

# Car Free in America

by Jim Motavalli

General Motors executives like to say that the fuel-cell car will take the automobile out of the environmental equation, when really it will only solve the tailpipe problem. Cars will still take up space, create gridlock and drive development decisions.

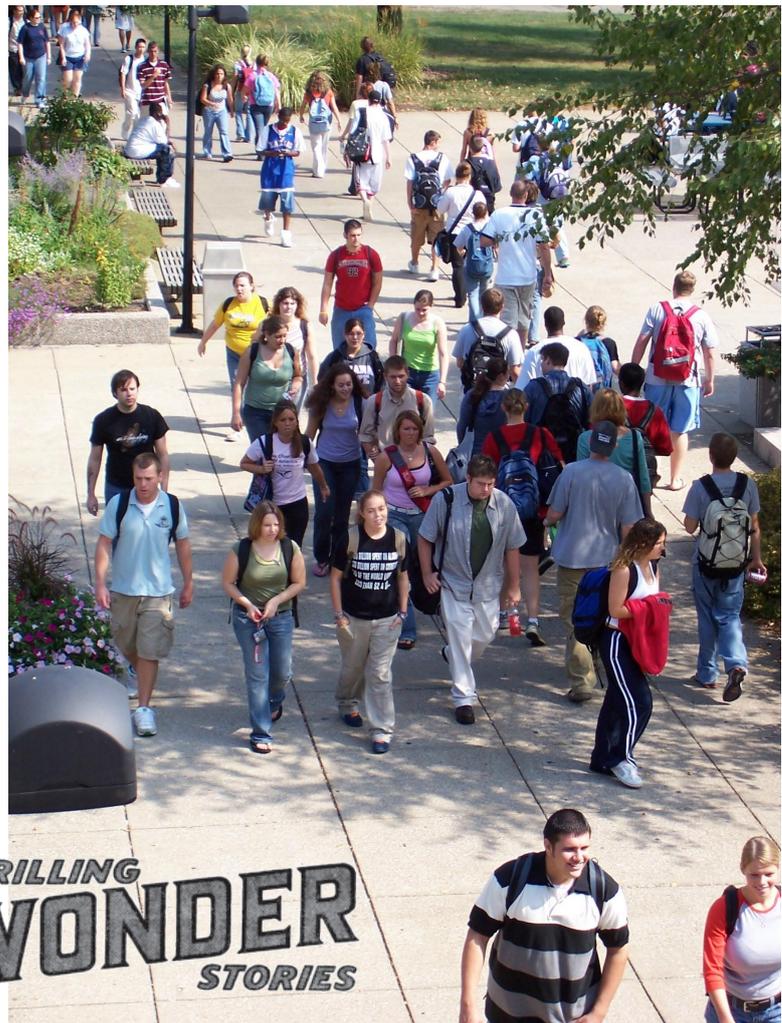
Many of us have seen old photographs of the comprehensive trolley and railroad lines that used to serve even the smallest American community, and wondered whether we've really made "progress" since then. Though the commuter of 1912 lacked an interstate highway system, he or she could walk out the front door, hop a trolley, then connect to an efficient national rail network with 300,000 miles of track.

Our shrunken, financially imperiled Amtrak system is a ghost of the network we tore up in search of modernity and the personal freedom afforded by automobiles. Our rail infrastructure now has half as many miles as existed in 1912. But cities are beginning to rebuild what was lost, turning to light-rail systems, fast ferryboats and dedicated bus corridors, among other new approaches.

The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) is full of relatively happy news:

Fourteen million Americans ride on public transportation each weekday. Americans took more than 7.8 billion public transportation trips in the first nine months of 2006, up three percent from the previous year. Light rail had the highest percentage of growth among all modes of transportation, with an increase of 5.4 percent. Double-digit growth was seen in Salt Lake City, Minneapolis, New Jersey, Philadelphia and Sacramento. Other big gainers

*People need mobility options. Whether its rail, buses, bikes or walking, there are a number of successful modes that illustrate the possibilities of accessing communities without a car.*



include Buffalo and Houston.

"Even as gas prices declined, more and more people decided to ride public transportation," says APTA President William W. Millar. "This continued increase in transit ridership demonstrates that when people have transportation choices, they use them."

Last January, a study that found transit saves 1.4 billion gallons of gasoline

every year, the equivalent of 108 million cars filling up, almost 300,000 each day. If twice as many Americans had transit choices, we'd save 2.8 billion gallons. Two-worker households that use public transit on a given day save more than \$6,200 a year on average.

Some 62 American cities now have or plan to build light-rail systems. There are now 651 light-rail stations around the country, operated by 26 transit

agencies. Commuter rail agencies add another 1,153 stations. Funded proposals will add 131 new stations in coming years.

Despite transit critics who charge that light rail offers “limousine-priced” rides to people who would otherwise have taken the bus, there’s ample evidence that transit is cost-effective, especially when the cost of gridlock is taken into account, and ridership is increasing from people who would otherwise have taken their cars. When the St. Louis light rail opened in 1993, according to the *Milwaukee Journal*, not only did the number of passengers far exceed expectations but bus ridership also increased 20 percent. In Toronto, Canada, transit carries 77 percent of all downtown-bound commuters during rush hours. Portland, Oregon’s Tri-Met light-rail system eliminates 187,000 car trips every day, or 58 million per year.

The Federal Transit Agency reports, “Americans lose more than 1.6 million hours a day stuck in traffic. Without transit, the nation’s \$40 billion in annual traffic congestion losses would be \$15 billion higher. In fact, if all the Americans who take transit to work decided to drive, their cars would circle the Earth with a line of traffic 23,000 miles long.”

Despite setbacks, long-distance trains are also making a comeback, Amtrak as a whole has lost about \$25 billion since it was created in 1971, a staggering sum until you consider the \$40 billion annually spent on highways. States are banding together in high-speed train compacts designed to provide ultra-fast and competitive rail service for such regions as the Midwest, Florida, the Northwest and California.

The model is Amtrak’s Acela train between Boston and Washington, D.C., which travels at speeds of up to 150 miles per hour. That’s slower than European trains, but it’s fast enough to be competitive with flying, especially when including the time consumed in getting to airports and checking through new security procedures. The Acela train has had many teething problems, but it’s still a popular travel alternative.

Rapid-transit ferries can compete with cars in commuting times. The city of Sydney, Australia, for instance, makes major use of ferryboat commuting, as does Hong Kong, Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia. There are some environmental problems and some cost issues with ferries, but, overall, when you have feasible water routes, it’s a great mode of transport.

Biking is also gaining in popularity, for health, for its environmental benefits and to eliminate auto-related costs. Owning a car for a year can cost more than \$7,000. According to the League of American Bicyclists, operating a bicycle for a year weighs in at \$120. Many insurance companies also reduce rates for commuters who bicycle to work rather than drive. The National Personal Transportation Survey found that approximately 40 percent of all trips are less than two miles in length—which represents a 10-minute bike ride or a 30-minute walk. Fifty-four percent of all commuters live within 10 miles of their worksite—making their commute time by bike or car just about the same.

Employers also benefit, because studies show that people who bike to work are more productive and take less time off for illness. Bikers cut down on an employer’s need to subsidize employee parking, and exercise tends to make workers more alert.

If bicycling seems too strenuous for you, there are a range of electric-assisted bicycles – with a top speed of about 15 miles per hour and a 20-mile range – available that give you a motorized push up hills and other obstacles. You can motorize a bike yourself with an affordable kit, or pay \$500 to \$3,000 for a ready-made unit. Santa Cruz County, Calif. gives \$375



rebates for electric bike purchases. And, of course, there’s always the Segway gyroscopic scooter, though they remain rather expensive novelties and not yet the transportation revolution that founder Dean Kamen envisioned.

Our transportation choices obviously have a major impact on the environment, so what can we do to lessen our impact on the planet and reduce our dependence on foreign oil? If we could prepare for the coming hydrogen-based energy economy by promoting interim clean-car technologies and a national public transportation network, we’d certainly be making major progress! Life without cars?

The Europeans and South Americans are far ahead of the car-dependent U.S. in taking back the streets. The English anti-roads movement actually stopped construction of some highway bypasses after activists blocked traffic. In the U.S., anti-car activism is largely restricted to bicycle advocacy, with groups such as Critical Mass and Transportation Alternatives occasionally blocking traffic and demonstrating for better bike access.

European car-free zones have become very successful. Sixty cities have declared that they’re going to make their centers car-free. Britain has developed a car-free day, which is supported by 75 percent of the British public. Similar ideas have spread to Central and South America. In some places, such as Athens or Singapore, because of pollution problems, you can drive only every other day (license plates ending in an odd number one day, even the next), and London now is charging cars a hefty fee to enter the city center. In Copenhagen, Denmark, 30 to 40 percent of commuters get to work by bicycle.

Although vehicle miles traveled and the number of cars in the world grows every day, some very green shoots are starting to show themselves through the concrete.

*Mr. Motavalli’s contribution comes from the E/The Environmental Magazine at [www.emagazine.com](http://www.emagazine.com).*