



RTD

Op Ed: Paying People to Take RTD Could Pay Off

DREW WILLSEY | JANUARY 26, 2018 | 7:27AM

We face a crisis in this city on a scale never before seen in our fair corner of the universe: traffic. It is a truism that traffic in the Denver metro area has become awful. All objective measures of incurred delay back up empirical observations by commuters that the city is turning into Los Angeles East. Yet, as Randal O'Toole recently pointed out in *The Hill*, RTD ridership, in terms of percentage of total commuters, has mysteriously decreased. This is despite billions of dollars of transit investment and no fewer than three fixed-guideway transit lines opening in the last three years. People are definitely using transit in record numbers, but that pesky 90 to 95 percent figure that represents the share of the total commute by single-occupancy vehicles still persists. What is going on?

Ask the average commuter, and they will tell you that they like transit, but it's just not for them personally. If only the transit system were more efficient, the thinking goes, more people would use it, therefore freeing up road capacity for "the rest of us." Clearly there's a disconnect here: People want more transit, but almost no one prefers to use it.

Reams of doctoral thesis paper have been filled trying to explore this conundrum inside urban planning departments across the country, but the answer is astonishingly simple: On paper, nothing beats the convenience of an automobile. An auto is an extension of your house, providing climate-controlled shelter, mobile storage, safety, privacy, speed and the ability to go from any point A to any point B that your heart desires at any time. I learned in Economics 101 that people typically act in their own rational self-interest, and it is simply not in one's self-interest to use transit unless driving a car is comparatively more inconvenient and costly.

Providing a simple cash incentive can be almost magical in effecting desirable policy or behavior.

It has been en vogue in planning over the last decade to try to promote auto inconvenience while also promoting the convenience of transit and other alternative modes. To be fair, a lot of this shift in relative convenience has happened naturally as Denver has infilled and densified, with thousands flocking downtown to live. As traffic delay on I-25 increases and cheap, convenient parking downtown vanishes, transit naturally begins to win the battle of relative convenience. But some of this shift has been artificial: the conversion of existing general-purpose road capacity to bike and transit-

only lanes is an example of this. As transit-usage incentives go, it's too much stick and not enough carrot.

We need more carrot. Recently I was inspired by the longstanding programs many states have that pay people 5 or 10 cents per aluminum can to recycle. This is a very small amount of money, but it successfully pushes recycling rates for aluminum cans up to significant levels, and cans are therefore rarely seen among other litter. Providing a simple cash incentive can be almost magical in effecting desirable policy or behavior.

Why hasn't anyone ever thought to try and apply this concept to transit? Transit usage can be expensive, especially to the poorest in our society, and often it isn't even cost-competitive compared to a cheap, fuel-efficient, used automobile, let alone competitive in terms of time and convenience. The vast majority of the operating budgets for most transit districts don't even come from individual rider fares; they come from taxes. Why not turn that cost-competitiveness disadvantage on its head?

RTD has been averaging around 100 million boardings per annum the last few years. Say a system were implemented where a person received a flat 25 cents per boarding, with no monthly cap, and all potential abuses of such a system were effectively controlled. That totals up to only \$25 million. In 2016, RTD's total operating budget was nearly \$500 million. Therefore, \$25 million would represent only about 5 percent of RTD's 2016 budget.

The current projected cost to complete the B commuter rail line to Boulder is about \$1.5 billion. Let's say we took that sum of money – assuming it materialized – and instead re-routed it in its entirety to paying people to take transit over the next ten years. Leaving the existing system as is (minus the completed B Line), RTD could afford to pay people \$1.50 for every transit boarding based on current ridership numbers for the next decade. Every existing commuter could make \$3 a weekday just for taking transit to and from work.

I predict that under this scenario, transit ridership would likely skyrocket for the entire system, rail and bus. The sky would be the limit on the percent of total commuters choosing transit over driving. Doubling or tripling the existing bus capacity could result in a doubling or even tripling of the number of annual boardings. For the price to complete the B Line, Denver might eventually rival Boston or San Francisco in terms of transit usage per capita.

Of course, if we could double or triple the commute share of transit in Denver, the need for expanded road capacity would decrease substantially over the next 25 years. According to current projections, about \$153 billion of maintenance and expansion projects are needed in that same time frame. Also, existing congestion delay is estimated to cost Denver drivers about \$2 billion per year. Cutting that delay down by even 20 percent would result in an overall congestion cost savings of about \$400 million per year.

Factoring in hundreds of millions of dollars of savings from expansion projects that no longer have to happen and from significantly decreased commute delay and increased economic productivity, paying people to take transit could actually end up as a significant financial windfall to all Denver taxpayers, drivers and transit riders alike. Meanwhile, the poorest in the city would have a little extra money in their pockets every month.

Seems like a win-win-win to me. Imagine that.

Drew Willsey is a local urban and transportation planner who graduated from the University of Colorado's Master of Urban and Regional Planning program in 2013 and has worked for two local consulting firms since then; read more about him here. What do you think of his idea? Post your thoughts in a comment or send them to editorial@westword.com.

Westword occasionally publishes online op eds on hot issues in metro Denver. Interested in submitting one? Email editorial@westword.com.

RELATED TOPICS: