

The Growing Need for Public Transit Improvements: Nashville, TN

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Gasoline, car maintenance, parking, and other auto costs often make up the second largest group of expenses for citizens, after housing. It is estimated that drivers in many U.S. cities could save over \$13,000 per year (close to \$17,000 in some cities) by using public transit as opposed to driving (Bonina and Dickens). To put that into perspective, \$13,000 would be 867 hours of working a fifteen-dollar-per-hour job, which is over double the minimum hourly wage in Nashville, TN. While that sounds like a strong reason for citizens to depend more on public transportation, Nashville city bus ridership is still incredibly low due to the inaccessibility and inconvenience of the bus system. Despite the staggering economic, safety, and environmental benefits of high public transit ridership, the vast majority of Nashville residents do not find using the city buses to be worth it. Nashville's economy, traffic congestion, and citizen health would greatly benefit from increased funding to improve accessibility and convenience of public transportation.

The economic benefits of developing a higher-quality transit system are undeniable, and they directly and increasingly affect individual citizens. Citizens continue to spend more and more of their income on increasing gas and car maintenance rates, which proves to be burdensome for many Nashville residents. Both new and used car prices have quickly increased in recent years, making obtaining a car in the first place much more difficult, and then citizens subsequently have to budget for surging gas expenses. The recent public transit financial study by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) wonderfully details the gas price explosion over the past few years. A graph reflecting the study shows that the average gas prices in the U.S. have grown from under \$2.50 per gallon in January of 2019 to \$4.00 per gallon in September of 2023, even reaching \$5.11 in 2022 (Bonina and Dickens 3). The difference in gas prices in 2019 and in 2023 have nearly doubled, and will only continue to rise as resources become less abundant and the population increases. While this is occurring, APTA's public transit fare database shows that public transit fare fees have not grown since 2020. These statistics are in the context of the U.S. as a whole, but the trends are applicable to a smaller scale, like Nashville, as well. Citizens still mostly prefer driving their own car despite these financial benefits due to the inefficiency of the current public transit system in Nashville. An improved system would entice drivers to choose public transportation, positively affecting their finances, and in turn, positively affecting the economy of the city of Nashville.

In addition to the financial drawbacks of a poor public transit system are health concerns caused by traffic congestion. It can be easy to forget about the dangers of traffic congestion, coming in the form of drastically increased traffic accident rates and air pollution from the massive volume of carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and other pollutants released into the atmosphere. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a U.S. government-run public health agency, says "...the fatality rates per billion passenger miles traveled between 2000 and 2009 were 0.11 for buses, 0.24 for

urban mass transit rail trains, 0.43 for passengers on commuter rails, and 7.28 for drivers or passengers in a car or light truck” (Kahana). While this analysis concerned only the years 2000 to 2009, private passenger vehicles as a mode of transportation have only grown since then, possibly making the fatality rates even higher for drivers.

Traffic accidents are the most obvious risk, but the effects of air pollution are also deadly. If preventative measures aren’t taken, air quality in Nashville will only get worse as the population rapidly grows, complicating respiratory problems in citizens. Karthik Sundaram, a physician practicing in Nashville, writes, “I am constantly advising patients on how to lead healthy lifestyles...an often overlooked issue that directly impacts everyone's ability to implement these elements of preventive health is transportation” (Sundaram). The health concerns of the undeniably congested roads in Nashville are often overshadowed by the financial effects, but they are just as important, if not more important. A reliable and convenient transit system would result in less drivers on the road, and therefore far less traffic accident fatalities and dangerous air pollution.

The incredible benefits of a convenient public transit system in Nashville are clear, but some believe that it would be too expensive to implement. In fact, a nine-billion-dollar plan was proposed to attempt to solve the transit problem in Nashville, but it was ultimately rejected by voters. It is only natural for voters to be wary of a nine-billion-dollar investment, but it doesn’t need to be nine billion or nothing; relatively simple and cheap implementations will be beneficial as well. Small and seemingly low-impact changes can greatly influence ridership, and cities with drastically higher public transit ridership can serve as an example, such as London, England. College professor Wyatt Wells highlights some of these features: “Almost every bus stop has a shelter to protect those waiting from the rain and detailed maps and schedules of the routes of passing buses. Many have electronic displays showing when the next buses will arrive. The system is as convenient as the subway and even more extensive” (Wells). Features like dynamic map displays at bus stops and more comfortable shelters on their own would certainly attract more bus riders, and would cost a tiny fraction of nine-billion dollars to implement. For perspective, there were about 1.5 billion passenger trips by London’s buses in 2022 (UK Department of Transport), compared to Nashville’s 7.35 million trips in the same year (Kahana 32). Of course, London has a much higher population, but in terms of transit ridership per capita, London sees nearly 16 times Nashville’s ridership while not spending close to the cost proposed for the Nashville transit plan (considering the proportion of how much more money London produces). London is only one of countless examples of cities with much higher-performance public transit systems. This is to say, improvements to the transit system can be made on a smaller scale and still prove to be worth it. A revamped transit system would be a collection of relatively small improvements, and there is no reason not to implement those small changes one-by-one, as opposed to a single nine-billion-dollar plan.

The need for more convenient and efficient public transit in Nashville has never been greater. Long commute times, high gas prices, and declining air quality are only a few examples of problems that could be significantly reduced by higher public transit ridership, and citizens are not going to leave behind their cars unless it is worth it to them. Improvements to the transit system can be expensive, but if thoughtfully implemented, would result in benefits outweighing the initial costs. There

is great potential for Nashville's public transit system, and the question of whether or not Nashville can financially manage to invest in an improved system should also be looked at from another perspective: can we manage not to invest in an efficient system, and as a result, struggle with these growing problems?

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