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TRANSIT PORK HAS FEW PASSENGERS

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In early March, the Senate agreed to include an additional \$25.9 billion in the five-year transportation bill scheduled for reauthorization. Although the additional spending exceeded the budget caps agreed to last year, Congress has committed itself to offsetting the increase with cuts elsewhere.

Many have criticized Congress for spending more on transportation than the commitment in last year's budget agreement, but this increase in transportation spending does fulfill a previous promise by Congress to shift that portion of the fuel tax once dedicated to deficit reduction to the highway trust fund. The effort to keep faith with the taxpayers, however, was quickly squandered when the Senate caved into environmentalists and unions seeking money for their pet projects. In response to this pressure, the Senate agreed to carve \$6.0 billion out of the additional \$25.9 billion and devote it to urban transit programs such as buses, subways, and light rail systems, provided that half the additional transit money is reserved for new projects earmarked by Senators.

While there is no assurance that the remaining \$18 billion in extra money for highways will be well spent under the centrally planned, mandate-laden federal highway program, at least that money would be targeted to the automobile drivers whose taxes fill the trough. These drivers account for more than 93 percent of the journeys to work and the same share of inter-city trips.

The same cannot be said for transit. While commanding 20 percent of federal surface transportation dollars, public transit today provides only 3.19 percent of the daily trips to work, down 20 percent since 1990. By 1995, more people walked or bicy-

cles to work (2.33 percent and 0.43 percent) than went to work by bus or metro (1.76 percent and 0.9 percent). The chief reason transit's share of the federal budget exceeds its share of the market is its high cost. According to the Congressional Budget Office, commuter vans cost 12.5 cents per mile, and buses 35 cents, while light rail systems cost a staggering \$3.40 per commuter mile—nearly ten times more than buses and 27 times more than vans.

Transit's minuscule share of the commuting market is not for want of trying or the result of underfunding. Since 1960, state, federal, and local governments have invested an estimated \$350 billion (in 1998 dollars) in transit. Over that same period, however, American commuters have been rejecting this turn-of-the-century transportation technology at the same pace as past generations.

Table 1 provides details on the use of transit in recent years for 33 major metropolitan areas. As the trend indicates, American commuters in urbanized areas have abandoned public transit at a rapid rate, despite major investments in new light-rail systems. Transit's share of the work-trip market in these areas fell nearly 40 percent between 1970 and 1990, and 25 percent between 1980 and 1990. By

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1990, only five of the major metropolitan areas had public transit use rates above 10 percent, and only one exceeded 15 percent.

Given the public's overwhelming lack of interest in using the services of publicly owned, monopoly transit systems—despite subsidies to do so—Congress should rethink the unnecessary reallocation of transportation dollars to these systems. While

Congress intends to offset this with cuts elsewhere, it can and should make its task easier by rejecting the extra \$6 billion for transit.

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Table 1

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Public Transportation Work Trip Market Share, 1970–1990

| Metropolitan Area | Public Transit Commuters as a Share of All Commuters | | | Change in Share: 1970–90 | Change in Share: 1980–90 |
|----------------------|---|-------|-------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | | |
| Atlanta | 7.94% | 7.39% | 4.59% | -42.2% | -37.9% |
| Baltimore | 13.04 | 9.95 | 7.39 | -43.3 | -25.7 |
| Boston | 15.78 | 12.89 | 10.35 | -34.4 | -19.7 |
| Buffalo | 10.15 | 6.31 | 4.45 | -56.1 | -29.5 |
| Chicago | 21.42 | 16.43 | 13.38 | -37.5 | -18.6 |
| Cincinnati | 7.10 | 5.60 | 3.56 | -49.8 | -36.4 |
| Cleveland | 9.74 | 7.75 | 4.49 | -53.9 | -42.1 |
| Columbus | 6.99 | 4.52 | 2.65 | -62.1 | -41.4 |
| Dallas | 4.91 | 3.35 | 2.26 | -54.0 | -32.5 |
| Denver | 4.16 | 6.05 | 4.18 | +0.4 | -30.9 |
| Detroit | 7.29 | 3.53 | 2.31 | -68.3 | -34.6 |
| Houston | 5.06 | 2.85 | 3.67 | -27.4 | 28.7 |
| Indianapolis | 4.95 | 2.83 | 1.96 | -60.4 | -30.7 |
| Kansas City | 5.12 | 3.95 | 2.03 | -60.3 | -48.6 |
| Los Angeles | 4.15 | 5.03 | 4.52 | +8.9 | -10.1 |
| Miami | 6.70 | 4.75 | 4.21 | -37.2 | -11.4 |
| Milwaukee | 10.84 | 7.01 | 4.82 | -55.5 | -31.2 |
| Minneapolis | 8.27 | 8.56 | 5.20 | -37.1 | -39.3 |
| New Orleans | 19.79 | 10.56 | 6.87 | -65.3 | -34.9 |
| New York | 37.48 | 29.61 | 26.85 | -28.4 | -9.3 |
| Philadelphia | 18.30 | 12.65 | 10.10 | -44.8 | -20.2 |
| Phoenix | 1.20 | 1.96 | 2.01 | +67.5 | +2.6 |
| Pittsburgh | 14.31 | 11.41 | 7.87 | -45.0 | -31.0 |
| Portland | 5.84 | 8.35 | 5.36 | -8.2 | -35.8 |
| Providence | 4.63 | 3.87 | 2.18 | -52.9 | -43.7 |
| Sacramento | 2.21 | 3.50 | 2.36 | +6.7 | -32.6 |
| San Antonio | 5.56 | 4.51 | 3.62 | -34.9 | -19.7 |
| San Diego | 4.18 | 3.23 | 3.20 | -23.4 | -0.9 |
| San Francisco | 11.19 | 11.34 | 9.09 | -18.8 | -19.8 |
| Seattle | 5.96 | 8.12 | 6.18 | +3.7 | -23.9 |
| St. Louis | 7.37 | 5.58 | 2.83 | -61.6 | -49.3 |
| Tampa–St. Petersburg | 2.75 | 1.69 | 1.33 | -51.6 | -21.3 |
| Washington, D.C. | 15.32 | 15.07 | 13.34 | -12.9 | -11.5 |
| Average for 33 Areas | 9.39 | 7.58 | 5.73 | -38.9 | -25.6 |
| U.S. Average | 8.48 | 6.22 | 5.12 | -39.6 | -17.6 |

Source: 1970, 1980, 1990 U.S. Census and U.S. Department of Transportation FTA Section 15 1990 Metropolitan Area Boundaries (1990). U.S. average from U.S. Department of Transportation, *Journey to Work Trends 1960–1990*, p. 22.