

Virginia Transit Association
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Guardians of our Democracy

I don't know what Lisa thought she was doing when she invited a preacher to do the Keynote at the Virginia Transit Association conference. I did grow up riding the streetcars in Washington. I have spent at least 20 years of my life as a transit-dependent person. And for 40 years I've been working with students and adults in the most transit-dependent neighborhood in Richmond – a neighborhood where 30 percent of the households, have no car. Only 5% of the students in our high school have drivers' licenses.

I do have a sense of how important public transportation is to the formation of a society, and especially to the formation of a city. No healthy society, and no healthy metropolitan city, can do without healthy public transportation – and those that are successful take advantage of public transportation for their success.

So when Lisa gave me the chance to give this talk, I took it, because I want to tell you what you mean to us, and especially how important you are at this point in the great sweep of American history.

- You guarantee the freedom of each individual.
- You build the foundation of the urban community.
- You develop the framework of the modern city.

You guarantee the freedom of each individual.

Transportation is one of the fundamental building blocks of our communities – one without which nothing else works. The right to decent transportation is as important as the right to vote. In fact, without transportation you may have difficulty voting.

Universal public transportation is as essential to the community as circulation is to the body. More than any other single element, it guarantees the ability of every person to participate in the community. Without transportation, individuals are forsaken; communities wither; people die;

Transportation is as essential as food. Public transportation is the lifeline of the society. We have no right to deny it to anyone.

Barely 50 years ago, public transportation went through a particularly unhappy time in the United States. Nowhere was the story worse than Virginia. Like nearly every historic asset in this Commonwealth, public transportation

became one more victim of the twisted, desperate desire to maintain racial discrimination at all costs.

Virginians and other Americans found that they could deny access to retail stores either by declaring them “For Whites Only,” or by putting them miles outside of the reach of public transportation. We found we could either segregate schools and neighborhoods, or we could create suburban freeways for some citizens and lock others in center cities served by limited public transportation. Once upon a time, half our population had to sit at the back of the bus. Now we could sit anywhere, but the bus didn’t go anywhere -- to the jobs, or the community colleges, or the stores, or the hospitals, or the shopping centers – and sometimes, even to the train station or the airport.

Virginia, alone among the states of the nation, had a system of independent cities. These cities became a way of creating separate, limited transportation systems. The state built highways indiscriminately across metropolitan areas, spending massive amounts of money and tearing down large swaths of the urban landscape. But when it came to the essential universal lifeline for the metropolitan city, public transportation, Virginia was anything but indiscriminate. It gave each jurisdiction discrimination as a local option. Whole new suburban cities were established, specifically restricting access by public transportation.

Our once-robust transportation systems became artificially truncated. Our cities sprawled uncontrollably, and the percentage of our population with effective access to the community shrank. The more people were confined to automobiles, the more afraid and dismissive we became of once connected communities.

But the public transportation never completely disappeared, thank God. Courageous purveyors of proximity – many of you, and your predecessors -- continued to maintain basic service for the survival of those who had little choice.

Transportation is a precondition of freedom and opportunity for each individual in this society. We have no right to deny effective transportation to anyone! It is a gross immorality, a hidden homicide. There are parts of our major metropolitan cities where this immorality persists. It is inexcusable. They must be reunited to our common life.

As transportation professionals and advocates, you guarantee the freedom of each individual.

You build the foundation of the urban community.

Here’s the soft secret of the service you produce. You bring people together. By bringing people together, you enable the first steps of the relationships that make a community work. You build the social foundation of the urban community. I wonder what New York, or London, or Paris would be like if people didn’t ride on the Metro and buses and walk on sidewalks together each day. Public

transportation is where people learn not to be afraid of each other, to watch one another, and to share together the tremendous diversity which is the modern city. Every bus driver is minister of a random congregation – herald of the fundamentals of the community that make cities thrive.

Beyond the accidental fellowships of transit, you establish the access of all citizens to all the essential aspects of the community's life. Universities and community colleges, high schools, food and retail goods, specialty stores, health care, entertainment and culture, tourism, and above all, employment -- Nothing is accessible without transportation.

Whether the population of the city is 100,000 or 1 million, the city benefits all if all can get where they need to go. You establish and maintain the basic pathways that make a city function efficiently and richly. You create the networks which make it less important exactly where you live if you want to work at a certain job.

Metropolitan cities with real, full-service public transportation have stronger neighborhoods. Their poverty is less concentrated. The diversity of their population is more apparent, and more celebrated. They are safer. The BRT, the buses, light rail, and trains are filled with high school and university students. Seniors are able to stay in their homes after they can no longer drive. There are fewer drunks on the road, and people with DUI's can still get to work. Most important, having public transportation to go to work is worth a 30% increase in income to a person earning minimum wage.

Public transportation in Virginia enables our fragmented metropolitan cities to function as a single economic unit, even when the Constitution and General Assembly keep them fragmented into different jurisdictions. Public transportation can give us social and economic cooperation without metropolitan government – an essential element if Virginia is to have effective, competitive cities.

You build the foundation of the urban community.

You develop the framework of the modern city.

There are two major theories about the development of public transportation systems going around urban planning departments in Virginia and elsewhere. They are the Last-ditch Theory and the Divine Theory.

The Last-Ditch Theory is one which I hear too frequently from transportation planners. It is this: Continue with your road-building program, wherever and whenever you want. Sprawl and sprawl again. If traffic ever gets so bad that you can't solve it with more lanes, or the crowd of people at one place gets to be enough to fill a bus, then establish public transit lines as a Last-Ditch effort to salvage the situation. Until then, forget the poor. The Last-Ditch Theory: Transportation follows development.

The other theory of public transportation planning is the Divine Theory. God put the James River here – a great highway of transportation. That's why this city developed. The original Transit-Oriented Development. The Divine Theory: Transportation precedes development.

The Divine Theory, of course, is the one which we follow in highway planning. The Federal Government and Commonwealth of Virginia spent more than \$1.1 billion from 1980 to 2000 building the I-288-295 Beltway around Richmond, much of it through undeveloped land. For the first several years the road was near vacant. Now billions of dollars of development are sprawling at each interchange and into the low-tax exurban counties. Transportation precedes development.

It may be instructive to compare what we consider normal in highway expenditures with what we consider normal for universal public transportation. Compare the ease of acquiring that \$1.1 billion spent for 70 miles of suburban development in metro Richmond to the enormous effort we have gone through these last months to get less than \$160 million to rebuild Metro in the Washington suburbs. The Metro money is barely one-seventh of the cost of the Richmond Beltway, but supports basic transportation for 5.5 million people.

The good news is that today we have incredible opportunities to sponsor and shape economic and community development through public transportation. Today, 80% of the development in America's largest cities is taking place on 5% of the land – land adjacent to Bus Rapid Transit, light rail, subway, or transit stops. People are spending a smaller percentage of their lives raising children in suburban homes and wanting to spend both young adulthood and post-child-rearing years with greater access and less need of a car. Communities are competing for the dynamic portion of the population we know as Millennials. In Virginia 27% of those Millennials do not even have drivers' licenses.

We are all aware that corporate leadership is making it clear that public transportation is a fundamental amenity which many seek, and which is increasingly a key factor in deciding where to locate. To locate an employment center near an effective transportation network multiplies the available employment pool and increases the effective income of each full-time worker by a minimum of \$4,000 a year.

As transportation professionals,

- You develop the framework of the modern city.
- You guarantee the freedom of each individual.
- You build the foundation of the urban community.

And your prophecy will shape the future.

You probably don't want to be prophets, but I am afraid history may be drawing you to that task.

First of all, you are prophets because you stand, as the great prophets have always stood, for the principle that no one is to be excluded from the human community. That means public transportation for everyone.

Here in this conference we are looking constantly at ways to do this job better, to help shape transportation so that cities can function more efficiently, and more inclusively. There are lots of ideas out there, – some good ones and some wacko ones. You are the explorers of our technological future in transportation.

Your most dangerous prophetic role, however, is just beyond the curtain of the future. The society is in danger of disintegrating. Physical sprawl is a major part of it. Spending more and more hours alone in individual containers called automobiles is a part of it. Virtual community is not adequate for building a real community.

Sprawling, automobile-based development makes high incomes, and therefore a widening income gap, a necessity rather than a luxury. As the economy shrinks, the divisions in society will become more aggressive. Public transportation is one of the most fundamental ways we can bind ourselves together – relate more effectively to one another – and save money with a common infrastructure.

Public transportation is the most powerful engine of inclusiveness, opportunity, community-building, and economic development in the now and future city. As its stewards, often unappreciated but massively determined, you guarantee the freedom of each individual, You build the foundation of the urban community, You develop the framework of the modern city. And whether you believe it or not, your prophecy will shape the future.