

Guest Opinion

Sustainable Transportation for the Ocean State

Eugenia Marks

Enough hay from growing season to growing season once sustained transportation, with an occasional offspring to replace the aging steed. But human populations have burgeoned since donkey or horse-and-buggy days, the concentrations of resulting pollutants to air and water has sky-rocketed, and we have developed a speedy life-style that seems to hurtle us toward Armageddon.

What do we mean in the 21st Century as we promote “sustainable” transportation?

We are talking about equitable financing for transportation that serves the full scope of the population in an environmentally friendly way. Sustainable means funding without oscillating finances that result in boom and bust service. It suggests pay-as-you-go out of the \$216.6 million required to keep roads and bridges repaired, and the \$101.2 million to keep buses running.

Sustainable transportation funding means cutting bond interest that currently consumes more than the revenues for the R.I. Department of Transportation’s operations and maintenance. It means capital budgets that are within the state’s means to pay for them. It means a system of bus, pedestrian, bicycle, air, rail and vehicular travel that are coordinated for reasonable public cost—financial, health, and environmental—and for maximum public benefit.

Environmentally friendly transportation reduces nitrogen emissions—and its negative impact to local air, health, and water—by providing better mass transit, bicycle infrastructure, and pedestrian safety to reduce the number of individual vehicles. Motors cough out pollutants that make ozone and climate change gases. Walking, cycling, car-pooling and bus use eliminate these sources of health and environmental degradation. Climate change experts say the transportation sector represents the largest source of carbon dioxide emissions in the Northeast; roughly 30–40 percent of New England’s total contribution to global warming pollution.

Gas Tax Undercuts Progress

Here in Rhode Island our public ground transportation system (RIPTA), the R.I. Public Transit Authority, stalls as the gasoline tax revenues fall, because high prices at the pump have cut into private car use. The gas tax, along with fares and federal dollars, support RIPTA, which also runs special services for elderly and disabled. Disastrously, the R.I. General Assembly omitted RIPTA from being the beneficiary of a stable source of funding—an increased auto

registration fee funding. As a result, the bus system is now calling for drastic service cuts, which will spiral into less ridership, more personnel layoffs and greater funding crises.

Rhode Island is part of a vibrant region that sustainable transportation can tap for our benefit. Another mass transit option—commuter rail—could and should be expanded to serve the large service areas north of Providence, such as Pawtucket, Cumberland and Woonsocket. Transit-oriented-development should also be encouraged south of the capital, where newly opened stations backed by transit-oriented development will add to personal efficiency and public economy.

Public transportation often compares favorably to the cost of purchasing a car and its insurance, maintenance, repairs, and fuel that take a chunk out of personal budgets. But it is only an alternative to the private car when it is a viable option that can meet a simple goal: It takes people where they want to go, when they want to go.

The Importance of Good Transportation

Transportation choices affect you and your family and friends’ personal finances and the state’s economy. Fifty-one per cent of riders take the bus to work, and to move away from providing a support service that gets people to the jobs



RIPTA bus services are used by Rhode Island residents, workers, students and visitors. Photo: Providence Metropolitan Transit Enhancement Study, Final Report, 2009.

that must be created to pull the state out of an economic spiral is illogical. Many students use the bus regularly to get to both classes and work. The elderly use it to go to doctor's appointments and go shopping, trying to maintain their independence and quality of life. And the special services offered by RIPTA's disabled ridership program are nearly essential to the lives of those who may be blind or otherwise physically tested.

The full scope of Rhode Island's population needs to be addressed in transportation planning. More than 78,000 people over the age of 18 in the state do not have drivers' licenses, and need public transportation or bicycles or their feet to get where they need to go.

Public transportation is more efficient in heavily populated areas, thus the sensibility of forward-looking state planners to encourage more dense development within the urban service boundary. Although Rhode Island is the second most densely populated state, gas-eating miles between sparsely-used stops or even low ridership on late night runs along main routes drain the budget. Nonetheless, transportation is a public necessity and deserves public support beyond the riders' fares to reap community benefits.

Waiting for the Transit Superman

People generally look to places like Portland, Oregon, or Boulder, Colorado, for well-integrated transportation systems. But if you look hard, you can see glimmers of the right concepts shining through right here in Rhode Island that could expand into more sustainable transportation.

Bicycle paths in Rhode Island are being linked and become commuter routes where and when possible. The reality of two snowy months need not sabotage the idea of commuting by bike. It's done from Providence to Roger Williams University; the East Side to downtown; Kingston to Narragansett; Warwick to Cranston, and when the snow comes, switch to bigger wheels—other times reduce air pollution.

Walking to shopping occurs in Wakefield, where flags to assure safe passage across Main Street offer a model for other communities. In Providence, the use of traffic lights with pedestrian crossing times facilitates walking, and the "Complete Streets" redesign of Elmwood Avenue will enhance pedestrian and bicycle traffic. Aquidneck Island recently issued a transportation study that recommends greater pedestrian, bicycle, and transit development and accommodation to facilitate residents and tourists. Westerly has a compact downtown conducive to walking, and plans for public transit to Watch Hill and the Dunn's Corner will alleviate automobile emissions.

Many Rhode Island municipalities have beautiful residential areas and interesting commercial architecture that can be appreciated by walking and biking.

~Eugenia Marks is senior policy director at the Audubon Society of R.I. and a member of the Coalition for Transportation Choices Working Group.

Go Deeper and Get Involved!

The Coalition for Transportation Choices (CTC), a coalition of 47 organizations, is working to create a 21st century transportation system that enhances our economy, supports communities and provides Rhode Islanders with healthy transportation choices. The Coalition has worked to implement sustainable transportation by promoting Complete Streets design; crafting legislation to support CTC's principles; holding policy forums for government officials; providing formal comment on transportation initiatives; supporting programs for pedestrian/student safety; advocating for bicycle integration in transportation; doing analysis for better transit; and seeking sustainable funding sources for DOT, RIPTA and municipalities, other than the self-defeating gasoline tax.

Visit CTC's web site at www.rictc.org to become involved in sustainable transportation that will improve economic and environmental health in the Narragansett Bay and Little Narragansett Bay watersheds.



Bike sharing programs are becoming a popular transportation choice in many U.S. cities. Photo: Providence Metropolitan Transit Enhancement Study, Final Report, 2009.