

THE STAR-LEDGER

Despite the ‘Summer of Hell,’ We Should Be Increasing Transit Ridership

By Peter Kasabach
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Derailments. Disruptions and cancellations. Overcrowded platforms. Standing-room-only trains. Anger, frustration, and a whole lot of stress. With New Jersey commuters suffering through the so-called “Summer of Hell,” is it crazy to suggest that we need to increase transit ridership?

While the thought of putting more bodies onto our crammed trains and buses may seem counterintuitive, the state’s economic future depends on our ability to move people and goods around the region reliably, safely, and sustainably. With the threats of climate change, limiting carbon emissions must remain a constant ambition. So while it is of the utmost urgency to do the maintenance required to get our transit system back to working order, we must also be working toward the longer-term goals of getting more people off the roads and onto transit and viewing transportation as an integrated system, with seamless connections among walking, biking, public transportation and driving.

Here’s how we can do it:

1. **Establish a Transit-oriented development specialty area within NJ Transit that works proactively with developers and host municipalities to redevelop sites around train stations, and that coordinates regularly with the state Department of Transportation.** Transit-oriented development (TOD) is the creation of compact, walkable communities containing office, retail, restaurants, housing and other amenities, typically within a half-mile, or walking distance, of transit stations. National studies have shown that about one-fourth of all housing demand over the next several decades will be for homes and apartments within a half mile of rail transit stations. The demand for TOD is in response to a number of conditions, including climate change, road congestion, shrinking household sizes, increased demand for urban living, and rising interest in walkable neighborhoods.
2. **Develop “first-mile/last-mile” transportation services and expand bike and pedestrian access to transit.** One of the greatest challenges to getting more people to use buses and trains to commute to work is getting riders safely and effectively from their front door to the transit stop. We need to connect sidewalks and create safe bikeways, and make sure our transit fleet is as bike-friendly as

possible. And ride-sharing services offer promise: The city of Summit partnered with Uber, subsidizing residents' rides to the train station instead of building a new parking lot.

3. **Create a data-driven prioritization process in the Department of Transportation to invest limited tax dollars in the smartest transportation projects.** Other states, including Virginia, have moved toward using a scoring system to evaluate infrastructure projects through a set of potential benefits such as congestion relief, economic development, and environmental impact. Advantages of this approach include taking the politics out of funding projects, and increasing transparency and objectivity when it comes to state spending.

Here's how we pay for it:

1. **Ensure the Transportation Trust Fund is financed and spent sustainably**, in order to minimize an over-reliance on long-term debt for short-term improvements. This may also mean shifting from a gas tax to a fee on vehicle-miles traveled, as cars become increasingly fuel efficient and electric cars increase their market share.
2. **Initiate local value-capture mechanisms**, such as special improvement districts and tax increment financing, to help bring in revenues to fund NJ Transit operations and investments in local infrastructure. Studies have shown that rail transit stations increase property values up to two miles away. And TOD projects tend to pay their own way, generating more in tax and non-tax revenues than the cost of public services for the new residents and employees.
3. **Work with towns and developers to access federal programs.** The Railroad Rehabilitation Improvement Financing (RRIF) and Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) can help pay for infrastructure improvements around transit centers.

Just the other week, I stood on a Jersey City-bound PATH train that was jammed with discomfited commuters who just wanted to get to work. I'm sure most of them were not thinking about how we could get more people onto the train. But I think it's a case of walking and chewing gum at the same time. We can fix the most immediate maintenance and operation problems and at the same time invest in our future.

While our current governor failed to see the demographic, environmental, and economic forces that were on our doorstep, I am hoping the next governor of New Jersey will take the lead in recognizing the great potential our state's transit system has to unleash economic growth. We must use our resources wisely, both to ensure that our transit system meets the highest standards of safety, transparency, and reliability; and to work to expand and integrate it – all at the same time.

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