

## The Works

# When Car-Loving Cities Start to Embrace Light Rail

BY RACHEL DOVEY | NEXT CITY | JULY 15, 2014

**A**mbitious light rail projects in Los Angeles, Salt Lake City and Phoenix underscore a paradox of auto-centric cities: As traffic worsens, even taxpayers who love their cars look favorably on public transit.

As in Denver, voters in these highway-dependant cities have approved massive rail arterials largely as inoculants against congestion. Whether their lines will actually unsnarl roadways is still a matter of debate; research has suggested that even with infrastructure alternatives in place, growing populations tend to fill freeways. But some ridership patterns, especially among students, present good news for lovers of both public transit and wide-open roads.

Los Angeles regularly tops national “worst traffic” lists, but a recent report assembled by George Washington University and Smart Growth America gave it a new spot of honor this year: One of the future’s most walkable cities.

That’s partly because of rail, according to Marc Littman with L.A. Metro. In the last two decades, Los Angeles workers have constructed four light rail and two subway lines covering 87 miles, and multiple expansions are in the works.

Before Measure R was proposed in L.A. County to implement a half-cent sales tax increase to fund transportation projects (voters approved the measure in 2008), L.A. Metro polling found that traffic congestion, safety and highway accidents were top concerns.

“We can’t build more roads,” Littman says. “There’s no land. We can’t build double-decker freeways.”

Environmental factors swayed Southern California voters as well. The *L.A. Times* [endorsement](#) declared that if Measure R failed “pollution will only worsen,” mirroring [arguments](#) for California’s high-speed rail that focus on climate change. But not all voters share these priorities. In Salt Lake City, congestion alleviation carries more weight.

“We have a very conservative population,” says Hal Johnson with Utah Transit Authority. “We’re a red state, and more of our voters tend to like transit based on business rather than environmental concerns.”

The transit authority tried to fund its TRAX project with tax revenue in the early ’90s, but voters rejected the initiative. According to one [report](#), protestors at the project’s groundbreaking several years later held signs reading “Light Rail Kills Children.” By 2006, however, voters did approve a measure directing tax funds to rail expansion.

Johnson says partnerships with the local business community have been key, along with outreach that emphasizes how rail actually benefits drivers.

“We don’t look at them as competing,” he says.

A clever [UTA ad](#) from several years ago demonstrates the utility’s tactic:



As CityLab [reported](#) in June, Denver has relied on similar strategies. After freeway-widening projects did little to ease congestion, voters turned to trains.

“Denver is a car town,” Phil Washington of the Regional Transportation District told the story’s writer. Later in the article he said: “From the start, we made it clear we weren’t competing with the car.”

But some research questions whether rail lines actually do thin roadway congestion. A much-cited [study](#) published by the *Journal of Transport Geography* examined data from light rail in four British cities over 10 years, concluding that train ridership comes mainly from buses instead of cars. The study also pointed out that as some cars left the road for public transit, others took their place.

In Seattle, Geoff Patrick with Sound Transit outlines the nuances of marketing rail. Voters passed a tax increase to expand the region’s rails in 2008 but, because of factors like those listed in the study, the agency has tried not to make promises it can’t deliver.

“People who ride a train or bus are not competing for clear roadway space — that’s clear and irrefutable,” he says. “Where I think you need to be careful is in creating a promise that traffic will recede from its current levels.”

Congestion can be tied to so many things: driver patterns, bus service and development density, to name only a few. It’s difficult to prove overall that one factor reduces it. But regional reports on the subject do show some interesting trends.

For example, researchers from the University of Utah and the National Institute for Transportation and Communities released a joint [report](#) in June examining Salt Lake City’s rail.

“Our calculations show that without the University TRAX line, there would be at least 7,300 more cars per day on 400/500 South, and possibly as many as 21,700 additional cars,” a press release for the study states.

And Phoenix’s new light rail shows similar trends.

Albert Santana, a Phoenix light rail project administrator, says the region’s new system has been more successful than even the agency hoped. Their goal was to serve 26,000 riders a day, but so far they’ve drawn nearly 45,000 riders a day — a figure they’d hoped to have by 2020.

Santana believes the reasons echo Utah. Around 35 percent of Metro’s ridership comes from students, he says.

These figures may not demonstrate a universal fix for congestion right now, but [carless culture skews young](#). Over time, light rail’s thinning effect on nearby roadways will likely be magnified.

Echoing many a trend piece on millennials, Santana sums up Phoenix Metro’s increasing popularity.

“The youth these days are not rushing out to buy cars,” he says.

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TAGS: LOS ANGELES, LIGHT RAIL, TAXES, TRAFFIC, PHOENIX, SALT LAKE CITY

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Science of Cities 

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## Pretty Park, Affordable Rent: Making Neighborhoods “Just Green Enough”

BY REBECCA TUHUS-DUBROW | NEXT CITY | JULY 15, 2014

From green roofs in Chicago to the High Line in Manhattan, U.S. cities have been making high-profile investments in green space — to widespread celebration. But could there be a downside to urban greening? A growing body of academic literature examines a paradox: Low-income communities tend to suffer from various kinds of environmental injustice, including shortage of green space. But when these concerns are addressed — the power plant closes, a park opens — the neighborhood becomes more desirable, often kickstarting a process of so-called “environmental gentrification.”

How, then, can we reduce environmental inequities without displacing the very people the improvements are supposed to benefit? One answer: a “just green enough” model that seeks to remedy injustices without introducing the fancy amenities that can radically transform a neighborhood.

A new [paper](#) in the journal *Landscape and Urban Planning*, by UC Berkeley professor Jennifer Wolch and coauthors, is the latest to advocate this approach. The paper, a literature review, discusses past work on environmental gentrification. In addition to the High Line, which raised property values in what had been a relatively affordable area of Manhattan, the authors cite a [study](#) of a stalled proposal to expand park space in Harlem in 2010. The city proposed connecting two pocket parks into a larger green space, but at a community meeting, residents expressed suspicion. Why now, only after luxury condos had been erected nearby? What would closing off the streets mean for traffic in the neighborhood? What would happen to the homeless people who currently spent time in the small parks? Whom, in short, would the project really benefit?

Similar questions dog almost any plan to “green” disadvantaged neighborhoods. But the authors do invoke one success story: community activism in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a historically Polish neighborhood on the waterfront, home to heavy industry. A huge underground oil plume plagued

Greenpoint for decades, and its polluted estuary, Newtown Creek, was declared a Superfund site in 2010.

In 2012, Winifred Curran, a professor at DePaul University, first coined the term “just green enough” to describe her findings from a [case study](#) of Greenpoint. Curran and her coauthors found that life-long residents and newcomers were working together, largely through an organization called the Newtown Creek Alliance, to achieve a cleaner, greener neighborhood while preserving an industrial presence and avoiding the “parks, cafes, and a riverwalk” paradigm. They helped win a \$25 million settlement from Exxon Mobil, as well as the declaration of the Superfund site and the establishment of the Newtown Creek Nature Walk. This nature trail, in the shadow of a sewage treatment plant, was [dubbed “ironic” by the \*New York Times\*](#), but it has proved popular with locals.

Bill Schuck, a longtime Greenpoint resident and member of the Newtown Creek Alliance, told me that in addition to cleaning up the neighborhood and expanding access to the water, the group focused on preserving working-class jobs, conscious of the risks of gentrification. He and his fellow activists thought, “Hey, wait a second. Are we doing this to make this attractive to real estate developers? And it was, “No, we’re looking to benefit people like us.” Though Greenpoint has not entirely escaped gentrification, it remains, according to one city official Curran interviewed, “the last real industrial beltway of the city,” with thousands of jobs in transportation, warehousing, and wholesale.

Curran believes that some planners and policymakers have become sensitive to these issues. But, she wrote in an email, “there is a tremendous reliance on the strength of community activists; activists really seem to lead the way, declaring desired outcomes that planners can then try to work with. I think it comes down to what the vision for the city is — a business-oriented place in competition with other global cities for limited investment dollars or a neighborhood-oriented place driven to improve outcomes for all its residents.”

What steps might other communities take to improve environmental resources while forestalling environmental gentrification? Wolch’s paper concludes with some recommendations for attempting to pull off this “careful balancing act.” Planners must be willing to design projects determined by specific community needs and preferences — for example, one Toronto non-profit urged planners to move away from re-wilding in favor of urban agriculture spaces that the community would find readily useful. Another suggestion is to prioritize small and scattered parks and community gardens, which can distribute access throughout a neighborhood, rather than flashy, large-scale projects of the type that tend to attract attention and real estate speculation. Also essential will be other tools, not specifically ecological but relevant to gentrification more broadly, such as affordable housing provisions and rent stabilization measures.

Environmental gentrification embodies essentially the same challenges as all gentrification. It’s painfully logical, almost tautological: When a place becomes more attractive, it tends to become more expensive. How do you improve conditions without raising rents?

“It’s about the people, it’s not about the place,” Curran told me. “Not, this is what makes it the cleanest,

this is what makes it the prettiest, this is what makes it the greenest.” And yet, “We’re not so anti-gentrification that we say, ‘Great, we love that sludge.’”

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**TAGS: GENTRIFICATION, BROOKLYN, PARKS, ENVIRONMENTALISM, GREENING**

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