

Pros & cons: Making public transportation free

Experts present their pros and cons lists for making public transit free for communities

The following question was recently posted on [Quora](#): "What are the arguments against and for making public transportation free?"

DON JOHNSON, URBAN PLANNER AND ECONOMIST

There are a couple of economic arguments for making **public transportation free** (or at least cheaper than it costs to provide:)

1. Cars impose **a lot of costs on society** that drivers don't pay for
2. Everyone benefits when people can travel around freely.

The technical term for the first one is "negative externality," and there are two big ones associated with cars: pollution and congestion. Every time you start your car and get on the road, you put mono-nitrogen oxides, VOCs, ozone, and carbon dioxide in the air, and you make the road more crowded and thus slower. These are real costs, measurable in environmental damage, health care costs, and wasted time, that **other people have to pay for**.

Economists like efficiency, and efficient economic systems are ones in which people pay for costs directly, because then they can make choices rationally. (I'll wait for everyone to stop laughing before I continue.) That's why economists and planners have been fantasizing about **congestion pricing** for so long - in a well-designed congestion pricing scheme, drivers actually pay more when they choose a congested road. And if there were an additional tax on gas dedicated to relieving air pollution and improving respiratory health (the existing gas tax in the US only pays for roads) that would make drivers pay the cost of pollution and also be economically efficient. But in the absence of those, subsidizing public transit (which gets people to drive less than they otherwise would) is kind of a second best solution.

The technical term for the second argument is "public good." It's good for everyone if transportation costs are reduced - workers can get to more jobs, companies can choose from more workers and more suppliers, people can take more spur-of-the moment road trips to outlet malls, etc. [Robert J. Kolker](#) will say that making the price zero don't make it free -- somebody somewhere is paying -- and he's right, but under some conditions you can probably show that making everyone pay to make transit free for some people actually makes everyone collectively better off. Again Robert will say that's not fair, but this is not a fairness argument but a collective benefit argument. But in any case our society is not run by economist philosopher kings.

Because economists famously don't agree on anything I have to point out that there are also economic arguments against making transit free:

1. Free transit is a poor substitute for making drivers pay actual costs of driving

2. Free anything makes people use it too much - in theory, anyway, transit that's too cheap is just as bad as driving that's too cheap. Somebody will end up paying for lots of trips that didn't really need to be made.
3. As noted above, people may feel that it's not fair that they have to pay for other people's bus tickets, even if it does make everyone better off. I'm personally not very sympathetic - pretty much every decision society makes is unfair to somebody. Is it fair to me that we spent \$62 billion to develop the F-22 fighter plane, when I don't feel any safer because of it? But I digress.

In summary there is a lot of reasonable thought behind subsidizing public transit (even if not making it absolutely free) and indeed that's what most cities end up doing.

ANDREW LEVY

Cons:

- **We would need more public transport.** Buses, planes, trains etc. all harm the environment, just as cars do. If everyone used public transport, more buses would pollute cities. It should also be mentioned that the manufacturing and creation of a public transport system is very energy intensive, drawing largely on coal and fossil fuels for energy. This releases significant carbon emissions into the atmosphere.
- **With the financial crisis, we can't afford to spend more money on something like this.** It would cost too much for the government to pay for running public transport services. With the economic crisis, it needs to spend the money on other more important things.
- **Car sales would drop significantly.** If it were free for everyone to get to work, families wouldn't need two or three cars; just one or even none, depending on their availability to public transport of course. Most families have several cars, and one is used just for someone to get to work each day. This wouldn't be necessary. It would hurt the car industry and car makers would most likely lose their jobs, and car companies may collapse, which is very bad news.
- **There are many people who would also lose their jobs.** People like conductors, parking cops and plenty of other people wouldn't have their jobs any more, because their services would be no longer required.
- **Some public transport cities are already terrible; this would just increase the strain.** Some public transport networks are already crowded and/or unreliable. With increased customers and pressure, these networks wouldn't manage.
- **If it was free, companies would not be expected to provide top service, because they are not paying customers.** Generally when you pay a little bit more, you are paying for a good service. But if you aren't paying anything, and heaps of people are using the service, you can't expect top-notch customer service. Generally people look after paying customers more. If it was free, companies could lower their service under the excuse that its customers aren't paying anything so they should just "get what their given".

- **Many people dislike public transport and still would not use it.** Many people will stick to their cars, and some would even stop using public transport, because with it being free, so many people will use it, it would become a mess and be way too crowded.

GLOBAL

- ["Why Free Public Transport is a bad idea?!?", World Streets Blog](#)

EUROPE

- [Baum, Herbert J. \(1973\), "Free Public Transport", Journal of Transport Economics and Policy, January 1973](#)

ASIA

- ["Myth: Making public transport free will encourage use", Public Transport Users Association, Australia](#)
- ["Free public transport is not our ticket to ride", Australia](#)

Pros:

- **Free public transport would reduce the number of cars on the road.** Global warming is a serious issue and if public transport was free, more people would use it, taking cars off the road. 1 train could take 2000 cars off the road. A public transport system with 20 trains could take 40,000 cars off the road. Some people would simply choose to not own cars, further reducing the number of cars on the road. Across dozens of cities in a nation and thousands world-wide, the result of free public transport would be dramatic in cutting vehicle emissions and combating global warming.
- **The government's job is to provide services.** This would be a great service that could be used by everyone. Taxes already pay for health care, schools and roads etc. so why not let taxpayers see the benefits for themselves, in a useful service everyone can use.
- **The environment would greatly benefit.** As well as providing services, the government should look out for the environment. No amount of money is too much to protect the environment.
- **We would need more public transport workers.** With increased and better public transport, we would need more bus and train drivers, creating jobs. This is great with the global financial crisis. And it work make it easier for people to get to their job - they could just get on a bus.
- **The government would be forced to improve public transport.** With more users, bad public transport networks would be improved by the government, to make it worthwhile using. Bad networks would be greatly improved, and the benefits can be used by everyone. Its definitely a worthwhile incentive.
- **A lot of public transport companies are reliable and need more customers.** Most public transport organisations offer friendly and reliable service and could do with some more "customers". They would be happy to take them and it would get cars off the road.

- **Single or zero fare maximizes the efficiency, convenience and attractiveness of public transport systems for both users and operators in inner cities.** "The option of a single and potentially free public transport fare zone in the Sydney CBD should be examined as a way of immediately simplifying fare structures, eliminating CBD interchange fare penalties, eliminating other CBD fare anomalies and maximising the efficiency, convenience and attractiveness of CBD public transport systems for both users and operators." Independent Public Inquiry - Sydney's Long Term Public Transport Plan, May 2010
- **Heaps of people would be tempted by free transport.** If free public transport was offered to everyone, of course they would use it. Yes, some people may stick to their cars, but the majority would think it was a great idea. If you had the choice of paying thousands each year to run a car, or to get on a train every morning for free, what would you choose?
- **A lot of people would already be using it if it didn't cost so much.** For a lot of people, the only reason they don't catch public transport is because it costs too much. If it was free, they'd definitely start using it.

GLOBAL

- [Free Public Transit Blog](#)

EUROPE

- [Møller, Berit and Thoegersen, John \(2008\), "Breaking Car Use Habits: The Effectiveness of a Free One-Month Travelcard", Transportation, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 329-345, 2008](#)
- [Thoegersen, John \(2009\), "Promoting Public Transport as a Subscription Service: Effects of a Free Month Travel Card", Transport Policy, Vol. 16, 2009](#)
- ["Perspectives on implementation of free public transport - assessments and recommendations from a working group under the Danish Board of Technology", Summary, English version, November 2006](#)
- [Scottish Socialist Party's campaign for free public transport, UK](#)
- [Campaign for Free Public Transport, UK](#)
- [Free Public Transport, Finland](#)
- [Transport Vsem, Russia](#)
- [Saltada Popular, Spain](#)
- [Planka.nu, Sweden](#)
- ["At Any Cost? The hidden costs of charging for public transport", Alex Berthelsen, Planka.nu, Sweden](#)

AMERICAS

- [freepublictransports.com, USA](#)
- [Zero-Fare, Canada](#)

ASIA

- ["Free ride: the future of public transport", The Age, March 5, 2006, Australia](#)

- "The case for free public transport", Green Left, Australia
- Fare Free, New Zealand
- "A Case for Free Comfortable Public Transport?", Clean Air Initiative for Asian Cities Center

PRASHANT PRASAD

In my opinion, encouraging public transport is a very good way to reduce pollution and other traffic related problems in any city. But in most of the cases, creating a free public transportation system is not a feasible solution.

The following are what I see as the pros and cons of making public transportation systems free of cost:

Pros:

1. More users will get attracted to the public transportation system as their mode choice which will reduce number of small and private vehicles on street resulting lesser congestion and lesser emission (good for the environment).
2. Time taken to purchase the travel ticket will be saved.
3. It will be accessible to the economically weaker section of the society also.
4. Will reduce the societal gap between poor and rich in the society as people from all economic status will be able to travel together.
5. This will provide job opportunities to more people as more public transportation vehicles will be required to ply in the Country.

Cons:

1. Initially managing the crowd in the public transport will be a major challenge in populated countries like India.
2. It will become a burden on the government to maintain the quality and finally to sustain the public transportation system.
3. Many people will not use the public transport as it will be too crowded.
4. Human psychology is that free things are not valued much, so the system may get abused by the public.

However there are countries like Germany where public transportation is free for students and the money for the same is collected as a semester fee. In countries like India the challenge is quite unique. In India we have a huge range of users ranging from a homeless person to a millionaire.

There are two types of users, according to the literature: Choice riders and Captive riders.

- **Choice riders:** users who can afford to travel by other private modes of transport
- **Captive riders:** users who cannot afford anything other than public transport.

We need to find a balance between their requirements and affordability, keeping in mind that anything we do will need money and money cannot be grown on trees. In order to attract both types of riders towards public transport, we need to keep the fare within an affordable range of the user groups and need to uplift the quality of the service to match the choice riders' needs.

This can be done by creating segments in the public transportation system:

1. A higher service quality for which the fare will also be a little lighter as the choice riders' affordability range is higher and
2. A comparatively lower service quality which will sustain itself with a lower fare and also will fit within captive riders' pocket.

Ways to get funds to improve the service-quality of entire transportation system:

1. The revenue of the higher service quality can support the lower quality to improve and come to the same level.
2. The revenue from the goods transportation system can also contribute in improving the public transportation service-quality.
3. In order to maintain the interest of the choice riders we will need to think of providing some advantages against the higher fare they will pay. Like less crowded in the higher class and little more pleasant condition.

The entire process to improve the quality of public transport and reducing various problems due to vehicles needs to be worked out in detail. This will take a longer time but this should work better than making it completely free for all.