



Key Points:

- As the construction of the M-1 Rail Line begins, it is important to examine the history of public transportation in Detroit.
- Public transportation can result in more sustainable cities, more efficient forms of transportation, less traffic congestion.



Theo Pappas, AIA is an associate/senior planner at Stantec. He is also a board member of the AIA Michigan and AIA Detroit.

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Public Transportation can be key to Detroit's revival

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As construction of the M-1 Rail Line has begun in earnest, it is worth examining the history of public transportation in the metro Detroit area. It may be a surprise to many that throughout the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Detroit had a well-developed public transportation system.

Between 1860 and 1910, with the establishment of the Detroit City Railway Co. and the growth of its first passenger rail system, Detroit was invested in a trolley/streetcar system that grew and expanded along with its tremendous population growth at the dawn of the American Industrial Age.

At first there were horse-drawn trolleys, but soon they were replaced with electric ones. Detroit expanded its rail system with the growth of the Grand Trunk Western Railroad routes and lines, furthering the development of the interurban electric railway that linked downtown Detroit with its surrounding communities.

Through the early 1950s, Detroit upgraded and expanded its bus system, rail system and highways in an effort to maintain and feed its tremendous economic growth in the postwar environment.

It all came to a stop in 1956. The Metro Detroit Streetcar Service ceased after 93 years – yet this was not a spontaneous event. In 1933, the voters of Detroit approved a subway plan, but the “state advisory board” refused to recommend construction to the federal government.

In 1934, the Department of Street Railways, with more than 1,600 streetcars and 19 routes at its height, began a campaign to replace its streetcars with buses.

What followed was suburban sprawl, transit strikes, noisy and foul buses, and the commitment of vast public funds and resources to highways, freeways, parking structures and roads.

Since the 1950s, numerous studies, task forces, and committees put forward dozens of plans for mass transit in Southeastern Michigan, but none gained political or economic support.



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The die was cast for a low-density, auto-dependent culture. Ironically, the freeways and highways that were built to ostensibly facilitate transit into the city did the opposite. As we look toward the future of mass transportation in metropolitan Detroit, we need to address the key myth of mass/public transportation highlighted by Vishaan Chakrabarti in his book *A Country of Cities – A Manifesto for an Urban America*.

In regard to the notion that mass transportation is not economically self-sufficient and requires massive governmental subsidization and continued public investment, Chakrabarti writes: “Proponents of passenger rail are continually pressed to prove profitability, while few ask whether airlines or auto companies would be profitable without massive government subsidies and bailouts.”

The truth is that government subsidizes the construction and maintenance of highways, roads, bridges, and other infrastructure needed to support the automobile to the tune of billions of dollars every year. Witness the current debate in Lansing regarding the amount required to “fix” Michigan’s roads.

Chakrabarti argues against the economic incentives that favor high-end single-family homeownership over other types of higher-density living environments.

If developers of suburbs were allowed to build subdivisions only if they also built the utilities and roads to support such development, then a free-market consequence would have been much less suburban development and a much greater investment in the city, supporting higher densities and less overall cost per capita of public dollars.

Not all public transportation has to take the form of elevated rails, subways and trains. For example, Cleveland’s HealthLine is a recently developed bus rapid transit system that connects downtown with its medical/hospital districts and universities. It employs new technologies and buses to support a clean, efficient and safe transportation system. The result is that along each stop of the 4-mile journey, new retail and housing developments have taken root.



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In fact, public transportation often stimulates real estate development in much the same way as suburban developments have done, but with much less public investment and cost per capita. The Portland Metropolitan Area Express line, which serves over 120,000 passengers a day, was funded by the reallocation of money originally intended for freeways. Public transportation can result in more sustainable cities, more efficient forms of transportation, less traffic congestion and parking problems, and most importantly, the greater availability and access to transportation by people who need reliable transportation to maintain their employment.

What seemed the right thing to do more than 100 years ago should echo forward to our current leadership to provide them with the will and desire to find a balance of new and modern strategies for public transportation and the re-birth of not just the city of Detroit, but all of Southeast Michigan.

Let us strengthen our support for the Regional Transportation Authority and work together for brighter, better communities. The automotive capital of the world can lead the way forward once again.