems likely there will be some. After all, remote work had been trending up even prior to the pandemic;

the share of people working at home had already grown to exceed the share commuting by public transit. And previous transit disruptions, such as those from lengthy strikes, have affected ridership for years. It took over a decade to recover ridership losses from the 1983 Philadelphia commuter-rail strike, for example.

Given the financial hits to transit agencies and the national scope of the problem, it’s not surprising that many are looking to Washington for help. Even with some sort of party split in Washington, there will be pressure to continue giving money to these agencies. But this is unlikely to provide them full relief.

The risk to cities is that they will be forced into service cuts that will be difficult to restore. New York City has already ended overnight service on its subways, and it’s unclear whether that will ever be resumed. Declines in service make transit a less attractive choice, which drives more ridership away.

Cities are going to have to find a way to reboot and rebuild their transit systems post-coronavirus. This was needed anyway as ridership, especially on bus systems, had already started declining pre-coronavirus, something The New York Times dubbed “the mystery of the missing bus riders.”

One thing transit systems should do

is start learning from and implementing global best practices. As transit analyst Alon Levy has repeatedly noted, U.S. transit agencies are largely unaware of how other countries plan, build and operate their transit systems. Many of those countries are far ahead of the U.S. in ridership, quality of service and cost control. It’s time to leave the idea of American exceptionalism behind and start learning from what works not just here, but around the world. This is not a short-term answer but rather a longer-term plan to work toward.

Cities should also be open to questioning fundamental aspects of how they operate and fund their transit systems. One proposal that should be considered is eliminating fares completely in most cities. Fares are a legacy of the era when transit was run by private, for-profit operators. Few other public services are funded this way. Most transit systems just don’t earn that much from fares to begin with, and collecting fares itself imposes financial and operational costs — slowing down buses as people put change in the slot, for example.

Aaron M. Renn is an urban analyst. The full version of this column can be viewed in its entirety on Governing.com at <https://bit.ly/3m6sV3O>