**A Community on Wheels**

In the movie *Network*, the anchorman Howard Beale urges his audience to throw open their windows and shout to the streets, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” While I am not about to go off on a rant about the media, I do want to urge you to (metaphorically) throw open your window and shout “I’m not going to take it anymore!”

As a community, we have limped along too long on miserable public transportation. I am not blaming the transit company—they have done their best with the resources and systems at hand. The buses are clean and attractive, they run on time, and the drivers are friendly and helpful. But I can’t get where I need to go in a reasonable amount of time (in the evenings, I can’t get there at all).

I grew up in Detroit, and was riding the bus when I was in grade school. Although I lived in four other cities after that, it wasn’t until I moved to Mankato that I bought my first car. At first, I got around most places in town by bus (this was back when MSU was moving up on the hill, so almost all the students and faculty at least rode the bus to get from the lower to the upper campus—and, having gotten in the habit, many of us just kept on going with the bus). But little by little, ridership slipped, followed by cutbacks in service, followed by further loss of ridership, followed by…. A death spiral. I raised my children to ride the bus as a special treat; by the time they were teenagers and tried to take the bus to the mall on a Saturday (there was no Sunday service), the trip took 2 hours—one way.

So why should we care? If no one wants to ride the bus, why should we throw good money after bad? If the system can’t pull its weight, why not let it die under its own weight?

That deceptively simple way to put the question is wrong, for two reasons. First, no transportation system pays its own freight. Second, some things (they are called “public goods”) *shouldn’t* be expected to pull their own weight.

The private automobile imposes huge costs on all of us, whether we use one or not. Those of us who operate cars are paying a high price—in purchase and loan interest, in insurance and maintenance and repairs, in gasoline and oil. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that it costs $6,000 a year to own and operate a car. All this for the privilege of owning a rapidly depreciating asset which we park for 22 of the 24 hours in a day. And, speaking of parking, about a quarter of the space in a city is devoted to the automobile—to streets, to parking spaces and lots, to driveways and garages. Much of that is directly subsidized by the city (as in “your property taxes”). Some of it you pay directly, although you’ve forgotten about it—when the city requires that you have 2 off-street parking spaces for each housing unit, or when the grocery store factors the price of building and maintaining its parking lot into the price you pay for a bottle of milk. Jane Kay estimates that these costs run on average another $3-5,000 a year (up to $9,400 a year, if you include the cost of congestion).

But, given how much you already have sunk into owning and operating a car, how can you be expected to pay *an additional* amount to use the bus instead of your car? And, besides, it takes longer to get there by bus (doesn’t it?)

Often it does take longer to use public transportation (although one quickly learns to pay attention to schedules, and the down time can be minimized). But what do we gain in return? On the bus, you see more of the city. You see more because you don’t need to concentrate on the road, and you see more because it takes you on routes you would not otherwise choose on your own. Along the way, you see more people. Many you will never see again, but you become aware of the diversity in the city. Others you see regularly, and develop something of a nodding acquaintance. And you get back some part of the time you spend commuting (throughout my school years—and since I am a teacher, that includes the present—I got a lot of studying done on the bus). You also benefit the rest of the community: There are many who do not have access to a private automobile. Some cannot afford one. Some are too young to drive, or at least to own their own car. Some are too old to drive (or, perhaps, should not be driving). Some have a family car, but cannot afford two (or three or more, depending how many drivers there are in the household). And you help save energy.

Public transportation will not stand a chance as long as it has to compete at a disadvantage with the private automobile. Until we spend as much on public transportation as we spend on public provision for the private auto (streets budgets, mandated parking spaces, etc.), we are not giving ourselves a fair choice. What would happen if we mandated bus service for every household, the way we now mandate parking spaces? What would happen if we budgeted for public transit the way we now budget for streets? Why do we accept miserable public transportation at home, when we find it so charming on the Paris Metro or the London Underground or the New York Subway or the DC Metro or the Chicago CTA—or even the Hiawatha Line in Minneapolis?

Once upon a time we had thriving streetcar lines in Mankato. Once upon a time there were buses running up Val Imm so stuffed that students were hanging out the doors. Once we were a walking city, where people met each other on the streets. Throw open your window! Shout to the streets “I’m not going to take it any more!” Get out of the car and reclaim the life on the street.

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