

Has transit missed the bus in Los Angeles?
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Does Los Angeles deserve its reputation as the car capital of the world? The answer is yes and no. A major three year study by the authors for the International Association of Public Transport (UITP) in Brussels has unearthed some interesting results. **The Millennium Cities Database for Sustainable Transport** collected comprehensive data on 100 international cities on all continents. It examined patterns of land use, private and public transportation, transportation infrastructure, transportation economics and externalities.

Surprisingly, for those who portray Los Angeles as having missed the bus (and the train), including ourselves, there are some mild rebukes contained in this new database. Los Angeles comes in as the 5th most automobile-dependent city in the world in terms of per capita annual car use, not number 1. Top position is reserved for Atlanta and not by a small margin. Atlantians travel a whopping 12,545 miles each per year, whereas Angelenos travel 7,694 miles. Also ahead of Los Angeles are Houston (10,627) and San Diego (8,285).

By any stretch of the imagination, LA's performance on automobile use is nothing to boast about. It is sky high in an international context. However, the fact that Los Angeles is not top dog in the automobile stakes warrants further investigation. How could it be that the metropolitan area set up in every sphere of popular culture as the spiritual birthplace of suburban sprawl, the automobile and the urban freeway, **not** be tops in auto-dependence?

The new database provides some opportunities for further exploration. For example, the centrepiece of LA culture is its freeway system, which is indeed impressive, if you like that kind of thing. However, of the 10 US regions examined, it only achieves 9th place in freeway length per capita, with only the Chicago metro region having less freeway on a per person basis. Even the Tri-State Region of New York has more. LA has half the per capita freeway provision of Atlanta, Houston, Denver and San Diego.

Furthermore, international research clearly shows that higher densities lead to lower car use and higher transit use and LA is portrayed as the archetypal low density region of the world. But in another ironic twist for a city replete with contradictions, US Census data on the density of urbanized areas clearly indicates that LA is actually the densest urbanized area in the United States. The New York Tri-State region is 25% lower in density than Los Angeles.

Los Angeles, in an international context, is clearly one of the densest auto-dominated regions in the world. This is one reason for its slightly lower use of cars than might be expected. But more important to the future of Los Angeles in this period of intense

uncertainty over future oil availability and the price of gasoline, is the advantage that Los Angeles has over other US regions in terms of its potential for public transit. Charicatured as the ultimate anti-transit environment in the world, what the data really show is that it is a transit-oriented environment waiting to happen - that is, if decision-makers would only give it the quality transit system it deserves, but which it has been deprived of for half a century. At each turn in LA's history, since the systematic dismantlement of arguably one of the best urban railway systems in the world (the Pacific-Electric system), LA has chosen to bestow all its transportation funds on freeways.

Today we see this situation reflected in the data in a cruel way. In a region that could support enormously expanded transit service provision, we have the spectacle of one of the smallest transit networks. At a mere 14 miles of transit service per person annually, it languishes at 7th out of the 10 US regions. Only Houston, Phoenix and San Diego have less transit service per inhabitant. Tri-State New York, the highest transit provider, offers 37 miles per person. Of course, in Europe and other parts of the world, transit supply ranges up to 100 miles per person, so LA is clearly a dwarf in this factor.

In accord with this situation, transit usage in LA teeters on the brink of irrelevance in context with its car use, though clearly it is not the worst in the US sample. Neither should its struggling transit use be dismissed, especially in an urban area where peak period congestion throttles the life of the city every weekday. At a mere 49 trips per inhabitant every year, it still beats Phoenix with 15, Houston with 20, San Diego with 27, and Denver with 32 and in this context does reasonably well, especially considering the hostility of the environment in which transit is forced to operate. Car commuters should be more grateful than they are for the small mercies of LA's transit system and should be more supportive of efforts to expand transit in a region that has the potential to become a thriving transit metropolis over the next 20 years. For the cynics, scoffers and naysayers, it would be instructive to reflect upon just how quickly LA destroyed the wonderful transit system it once had and how in only a short a period of time it converted to almost total reliance on the car. Things can reverse. This is the role of public policy and enlightened decision making.

There are of course policy reasons for the picture painted above. Cities choose to prioritise their transportation funds according to certain cultural and philosophical assumptions. There are two basic positions. First, we have the cities that seek to maximise individual or private advantage, thereby threatening the integrity of the urban system as a whole. Such cities usually end up with seemingly intractable problems that make them easy fodder for extreme solutions. Atlanta is currently going through such trauma with extreme calls for more road building to counter congestion. And then there are the cities that maximise efficiency and livability of the city as a whole and reap system-wide benefits, with some restraints on individual behaviour. These cities are usually the ones renowned for their quality of life, avoiding extreme situations by balancing individual and collective benefits. These are also cities in which transit and even non-motorised modes really work and deliver healthy competition to the automobile.

Such priorities can be reflected in data. In the Millennium Cities Database we calculated a 5 yearly average investment in roads and transit systems in all cities. In US cities as a whole there is 4.5 times more investment in roads than in transit and in LA it is even more extreme at over 6 times more. It is not possible for transit to begin to play a bigger role in US cities whilst such glaring imbalances persist. In Houston, for example, we find that the ratio was 9 to 1 in favour of roads and in Phoenix 70 to 1. So again, LA is not the worst, with at least some investment in new rail, but it is still not at a level whereby we can expect miracles from transit. By way of contrast, in European cities, roads receive only 1.25 times more investment than public transit. In other words, roads and transit in Europe are on roughly equal investment footings compared to the situation in the US.

There are many more untapped stories to be told from this new wealth of urban data. It has taught us that Los Angeles should not necessarily be the pariah of the sustainable cities movement, as convenient as it is at times to pillory a city for its obvious excesses. What is more difficult, but ultimately more constructive, is to see the positive side of problematic environments like LA. Atlanta may be a far more deserving outcast in sustainable transport, but even here caution is required because its much maligned MARTA rail system actually accounts for just under half its transit usage of 51 trips per capita in a region with a density that is one-quarter of LA's. But of course, we all know that rail can't work in a low density region. Hmm.

What LA really shows us is that with some nurturing and strategic exploitation of its natural density advantage, the region could dramatically increase its transit offering and use and begin to reverse half a century of rampant automobility.