

**Study: Free Transit Doesn't Reduce Driving---But Does Increase Local Business Support**

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A new study finds that commuters with access to free public transportation don't necessarily drive any less, but they do take more leisure and shopping trips, which could help local economies provide more social services as a result.

Typically, the cost of fare collection outweighs the fare revenue collected, and few studies have looked at how all-access to transit affect travel destinations, trip frequency, commute periods, and other variables. When it comes to building sustainable transit, these are important considerations to do so logistically and financially.

The study, which took place in Santiago, Chile, recruited a study group of workers from various income levels and industries and gave half an unlimited, two-week transit pass that they could use throughout the city. As both groups noted everywhere they traveled during the entire, period, those with the free pass took transit 28 percent more often than the group that had to pay. Also, most of these trips were taken during the off peak hours and ended up at leisure destinations such as restaurants, shopping centers, parks and other places where they spent money or connected with their communities. Respondents noted these trips would not have taken place if their fares hadn't been free.

These findings show examples of induced demand, which may have taken place in a vehicle rather than transit. Researchers further concluded that user-based free transit experiments could precipitate surges in ridership along certain routes, potentially leading to an increase in frequency and service density, decreasing wait times and walking times for all other road users.

Most users of free transit aren't necessarily new riders, it's usually current riders using transit more. If the frequency of service does not change, free transit will typically be more beneficial to those that use it anyway, but having access to transit that is reliable and easy to access can inspire more trips overall.

Building transit ridership through free fares has benefits beyond getting people out of their cars, especially when it comes to racial and social-economic equity. Network-wide free transit would promote more equity than just doing it on a free route, which is what many transit systems currently do. Evidence suggests that free transit would still eliminate some car trips.

## **So What? How Can Free Transit Affect OmniRide?**

In March 2020, OmniRide eliminated fare collection on all local and Metro Express routes in the OmniRide System as the impacts of the pandemic became more widely apparent. The benefit was to not only reduce cash handling after probing the fareboxes each evening after the buses return to the bus yard, but to speed up the boarding process and reduce the interaction between bus operators and customers. Essential workers make up a large segment of ridership on both services, while commuter services largely are made up of workers that are able to work remotely. However, OmniRide implemented Smarttrip only payment for commuter buses to also speed up the boarding time and reduce cash handling.

Initially, ridership plummeted as only front-line essential workers were taking the majority of trips throughout OmniRide's service area. However, in June, after the state phased in allowing residents to safely resume more activities, ridership followed suit. By the summer of 2020, local and Metro Express ridership was only 40-45 percent lower than pre-pandemic levels, largely due to the ability to resume travel to local destinations, while still attracting those essential workers that never stopped riding. With schools and colleges still doing most of their activities online, this segment of the ridership has not rebounded the same way as those that need transit services to go to jobs, medical appointments, or shopping.

What OmniRide staff noted, as well as other agencies in the region, is ridership activity shifted away from traditional peak times. While there is still a noticeable bump in ridership during both the AM and PM peaks, mid-day ridership was also rebounding faster. Ridership is showing spikes earlier than the traditional PM peak time, closer to 1-2PM rather than after 3PM. In addition, weekend ridership is seeing a notable rebound, with more than 70 percent of pre-pandemic ridership noted in October and November 2020. This leads staff to believe that people are using the bus more often, and for other uses than just going to their place of employment. Taking away the fare payment barrier not only allows our riders to reallocate spending to other uses, but it also reduces boarding time, fare disputes, breakdowns of the fareboxes, and promotes freedom to traveling through the service area to get to and from their destinations.

As staff continues to monitor ridership trends, shifting of resources may be necessary for more capacity during the early afternoon vs. later in the evenings for example, when ridership begins to wane. While spans of service would not be impacted, shifting of the vehicle resources to reduce overcrowding during the busier part of the day will be necessary to ensure proper social distancing, providing more convenience during the time periods needed, and lead to more reliability and attractiveness for those that need transit.

It is important for OmniRide to focus on building up the usage of those that need and already use the service, and phase in focus on attracting new riders, as resources become available to either increase frequencies of service or offer new destinations.

As confidence levels increase in using transit and commuters report to their offices in person, the commuter services will again flourish, or continue to reconfigure to meet the 'new normal' commuting habits. With a high percentage of commuters having their fares already subsidized by the existing Federal transit benefit, those fares will be very important for these services to remain viable and continue to reduce traffic and move masses of people between OmniRide's service area and the employment centers in Northern Virginia and Washington, DC.