

Alabama Roadblock: Our Public Transit Gap

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Keywords

public transportation (also called *mass transit* or *public transit*) – passenger service operated by a local or state government.

fixed-route system – public transit service in which vehicles operate along established lines on a regular schedule.

on-demand system – public transit service in which individual passengers call in advance to schedule rides.

multimodal (also called *intermodal*) **system** – a transit network that links a variety of services such as bus, van or train.

sprawl (or *suburban sprawl*) – the spreading of a city's residential and commercial development into surrounding areas without an effective regional development plan.

A legacy of neglect

Inadequate public transportation keeps thousands of Alabamians from meeting basic needs:

- A small-town mom, for example, risks losing her factory job every time her car breaks down.
- An urban retiree who doesn't drive can't get to the dentist.
- As low-wage jobs shift to the suburbs, urban and rural workers face increasing transportation challenges.
- Without reliable rides, rural Medicaid patients miss essential evaluations and treatments.

Nearly 50 years after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) provides no public transit funding. A 1952 amendment to Alabama's Constitution makes it illegal to use state gas tax and license fee revenues – a logical source of transit funds – for any purpose other than building and maintaining roads and bridges. ALDOT administers the use of federal transit money in the state, matching local dollars on a 4-to-1 (80/20 percent) or 1-to-1 (50/50 percent) basis, depending on the program.

Federal and local funds support a patchwork of transit services:

- There are 12 "Section 5307" urban transit providers – serving Anniston, Auburn-Opelika, Birmingham, Decatur, Dothan, Gadsden, Huntsville, Mobile, Montgomery, Phenix City, the Shoals and Tuscaloosa.
- There are 27 "Section 5311" rural transit providers, serving 50 of the 67 counties.
- There are between 120 and 150 "Section 5310" providers of transit for seniors and people with disabilities.
- Medicaid pays for individual transport of Medicaid patients to doctor appointments.

A hard pattern to break

As in many other parts of the United States, owning and operating a private vehicle is a way of life in Alabama – only more so. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2001 American Community Survey:

- Alabama leads the nation in drivers who commute alone – about 1.6 million people, or 84.6 percent of the state's workforce.
- Only about 210,700 residents, or 11.2 percent of workers, carpool with friends, family or co-workers.
- Less than 1 percent of Alabamians use public transportation to get to work.

Even ALDOT recognizes the need for improved public transit. In 2000, the department commissioned the University Transportation Center for Alabama (UTCA) to conduct a public transit needs assessment. The researchers failed to involve current and potential riders in the study, relying mainly on input from transit providers. Despite this flaw, the report makes a clear case for reform:

- Several of the 27 rural providers do not offer complete service in their areas.
- Almost 1.3 million rural Alabamians do not have access to public transit services.
- Three of the state's largest counties – Mobile, Montgomery and Tuscaloosa – have urban systems but no rural service. These counties account for 61 percent of the people without access to rural transit.
- Overall improvement of the system is hampered by the lack of a central driving force.
- The logical central driving force could be ALDOT's Multimodal Bureau.

Yet ALDOT has consistently – and successfully – opposed efforts to release state funding for transit. Since the mid-1990s, local transportation advocates around Alabama have proposed a variety of plans for dedicating small portions of state gas tax and license fee revenue to public transit. All attempts, including the most restrictive one – which would have diverted a maximum of 2 percent of the \$400 million annual revenue – have failed. ALDOT has argued that it needs all existing revenues to maintain and expand the highway system.

Where the rubber meets the road

Public transit is a health and safety issue. Over-dependence on private vehicles creates air pollution and other hazards. In 2002, the American Lung Association reported that 1.9 million Alabamians – nearly half of the state’s residents – live in counties with unhealthy summertime ozone levels. High-volume traffic also adds wear-and-tear to roads and bridges. Both traffic and structural defects increase the risk of highway accidents.

Public transit is an economic and social justice issue. When Arise conducted statewide listening sessions on welfare reform a decade ago, participants consistently cited lack of transportation as one of the top barriers to employment. Alabamians who don’t drive also face obstacles to health care, public services, education and shopping. This disparity has a disproportionate impact on Alabamians with disabilities.

Transportation needs also reflect racial inequities. For example, according to current U.S. Census data, African Americans in the tri-county Montgomery metropolitan area are nearly five times more likely than Whites not to have access to a car. A 2000 study by the non-profit Surface Transportation Policy Project (www.transact.org) showed that transportation costs are tied with housing costs as the greatest household expense in Alabama.

Public transit is an economic development issue. Communities around Alabama must meet the challenge of connecting people to job sites, retail and service opportunities, health care and educational centers. They must find innovative solutions to the road congestion and air quality problems that accompany *suburban sprawl*. According to the Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce, failure to meet Clean Air Act ozone standards cost Jefferson and Shelby counties some 11,000 jobs and \$2 billion in capital investments between 1978 and 2002. A weather change relieved the problem in 2003, but auto emissions continue to increase. Sound economic development requires more mobility and less traffic.

Hopeful signs

Even without state funding, public transit is making a difference in many Alabama communities. Rural areas like Baldwin, Autauga and eight West Alabama counties benefit from *on-demand* programs. The City of Montgomery recently changed its bus system from on-demand-only to predominantly *fixed-route*. Both types of

systems have proven successful when good management is matched with communities’ specific needs.

Research points to a funding breakthrough. In its August 2000 report (available online under the keywords “Alabama Public Transportation Needs Assessment”), the University Transportation Center noted: “ALDOT recognizes that ... federal funds are insufficient to provide the high-quality transportation services it desires for Alabama citizens and is working to add state funds to the public transportation system.”

A realistic cost estimate must take into account the needs and preferences of current and potential transit users. ALDOT has said that it lacks the funds to commission such an assessment. Until better research

becomes available, the existing provider-based UTCA study at least hints at the magnitude of need: The report estimates that the combined costs for bringing Alabama’s urban and rural transit systems up to speed would be \$34 million in the first year, with \$27 million in each succeeding year to maintain adequate service.

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- Alabama Public Transportation Needs Assessment, University Transportation Center for Alabama, August 2000

UTCA’s February 2001 follow-up report on rural transit (available online under the keywords “Analysis and Recommendation for Rural Public Transportation Systems for Alabama”) included three recommendations:

- Adding state financial support to help modernize, expand and sustain the system;
- Using the resulting increase in control to influence such areas as increased demand-response service, coordination among transit providers, and consolidation or breakup of inefficient providers; and
- Promoting Section 5311 transit services as an “indispensable and credible transportation option.”

The path ahead

Around the world, the Montgomery City Bus System is a symbol of freedom and equality. Yet a 50-year-old law continues to shortchange public transit in Alabama. The Golden Jubilee of the Montgomery Bus Boycott on December 1, 2005, demands more than symbols. As this historic anniversary approaches, the time has come to bridge Alabama’s funding gap in public transportation.

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