



Getting from Here to There

Transportation Solutions
for Rhode Islanders



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Executive Summary

TRAFFIC CONGESTION and poor air quality are only the two most obvious problems caused by the massive rise in vehicle miles driven in Rhode Island over the last decade. This increase is also a major contributor to rising carbon dioxide levels which help fuel the global warming that threatens our coast. After half a century of highway building we know that more roads always create more traffic and they are expensive and controversial. They will not improve congestion and they cannot help with pollution, either.

Mass transit is an acknowledged—and perhaps the only—solution to each of these problems, yet Rhode Island’s bus service, RIPTA, suffers from perennial financial problems, low ridership and a poor image. State laws, regulations and policies have led to a negative feedback loop of deteriorating service, public dissatisfaction and lack of support. Yet, according to RIPTA’s own research many more people would ride the bus if service were improved.

The obstacles to a robust public transit system lie in several areas, but two stand out. First, the state of Rhode Island has yet to recognize the public benefits of transit over automobile use. In fact, every year RIPTA struggles to balance its budget while automobile use is heavily subsidized

RIPTA can help manage congestion, pollution and more, but only if it is strong enough to do the job.

through various means, including free parking and tax deductions for automobile travel. Second, there is no accountability in place for local zoning boards to follow recommendations by state and local planners who understand the need for public transit and a pedestrian-friendly environment. Indifference to design for pedestrians has led to absurdly difficult access from streets to

businesses, and between businesses.

Overcoming these obstacles should begin with a fair investment of tax dollars in Rhode Island’s public transit and pedestrian infrastructure. Current spending and debt service for automobile-centered transportation heavily outweighs the state’s investment in a reliable and effective mass transit system. Our emphasis on tax dollars for auto use drains the economy, keeps Rhode Islanders dependent on foreign oil, and exacerbates the state’s pollution.

Our state government must recognize that public transit is an important public service—and act on that.

Rhode Island has a planning statute requiring the creation and approval of comprehensive municipal plans. This law, a national model, could become a tool for rational development that would encourage the use of public transit rather than preclude it. Businesses and other institutions also have their role in establishing a suitable “built environment.” Here the state could lead the way by encouraging companies to locate on appropriate sites and by providing subsidized bus passes to its own employees—as is already required of many businesses.

Ultimately, the way cities and towns are funded must be changed. An over-reliance on property taxes has created unwise growth in rural areas and lack of investment in urban areas. This has led to some of the most difficult planning problems.

Some of these solutions will require fundamental changes and will not be quick. But others could easily be implemented in the near future. Improving bus service for current riders will encourage more reliable use—and new riders. At the same time we should be examining the ways that other cities have created healthy public transit sys-

tems, including light rail, “bus rapid transit” and the commuter rail that is already in the planning stages.

Rhode Island faces critical decisions that will determine the future well-being of the state. Those that encourage our reliance on automobiles do damage to our health, safety and economy. A decision to encourage public transportation will save the environment, our quality of life and, not incidentally, a great deal of money for our citizens.

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1

The Need for Solutions

THE RHODE ISLAND PUBLIC TRANSIT Authority (RIPTA) is often in the news, and for a bus company, that's unlikely to be a good thing. The news over the past couple of years is usually about the agency missing some budget number, or predicting severe shortfalls in the next year's budget.

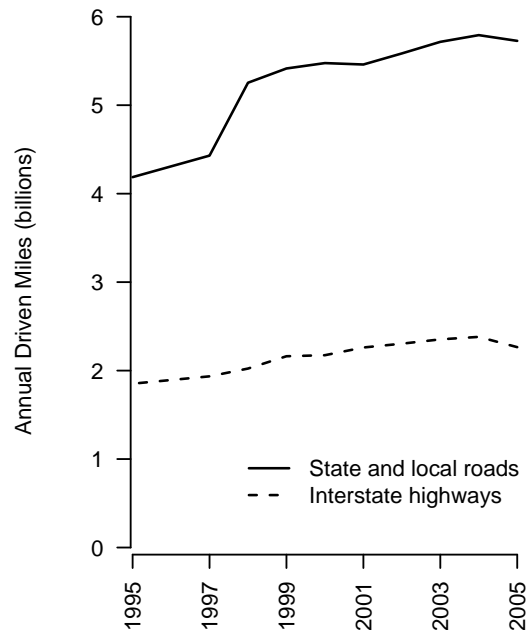
This is a big problem because anyone who travels on our state's roads and highways knows that their capacity is taxed every single day. Every year, cars and trucks travel over 8 billion miles on our roads—2.2 billion miles on our 70 miles of interstate highway alone. Our population has not gone up by much in decades, but the miles we drive are up by a lot. Three-dollar gas has moderated the pace of growth a bit, but even so traffic on I-95 and I-195 in Providence is up 20% since 1995, measured by vehicle miles driven. Overall,

Gas prices are way up, but we're still driving more than we did ten years ago.

miles driven in Rhode Island are up about a third since then, and traffic on the other urban roads, from Rt 10 in Cranston to Broadway and Blackstone Boulevard in Providence, is up 47%.¹ In other words, it's hardly surprising that congestion seems to be getting worse. Daytime travelers to Providence on I-95 only wonder *where* the traffic will bog down, not *if*.

Air quality has also suffered over the past

¹Source: RIDOT statistics, collated by the Federal Highway Administration: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/ohpi/qftravel.htm>. Miles on the smallest roads are omitted from the statistics here, since the methodology has changed twice over the time period.



Miles driven per year. The distance we drive every year is related to economic conditions—a good economy means we can afford lots of gas—but despite occasional dips, we drive farther every year.

decade, too. We've made progress on some pollutants—carbon monoxide, ozone, large particles—but we've discovered other pollutants that are worse than we had thought, like small particles whose health effects were not even recognized until the mid 1990's. The EPA rated 95 days as less than "good" air quality in 2003. There were only 47 in 1994. Though air quality is affected by a number of factors, including the vagaries of the weather and coal burnt in Ohio, automobile traffic is an important factor. Carbon dioxide from automobile exhaust is the single biggest contributor to global warming, which is a

severe threat to quite a lot of our Ocean State.²

Increasing highway capacity is obviously not going to do anything to solve the environmental threats to our state from auto exhaust, but it is unlikely to be a viable option to solve these other problems for three reasons, financial, political and practical.

Financial Highway expansion is very expensive, and the RI Department of Transportation (RIDOT) is tapped out. Financial mismanagement over the past two decades have left the department strapped and needing to borrow for routine expenses, like maintenance of roads and bridges. Furthermore, construction of four big projects—the I-195 bridge, the highway and rail to Quonset and the Sakonnet River Bridge—have forced RIDOT to borrow a tremendous amount of additional money over the past three years, pledging many years of future federal highway funds to repay it.

Political Highway construction is always controversial. Adding lanes to I-95, for example, would require taking land from powerful (or popular) landowners, such as the Diocese of Providence and the Roger Williams Park Zoo. The Providence Place Mall, and the condominium projects along Promenade Street in Providence would also be affected. What's more, Rhode Island is not in compliance with federal air quality regulations, which would by themselves forbid further highway expansion.

Practical The most important reason that adding capacity to our highways will not solve the problem is simply that it will not solve the problem. Five decades of experience with building ever-wider interstate highways has demonstrated beyond doubt that traffic will always tend to grow beyond the capacity of the available highways, no matter how large they are. A new road invites more people to use it, apparently.

²And of course there's also the correlation between the wasteful use of oil here at home and blood spilt in the Middle East. But space limitations require we put off an analysis of RIPTA's geo-political implications until another time.

Our congestion problem is not limited to interstates. The biggest increase in traffic over the past decade has been on our non-interstate highways like Rt 4 in South County and secondary urban roads like Broadway or Blackstone Boulevard in Providence. On these roads, traffic is up by a half since 1995.

To its credit, RIDOT acknowledges this reality, and have been seeking other ways to increase highway capacity. The information display signs you see on the interstates are an example. These signs tell you whether heavy traffic is ahead, or might be avoided by taking an alternate route (though they sometimes only tell you that you are already in traffic). RIDOT planners and other state policy makers have surveyed the issue and declared that buses are a crucial part of the solution. You can ask anyone at the state house, and they'll all say the same thing: buses are crucial to improving air quality and managing congestion in our state. And yet, RIPTA still totters along, constantly skirt-

ing bankruptcy.³ Rather than helping RIPTA improve service—and its bottom line—many identifiable state laws, regulations and

policies continue to work against the agency, preventing bus service in Rhode Island from becoming any better than it is, and guaranteeing a slow spiral down for mass transit in our state.

But there are steps we can take, and they are worth taking. RIPTA recently conducted a survey of non-riders to see what kinds of improvements would persuade people to take the bus. What they learned is that RIPTA only reaches a very small percentage of the people who want to take the bus.⁴ Though there are also a sizeable number

RIPTA only reaches a small percentage of people who want to take the bus. In other words, small improvements can reap big rewards.

³Constantly. Articles in the Providence Journal: December 19, 2006, pB-1, "As ridership rises, RIPTA strains to meet demand"; March 15, 2005, pB-1, "RIPTA suggests cutting 53 routes"; October 23, 2003, pB-1, "Cicilline rips proposed cuts in bus service"; August 11, 2002, pA-1, "Highways, bridges, RIPTA face crisis"... this continues back to (and beyond) July 27, 1988, pA-1, "RIPTA plans cuts in service".

⁴RIPTA non-ridership survey, 2006.

of people in Rhode Island who will never get on a bus, there is plenty of demand for RIPTA's services, if only we can get the obstacles to good service out of the way. The good news is that many of the things that we should do to help RIPTA will also have good effects on air pollution, traffic congestion and state and municipal budgets.

1.1 Governance

One important obstacle to improving service is noted in the accompanying box. RIPTA was created as a standalone agency, and not a department of the state. This means that RIPTA's bottom line is hung out on display for all to see in a way that is not true of a state department. A state department like RIDOT does not service its own debt, which is accounted centrally in the budget. Neither does it have its own personnel department, nor its own liability insurance, nor its own payroll service, among much more. These are all central services, provided by branches of the Department of Administration.

Most important, few departments of state government are responsible for their own revenue,

RIPTA is responsible for its cash flow in ways that few other state agencies are.

and so no one talks about whether or not some department is a net loss to the state.⁵ The division of state

government into different departments is a management convenience for public services, not an identification of revenue centers. We do not usually think of state departments as turning a profit or not. But RIPTA, by finding itself as a standalone agency, is constantly judged in exactly that way.

This is not to recommend that RIPTA ought to be a department of the state; there are some good reasons for remaining an independent agency, and some bad ones, too. On balance it's not clear whether service would be improved by becoming

⁵RIDOT is, in theory, funded by the gasoline tax, but the practical reality is very different. Some services and expenses due to RIDOT operations are spent out of other parts of the budget, such as general obligation debt service, which is accounted under the Department of Administration. In fiscal year 2007, this was almost \$40 million.

CTTransit Hartford

CTTransit Hartford runs the buses in and around Hartford. They have 229 buses, while RIPTA has 240. They have 46 routes in 27 towns, we have 58 routes in 38 towns. Their system is slightly smaller, but quite comparable. But when you look at the two systems' budgets, they are quite different. CTTransit Hartford gets by with \$37 million each year, with \$10.6 million from fares, and around 500 employees. RIPTA, on the other hand, eats up \$75 million and has 800 employees. What a scandal.

But unlike RIPTA, CTTransit Hartford is part of the state department of transportation. So unlike RIPTA, they do not do their own planning, they do not pay their own debt service and they do not pay their own insurance. (They also do not run a ferry, and they do not do paratransit service for the disabled.) If you look only at RIPTA bus operations and administration, which is essentially all that they are, we pay \$43.5 million to their \$37 million. That is, we pay around 17% more for a service with 26% more routes, and we do it with approximately the same number of buses. What's more, RIPTA buses earn much more in passenger revenue: \$20.3 million (and growing) to \$10.6 million (and declining). In other words, not a bad deal at all.

RIPTA, because it's a stand-alone agency, pays for all kinds of things that are simply absorbed by Connecticut DOT on behalf of their bus system. Taxpayers in the state of Connecticut still pay those costs, but they do not appear on the CTTransit Hartford bottom line. This is not a recommendation that RIPTA adopt the Connecticut model, but an observation that many comparisons between RIPTA and other agencies are flawed by differences in the governance.

a department. But when state policy makers are considering what to do about RIPTA's financial condition, they should remember that if RIPTA were a department of the state, its financial condition would be regarded very differently than it is as a free-standing agency. RIPTA is in the news when it faces a one- or two-million dollar shortfall. RIDOT increases state debt by at least \$30 million and costs the state an *additional* three or four million dollars of current revenue *every year*, and that never appears in the newspaper.

Chapter 2

Identifying the Obstacles?

RIPTA IS ESSENTIALLY the remains of the private bus companies that used to provide service around the state. Formed by the legislature in 1966, when the existing bus companies were on the verge of bankruptcy, RIPTA has grown modestly since then. Today RIPTA runs 58 bus routes as well as the statewide paratransit service, which provides transportation to the disabled. RIPTA owns a fleet of 240 regular buses, as well as 144 paratransit vans and a ferry, and carries roughly 22 million fares each year.

The problem is that 22 million fares is not enough to cover the costs of the service RIPTA provides. RIPTA's spent about \$90 million in fiscal 2006, and fares provide only about a third of that. Much of the rest is supposed to be made up by a few pennies of the gas tax. The reason for the shortfall are many: the ever-increasing

In order to make up its deficit, RIPTA must seek to increase the number of people it serves.

cost of health insurance for RIPTA employees, the rising cost of fuel, the skyrocketing demand for paratransit services, increases in pension contributions, and so on. Sensible state policy could—and should—reduce some of these expenses, but this report focuses on the other side of the equation: increasing revenue.¹

Unfortunately for RIPTA, the demand for its services is fairly elastic, resulting in sensitivity to

¹Pension reform has already reduced one, but the state has done little to reduce the cost of health insurance. The Governor's proposals to reduce the cost are largely only proposals to have employees shoulder more of it, which is not the same thing.

price increases. This means that the agency cannot make up operating deficits simply by raising prices. According to experience and survey information, a rise in prices will result in a fall in ridership that will counteract most if not all of the increased price, and the result will be even less money for operating expenses. *In order to make up its deficit, RIPTA must seek to increase the number of people it serves.* This, of course, is exactly what policy makers concerned about traffic congestion and air quality also want it to do.

But again, there are a wide array of state policies, regulations and laws that actively work against RIPTA, discouraging riders, and making better service elusive.

Apart from the financial, there are several significant obstacles to improving service by RIPTA:

- Pedestrian obstacles
- Automobile subsidies
- Sprawl
- Subsidies to sprawl
- Poor planning
- Funding municipal services

2.1 Pedestrian Obstacles

In many ways, making RIPTA more appealing is the same as improving the lot of pedestrians. When a rider descends from the bus, he or she becomes a pedestrian. (Or a bicyclist, for the people who use the bike racks.) In a sense, RIPTA is a set



NEW ARRIVALS
New Balance
MW901UTP
 Price: \$104.95



NEW ARRIVALS
Rockport Summits
Edge
 Price: \$109.95



NEW ARRIVALS
Rockport
Metroplex
 Price: \$99.95



NEW ARRIVALS
New Balance
MW901UBE
 Price: \$104.95

Walking shoes. As one expert puts it: what are shoes for if not for walking? The marketing of walking as a specialized activity, done at certain times and with certain equipment, is akin to the idea that walking is only to be done in certain “safe” places like village centers, maintained trails and shopping malls.

of pedestrian bridges from one place in the state to another.

There are some common experiences to trying to get around Rhode Island on foot. Traveling without a car in Rhode Island means committing to scrambling over berms and guard rails between bus stops and destinations, walking across four-lane streets with no crosswalks, wading across marshy median strips, climbing over unplowed sidewalks, and more. Bus stops are out by the road, with gargantuan parking lots to trek across before you get to the store. Standing next to the road in inclement weather means getting wet

To be a pedestrian in Rhode Island is to be a second-class citizen, constantly reminded that you are less important than citizens who drive.

drivers. And there is not a “walk” button in the state that perceptibly changes the light when you press it.

Bringing these experiences to officials’ attention is rarely productive. One is told that too few people walk to make it important (the very definition of a self-fulfilling prophecy) or that slowing down the traffic would make “people” wait, as if the pedestrians do not qualify as people. Putting in additional crosswalks is thought to create unnecessary traffic tie-ups and even though munici-

pal comprehensive plans may require commercial buildings to be next to the sidewalk, and therefore convenient to pedestrians, planning commissions and town councils seldom insist on these kinds of restrictions, and regularly trade them away for other amenities.. After all, few of *them* walk. In other words, to be a pedestrian in Rhode Island is to be a second-class citizen, constantly reminded that your safety and comfort are rated far behind those of your fellow citizens in cars.

Sometimes these problems are in the original designs—planners, especially the corporate variety, do not seem to have public transit in mind when they draw up their parking lots and industrial parks. Municipal planners in Rhode Island seem slightly more prepared to take the concerns of pedestrians and bus riders into account, but then planning boards and town councils do not always defend the plans, and sidewalks get traded away for height restrictions or concessions on some tax stabilization treaty. Without strong advocates to defend sidewalks, our built environment becomes slightly more hostile to pedestrians every day.

Examples abound. In North Kingstown, for example, there is a Home Depot and a Dunkin’ Donuts (both built within the past three years) right next to a RIPTA parking lot. To go from one to the other, you have to climb a berm and step over a guard rail while navigating around a drainage pond. It’s not clear how many people will ever want to walk from one parking lot to the other, but the planners who designed the Home Depot



Dunkin' Donuts, Ten Rod Road, North Kingstown. This is the view from the next-door RIPTA parking lot. To get from one to the other you have to climb the guard rail and skirt the drainage pond in the foreground. You can go around both to the left, but there is no walk, and you wind up in the drive-through lane. Clearly the planners involved in this project assumed the number of bus riders who might want coffee while they wait would be zero.

and Dunkin' Donuts lots clearly assumed that the number would never exceed zero, and now their lack of imagination is on display every morning as waiting bus riders step over the rail to get coffee, or use the Home Depot lot for overflow parking.

Making bus travel appealing is the same task as making foot travel appealing. But so long as no town in the state sees an advantage to planning

So long as no town in the state plans around the needs of pedestrians, travel by foot and by bus will remain disagreeable to many.

around the needs of pedestrians, travel by foot and by bus will remain a disagreeable prospect to many.

It occasionally happens that some

planning project is approved that contains mention of pedestrians. Village center plans, like in Wickford, Pawtuxet, Wakefield or Block Island will sometimes contain mention of pedestrian needs. But these mentions only serve to highlight the exclusions elsewhere. If state policy is really to reduce our reliance on oil, or to reduce pollution or alleviate congestion, then walking cannot be

confined to small pedestrian ghettos.

RIPTA's financial situation is of a piece with the rest of these concerns. Our state can afford to build new bridges for hundreds of millions of dollars, simply to replace old ones that were not maintained well, but buses have to struggle to maintain the existing level of service. The message is clear: the state has not valued this kind of transportation enough to make service excellent. Until this changes, walking and taking the bus will always seem the poor relation to driving, and persuading people to leave their cars will be more than just a matter of practicality, it will be a matter of status and safety. The psychic cost of mud-spattered trousers is worth a lot of \$4/gallon gasoline to some.

2.2 Automobile Subsidies

Automobile travel is a heavily subsidized form of transportation, but the subsidies are often hidden or unacknowledged. Drivers pay property taxes on their cars and tax on the gas they use, but the benefits received far outweigh the taxes paid. A variety



Wal-Mart, Post Road, Warwick. The planners of this store built a parking lot with lanes too narrow to be navigated by a bus. The bus stop shown overlooks the lot atop a four-foot retaining wall. Pedestrians must walk 75 yards away from the store (to the left in the picture) to get to an entrance they can negotiate. The fence behind the bus stop was put there by Wal-Mart in response to complaints about the inconvenience of scrambling down the wall. A staircase would have used up a valuable parking spot, after all.

of studies have looked at the issue, and estimates range from 3 to 7 dollars per gallon of gas.²

These are a few of the government subsidies received by cars and drivers.

Highway and Road Construction These are often thought of as “public goods,” while bus shelters, rail tracks and transit garages are thought of as “expenses of public transit.” In our state, RIDOT operations are largely funded with the gas tax, but the vast bulk of road construction is funded by federal taxes and state general revenue.³

Free Parking Lots Stores and corporations that provide free parking to customers and employees still pay property taxes on the park-

²See <http://www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/articles/subsidies.asp> for more information, and pointers to several such studies.

³The federal government matches most road construction at 80% or 90%, and the state provides the match with borrowed funds. The service on this debt (by far the largest of any state department) is paid through the Department of Administration.

ing lots, as well as snow clearing and other maintenance expenses. This is considered an ordinary business expense, whereas providing bus passes for employees is a “perk.”

Subsidized Parking Many large employers subsidize paid parking for their employees. (The state does this, for example.) There is a law on the state’s books that says that an employer who offers to subsidize parking for their employees must also offer a bus pass if the employee chooses. But the law is not widely publicized (even the state does not comply) and it’s not clear what effect it has.

Highway Patrol The most significant function of Rhode Island’s state police is to patrol the highways and enforce traffic laws to keep the traffic safe and moving.

Street Lighting Much street lighting is for public safety, but quite a bit of it is only for auto travel, especially on Rhode Island’s over-lit highways. Maintaining these lights and pay-

ing for the electricity is not a minor expense.

Zoning Regulations Urban zoning regulations that specify how much parking is required for a residential unit ensure that parking is never considered an “extra.”

Tax Deductions Parking receipts and standard mileage rates can be used to deduct car expenses from your income taxes. You cannot do the same with bus fare.

In addition to these, there are also more intangible subsidies. These include: the property values lost to road noise or to land taken for road construction; the uncompensated medical expenses of both traffic accidents and illnesses from pollution; losses from uninsured motorists; and the time lost to congestion.⁴

Except for highway construction, this list omits the many federal subsidies involved in defending supposedly friendly regimes in the Middle East, maintaining the strategic petroleum reserves and below-market mineral leases on federal lands and

⁴No list of ignored expenses would be complete without including the threat to billions of dollars of Rhode Island real estate due to rising sea levels from global warming. Automobile emissions are among the most significant sources of the greenhouse gases that cause the warming.

State Parking Policy

One of the surprising things about investigating our state’s public transit policy is that some of the organizations least helpful to RIPTA are departments of the state government. The state continues to send jobs out of Providence, to the Pastore Center in Cranston, for example, but also to the DMV in Pawtucket and other sites. The moves make it difficult or impossible for employees to commute via RIPTA.

The state has also refused to implement a bus pass exchange. In such an exchange, a business that provides subsidized parking for its employees must offer the employees a bus pass instead of the parking, if the employee chooses it. This is now *required by state law* for private businesses, and yet the Governor will not order the state to follow its own advice.

waters. These are also real costs paid by the federal government in order to keep the price of gasoline and other petroleum products down. They cannot be considered strictly subsidies to driving, since electricity is generated by oil, and the vast petrochemical industry is also dependent on oil. But they do keep the cost of gas down, at the federal expense, and that’s enough to count as a hidden subsidy.

2.3 Sprawl

Rhode Island’s population is roughly what it was decades ago, but we take up a great deal more room. From 1970 to 1995, Rhode Island’s population increased only 5%, but the developed land in our state increased by 47%. In terms of percentages of the whole, in 1970, 80% of the land in the state was not built upon. By 1995, that was down to 70%.⁵ The trend has almost certainly accelerated since then.

There are many complaints to make about the way our communities have sprawled across the landscape—loss of wild habitat, loss of farms, increasing traffic—but the biggest knock on suburban sprawl is

The biggest knock on suburban sprawl is just that it is wasteful, of land and infrastructure.

just that it is wasteful, and not only of land. For example, the gas company has a significant amount of money invested in the pipes that bring the gas to its customers. New customers who *do not* use the existing pipes may not earn money for the company, since it must invest in new pipes in order to serve those customers, and the added income may not meet the cost of expanding the service. As customers move from well-served neighborhoods to new suburban tracts, the gas company sees the likelihood of profit decline.

What is true of gas pipes is equally true of electric distribution, municipal services—and public transit. Rhode Island towns and companies have a substantial investment in the infrastructure to support these services, whether it is electric lines, fire

⁵Data from RI Statewide Planning.

department locations, elementary schools and bus routes. Few of these systems are operating at capacity, so when people and businesses choose to move away from that infrastructure, its capacity is wasted.

Getting to Work

A story in the August 18 Providence Journal highlighted how sprawl affects working with the unemployed in Woonsocket. The reporter spoke with Nancy Paradee of Family Resources Community Action:

The unemployed in Woonsocket and the surrounding area, Paradee and her staff explained, are especially hard hit by transportation problems. Removed from the greater Providence and West Bay areas, where most of the state's job growth has occurred over the last decade, those who do not have cars depend on RIPTA buses. These buses run about every 45 minutes. They do not run 24 hours a day or have full service on the weekends, making it difficult for job seekers to work at odd hours.

"Many employers don't realize it's a problem because the people who don't have transportation don't apply for many of the available jobs," Paradee said. "It keeps them from being able to compete with those who do have transportation."

No matter how much training and career help Family Resources Community Action, or other agencies, give those seeking employment, if job seekers cannot get to work they will not. Paradee said that she and her staff often see people desperate for work turn down jobs because they are not in their immediate area.

"Take the Bank of America call center in East Providence," said Nick Azzarone, a Family Resources Community Action staff member. "They are really recruiting, trying to get a lot of people. But to work there, if you live in Woonsocket, you have to take a bus to downtown Providence and then connect to East Providence. That's real dedication. And, if you miss a bus, you are going to miss your shift."

Some of the largest employers in Rhode Island – companies such as MetLife, Amica, Bank of America, Fidelity and a host of others – are located in areas that are difficult to get to without a car.



Behind Stop N' Shop, Frenchtown Road, North Kingstown. Note the makeshift ladder. The railroad tracks separate the shopping plaza from the neighborhood directly behind it. To get from the neighborhood to the stores in a legal fashion requires crossing the bridge a quarter-mile away and scrambling down a 20-foot berm. In other words, even if you make the effort to go around the tracks safely, you're still wading through the bushes on page 17 to do your shopping.

Whether it is the poetic yearning of the call to America's frontier, or the more prosaic longing to leave behind the noise and crime of the cities, the urge to move out to the country has always been present in America. When the IRT built a subway line from Manhattan out to the still-rural Bronx in the early part of the 20th century, there was a land rush on house lots around the terminal stations. Access to this land created a population surge and from 1900 to 1920, the population of the Bronx grew 265% while the rest of the city grew only

65%.⁶ It should have been a surprise to no one that the opening of interstate highways into the hearts of our cities would have the same effect.

Once the people began to move out of town, the businesses soon followed. Suburban malls, “big-box” retail stores and strip developments have replaced many businesses centrally located in villages and cities. Typically, but lamentably, these developments were accompanied by the creation of suburban office and industrial parks, an invention of planners who imagine that everyone has a car. These parks typically have *no* public transit access, and even if they had, it would take an enormous park (or a very specific schedule) to generate the demand for a bus route to serve them.⁷

⁶There are many good histories of the New York City subway at www.nycsubway.org.

⁷Plus, standard management practice dictates that many large businesses use staggered start times, with secretarial workers starting at one time, line workers at another time and

One important consequence of this spreading is that it is very difficult for people without a car to get to work (see box on page 16). Since, on average, it costs more than \$8,500 a year to own a car in Rhode Island⁸, our state has inadvertently set a minimum amount of money you must have in order to hold a job. A full-time job at the minimum wage provides only a bit more than \$13,000 per year, gross, so even with a well-below-average car, the transportation costs are a huge chunk of what can be earned by a low-wage job.

**People without cars often
can't get to work that will
hire them.**

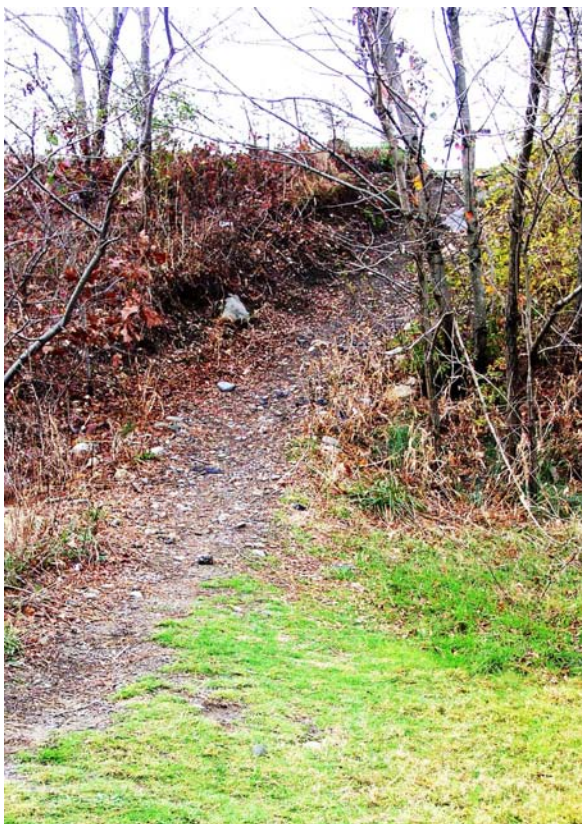
The important thing about sprawl to RIPTA is simply that where it was once possible to serve most needs with lines that run to and from Providence, this is no longer the case. This is no different from the gas company's position as people move away from its fixed investment. People these days need to get from Coventry to Warwick and from Lincoln to Smithfield as well as in and out of the capital city. A system that cannot help people get where they need to go will turn away not only new riders, but faithful ones as well.

2.4 Subsidies to Sprawl

Towns did not sprawl by accident. The pressure to sprawl might be as simple as a desire to live in pleasant surroundings, but the fact that sprawl happened, and happened in the way that it did, is largely the result of specific government actions (or inactions). The shape of our landscape is the result of dozens of different government policies, laws, and subsidies. It was government that built the highways that people used to commute into and out of the city, for example. It is also government that created two-acre residential zoning and mortgage subsidies. And it is government—in the form of our state's economic development agencies—that continues to encour-

executives at another time. The idea is to avoid traffic problems in the parking lots, but it also makes it very difficult to define a convenient bus schedule.

⁸Justin Weber, *The Cost of Driving*, <http://www.carprices.com> 2004



The only entrance from Post Road to the Frenchtown Road Stop N' Shop plaza. The number 14 bus delivers a store employee to this entrance every morning.

Suburban Quonset

A case study in government-fueled suburban development can be found right in North Kingstown, at the huge former Navy base at Quonset Point. Since the base was abandoned by the Navy in the 1970's, the state has attempted to develop it as an industrial park. There are plenty of vacant industrial buildings and land in Providence, Pawtucket, West Warwick and Woonsocket, but state policy was set around developing this vast tract. There are few compelling reasons to emphasize developing industrial land in North Kingstown over industrial land in Providence, and many compelling reasons not to, but Quonset is flat, well-served by transportation, and an easy sell to corporate executives. So instead of doing what was right, the state did what was easy, and the result is that Quonset is occupied by companies that have moved there from all over Rhode Island.

According to the Quonset/Davisville Management Corporation, in the last six years, no companies have moved to the park from out of state, but several have moved from other parts of the state. This may eventually redound to the advantage of North Kingstown, but what about Providence, Woonsocket, Cranston and West Warwick, where the companies came from?

age low-density commercial and industrial development miles from our urban centers: Fidelity and Dow (now Alexion) in Smithfield, and all the tenants at Quonset Point (see box, previous page).

All the subsidies to driving listed above can be counted as subsidies to sprawl, but here are just a few of the government policies that much more specifically encouraged the runaway land consumption of the past 50 years.

Inadequate impact fees The costs of new schools, fire stations, electric lines and water lines are seldom, if ever, borne by the people who choose to live in the new houses they are built to serve. Instead, that money is spread widely over the residents of the now-sprawling town. (Who then blame public employees for rising taxes.)

Mortgage subsidies Public policy in the United States is heavily weighted toward helping

people own their home. There are subsidized mortgages available to first-time buyers, as well as tax deductions on home mortgage interest. Widespread ownership is, on balance, a good thing, but it has its costs, too, and one of them is a large number of buyers looking for that snug little house on two acres of land. Condominiums and cluster zoning are relatively recent innovations in housing, and were primarily an urban phenomenon until recently, so new home buying was an incentive to sprawl.

Zoning regulations The original motivation of zoning was simply to protect property values. There is certainly value in that kind of government protection. But the practical reality of zoning regulation in town after town has been to create huge neighborhoods inaccessible to pedestrians because the distances are



Bald Hill Road, Warwick. Planners apparently did not anticipate that people would want to walk from Building 19 to W.B. Mason, but the well-beaten path tells us that they frequently do.

too great. Lots of suburban areas are pleasant enough to walk in, but apart from visiting neighbors, there is nowhere to walk *to*.

The government's actions are self-defeating here, since RIPTA is hardly the only government service whose delivery is hurt by sprawl. Social services are hurt when people live far from the nearest office, and public safety services become more complicated to provide when they have to be available in so many different places. It becomes harder to provide clean water when many people live near municipal wells and reservoirs. The demand to "improve" country roads (that is, to widen and straighten them) is created when the population on those roads is augmented by a battalion of commuters.

Until the government incentives to inefficient land use are identified and stopped, the trends to sprawl will continue unabated, and RIPTA's service woes will increase. The pressures on state and municipal budgets will continue to grow, too, as schools in densely populated areas empty out and new schools and fire stations are built in distant potato fields and forests.

2.5 Funding Municipal Services

In any discussion of the shortcomings and possibilities of land use planning in Rhode Island, the topic must inevitably return to the lurking presence of the property tax. The property tax in Rhode Island is high compared to many other states, and our reliance on it to fund our municipal services produces many of the less-than-optimal

The property tax drives bad planning decisions, and until towns do not rely so heavily on it, planning will suffer.

planning decisions we see. That is, in the face of flat or effectively declining funding from the state on one hand, and ever-rising costs on the other hand, towns are so desperate for funds that they routinely favor the short-term gain over the long-term benefit. Long-term, it may be important to protect watersheds, encourage density, and maintain open space. But in the short term there is a school budget to meet and po-



Providence. The future preferred entrance to the new high school on Adelaide Avenue. From the neighborhoods off Elmwood Avenue, cutting across the tracks here will save at least a half a mile's walk. Providence school policy is that transportation is only provided to HS students who live more than three miles away from school. The path here is well-worn, despite repeated attempts to block it with fences on both sides of the tracks. Tracks are dangerous and should not be crossed, but the school's site was obviously not chosen with easy pedestrian access in mind.

lice officers to pay. When Hopkinton weighs the possibility of big-box development within its borders, it puts its rural character on one side of the scale and raw dollars on the other. Is it any wonder that rural character often comes out the loser in these conflicts?

The same is true of suburban office and industrial parks, which promise property tax revenue to towns without the children to educate that come with an increase in residents. On the other side of the coin, high property taxes act as a disincentive to keeping land in farming, or keeping it open, and make the creation and maintenance of affordable housing difficult or impossible. In any town, the property tax makes wealthy elderly individuals more desirable than young families who may have children. It is a shame that our local governments are forced to create a disincentive for providing a

good quality of life for future generations.

When you talk to municipal planners in Rhode Island, they largely talk the talk of public transit. They attend conferences on planning transit-convenient towns, and are full of information

Our cities and towns are so desperate for property tax revenue that they are in no position to insist that private developers follow their plans.

about how to make this area or that one a more pedestrian-friendly site. When you go further and examine plans for this district or that transportation corridor, they can even be said to walk the walk. And yet, poorly planned roads and subdivisions continue to be built in our state. The reason why is not mysterious. The best-laid plans mean nothing without the will to enforce them. Our cities and towns are so desperate for property tax revenue that they are in no position to insist that private developers follow their plans. North Smithfield recently allowed

an enormous big-box development to be built, right on the border with Woonsocket—essentially a transgression of both towns' plans—for this reason.

Many municipalities do not even get as far as enacting the plan. Providence will soon be facing a glut of luxury condos that were all built without any requirement for building affordable housing, since the city was too afraid that such a requirement would turn away the investment, and therefore the property taxes.⁹

Taken as a whole, the property tax is not just a financial cost to be paid by homeowners. Our heavy reliance on the property tax subverts declared state policy on public transit, but also on air quality, congestion, water quality, land use, affordable housing, education and more. If state policy in these areas is to succeed at all, there must be a resolution to these dilemmas. One can make small feints at improving land-use planning and RIPTA's overall situation, but without addressing the root cause, they will remain without significant effect.

⁹See an interview with Thom Deller, Director of Planning in Providence, in *Rhode Island Policy Reporter*, issue 15, January 2006

Chapter 3

Overcoming the Obstacles

NONE OF THE OBSTACLES outlined in the previous chapter are insuperable, but together they are formidable. In the face of our problems with air pollution, congestion and energy use, abandoning public transit is not an option, but to find a way to make RIPTA better, we will need to get over decades of precedent.

In the early 1970's, Portland, Oregon, exchanged half a billion dollars in federal road-building money (see box) for real investments in transit. These were not half-way measures, cooked up out of money left over from road-building. This was investment of a size that would make a real difference, and was made *instead* of road projects that only cater to automobiles.

Making the kinds of changes that Portland made will not be an easy thing. But conversation about these changes is essentially a conversation about what kind of world we want to live in. Do we want

Do we want to live in a world where it's impossible to get a job without a car? If not, we'd better act now.

to live in a world where it's impossible to live and work without a car, and because of that it's impossible to reduce our dependence on imported oil, stop global warming, or meet our neighbors in frequent casual encounters as we walk around town? In a world like that, is it even possible to build enough roads to avoid spending huge amounts of time sitting in traffic jams? Can cars *ever* be made clean enough that the pollution from a billion of them is tolerable?

Portland's Story

Portland, Oregon, has a reputation as a progressive kind of place, where you would almost expect there to be resistance to building highways. But it certainly was not always that way. In the late 1960's, the Mount Hood freeway was planned to slice through central Portland, eliminating about 1700 homes. This was no different than the kind of violence done to cities across America, including Providence. The difference in Oregon was that a young City Council candidate named Neil Goldschmidt organized opposition to the freeway, and won election to the council that way. In defiance of the sitting City Council, the Chamber of Commerce, the *Oregonian* newspaper, and most of the rest of the movers and shakers in town,

Goldschmidt assembled an unlikely coalition of the poor, middle-class conservative city residents, and labor, who came aboard after it was clear that the highway money could be converted to other uses and would not be lost. Even then, it took some lucky breaks to defeat the project, in court and in the selection of the firm to do the newly required environmental impact statement. But it was defeated, and the construction that took its place created a transit mall in downtown Portland, satellite transit projects all over Portland's neighborhoods, and—far more important—became a source of pride to its population. Local activists date the beginning of the greening of Portland politics to the episode.^a

^aSee the Willamette Weekly, for example: <http://www.wweek.com/html/25-hwy.html>.



Brewery Parkade, Cranston. The bus stop in this commercial development is centrally located and convenient to all the stores. The bus had just left when this picture was taken, but the shopping carts testify to the activity. Service on this line is now routinely standing-room only, and by the end of each day there are usually dozens of carts around the bus stop.

3.1 Improving municipal planning

Rhode Island currently has a national model planning statute. The law says that:

- Cities and towns have to make comprehensive plans, and update them every five years;
- The state has to approve these plans to ensure that they do not conflict with state policy, or the plans of neighboring towns; and
- Municipal comprehensive plans have the force of law.

In some ways, this is an ideal situation to be in. Many states do not have anywhere near this kind of support for planning in their state laws. And yet, a conversation with RIPTA planners, or just a look out the window, will tell anyone that great planning laws do not necessarily mean great planning outcomes.

Municipal comprehensive plans currently have the force of law in Rhode Island, but the force of law is only meaningful when it's backed up by a realistic measure of enforcement and accountability, and in Rhode Island, there seldom is such

accountability. When a city council or planning commission is not willing to defend vigorously the plans their staff has created, who cares whether state law gives them that option? When a town's finances depend on the income from a wildly inappropriate commercial development, or on rezoning some agricultural land, is it any wonder that these manage to sneak through council votes by narrow margins?

Another challenge comes in the way that state oversight is conducted. The way the system works now is that the state gets plans after the town has approved them. The state planning office passes the plans around to state agencies for

Municipal plans should be made in cooperation with other towns and with state agencies, not just reviewed by the state after they're done.

review, and if there are objections, there is further correspondence with the town. This puts the various state departments and agencies in a position of only being able to review what's already been decided on. In effect, the state simply becomes a potential obstacle to plan approval.

A better way would be to allow departments to engage the cities and towns before local approval of the plan, and to be able to make suggestions about what shape the plans could take. Agencies like RIPTA (and the Department of Environmental Management and Health and Human Services and the rest) should not just be told what's in the plans and given the opportunity to vote yea or nay, which is currently how it works.

3.2 Improving corporate and institutional support of transit

Planning is not just a government function. Corporations and universities have planners, and make decisions that affect pedestrian access and public transit.

Planning Commercial shopping plazas and malls, office buildings and manufacturing facilities should all be built with transit in mind. The amenities necessary for transit are rarely a significant cost and the return on the investment can be significant. Imaginative executives at those corporations and universities can make tremendous contributions to the public welfare of our state by ensuring

UPass at Salve Regina and Providence

Both Salve Regina and Providence College have participated in the RIPTA UPass program for several years, and the program has been a great success at both. At Salve Regina, in the sixth year of the program, estimates show that the bus program is keeping more than 300 cars away from the campus.

At Providence College, planners estimate that students there took more than 175,000 trips on RIPTA buses last year. This is a lot of cars that are not on Smith Street any more, and RIPTA has had to add a few buses to serve the increased demand on the nearby bus routes. This, in turn, makes these routes more useful to other residents of the neighborhoods off Smith, and ridership from other residents is also up, provoking more service adjustments to accommodate the increased load, and so on.

that their contributions to the built environment make it easier or more appealing for their employees, customers or students to walk or ride the bus.

Location Obviously, preventing planning defects like the ones outlined in the illustrations is important. But planning a company's location is also crucial to being accessible to public services, including transit. A factory location in Coventry, while potentially convenient to the highway, will not be conducive to commuting in any way besides automobiles. The state could be a leader in this respect, but has largely chosen not to be. (And see the picture on page 19 for the outcome of some recent planning decisions in Providence.) For example, while it is important to provide state services to people who live in places besides Providence, for most state functions, there should be a strong presumption that the work will be in the state's capital city. The state has, to take just one example, recently moved the traffic court to suburban Cranston. This, of course, is a place where people whose permission to drive has been revoked commonly have to go. Similarly, corporations wishing to locate facilities in Rhode Island should, wherever practical, be steered toward the industrial core of the state—the part best served by transit—and not to the suburban or rural towns.

Transit passes The state and other employers can also help improve conditions on our roads by embracing employer-sponsored transit programs, such as offering bus passes to employees, or helping agencies organize car- and van-pools for commuters. State law¹ now requires companies with more than 50 employees to offer a bus pass to its employees in exchange for any parking subsidies they might offer.

The state itself does not comply with the law, which provides an obvious step toward improving compliance.

Colleges There are even more direct ways in

¹Rhode Island General Laws §35-5-7.1

which institutions like large employers and colleges can participate in encouraging transit use. Most of the colleges in Rhode Island, for example, participate in the UPass program, that allows students to use their college IDs as transit passes (see box). By their calculations, the expense of the program is more than offset by savings in avoiding further investments in parking and security. What's more, by increasing the ridership on the routes that serve the colleges, RIPTA is able to increase the number of buses that serve those routes. This, in turn, makes the routes easier to use for everyone, not just college students.

The state's public colleges do not participate in this program.

3.3 Changing how we fund our cities and towns

Time after time, when inquiring into the root of some poor planning decision, one meets with the same explanation: we did it this way because the town needs the money.

Rhode Island is suffering from an over-reliance on property taxes. But it's not just the tax that people pay that is the problem. It's also that this manner of funding towns causes all manner of mischief. In the endless quest to improve the financial stability of their town, land-use decisions are routinely subordinated to financial decisions. In many cases, the decision appears to be a conflict between sentiment and finance. So affordable housing suffers while big-box stores thrive. Open space suffers while new housing thrives. Farming suffers while unwalkable commercial strips thrive.

But even the amenities that would not cost a municipality a dime of tax revenue suffer when towns are so desperate that they fear chasing away development. By its very nature, demanding that

builders and developers adhere to town comprehensive plans requires risking that developers will simply decide not to comply and not to build. In order to enforce the regulations, a Mayor must be willing to run that risk. But in the current climate, where the state has retreated substantially from its commitment to fund schools, while at the same time health insurance and other costs continue to rise, this is asking more than one can expect of any elected official. A town has no incentive to plan better, because it will lose money by discouraging development. State policy encourages towns to rape their own land.

We now know, though, that these conflicts are not just sentiment versus finance. Indeed, they are better construed as long-term costs versus short-term revenue. When one of Rhode Island's suburban or rural town chooses to allow development of its potato fields, it incurs some long-term costs in exchange for the short-term shot of property tax revenue or impact

The conflicts are not between sentiment and finance, but between long-term costs and short-term revenue.

fees. That development will require water lines, police coverage, fire coverage, and will likely attract families whose children will need educating, and it's well documented that the revenue will not cover the costs. Similarly, when a city passes up the opportunity to require construction of affordable housing units, the housing market becomes a little bit more restrictive, and the future of the local economy becomes a bit more grim.

If Rhode Island is ever to find a way to reverse the damage wrought by fifty years of out-of-control growth and sprawl, and if we are ever to create an environment where transit *can* work—and increase the use of the infrastructure we already have—we must figure out some way to reduce our reliance on the property tax as a way to fund our government.

Chapter 4

Improving RIPTA Service

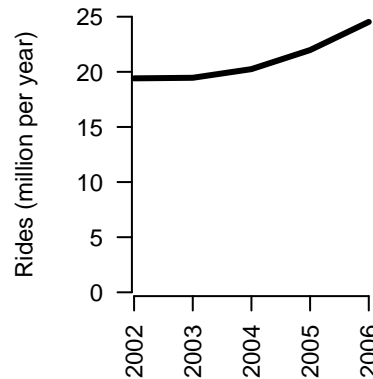
THE PLANNING CHANGES outlined in the previous section will require a sea change in attitudes about what kind of world we want to live in. They will require citizens to realize that the shape of their communities is less a product of some invisible hand than it is a result of some architect or planner in a room somewhere forgetting to take their needs into account. But these changes will take time.

In the meantime, there are service improvements that can be accomplished in the near term that will make RIPTA a more useful service to the people who use it already, as well as attracting those Rhode Islanders who would take the bus if they could.

They are arranged roughly in order of increasing cost, with the cheap and easy coming first, and the ambitious and expensive toward the end.

4.1 Improve service for those who already use the bus

The most obvious obstacle to improving service at RIPTA is simply financial. That is, the best way to increase the number of riders is to appeal to the ones who already ride the bus, by making the service more convenient to use. This would involve increasing the numbers of buses serving the heavily-used bus routes. RIPTA picked up about a million more passengers in 2005 than in 2004, and the advent of \$3 gas added almost 3 million more in 2006. Unfortunately, there has been little accommodation in the service. Some routes are consistently standing-room-only and others are routinely forced to pass people at bus stops without room to pick them up.



RIPTA ridership. RIPTA gave 11% more rides in fiscal year 2006 than in 2005. There was only an 8.5% increase from 2004, and 2004 saw a 4% increase over 2003. In other words, ridership is up by a quarter in just three years, but bus service is still on life-support.

The government management mantra of the last 20 years is that increasing service is to be done by increasing the “efficiency” of bus service. But this is a strategy with a mixed record of success. While it is certain that some inefficiencies can be found and eliminated, it is equally certain that this cannot be the whole solution. Some kinds of efficiencies are easy to endorse. Finding less expensive fuel or renegotiating work rules with drivers would be efficiencies that do not impact the level of service. However, RIPTA has been in fiscal trouble for several years, and its own managers have already sought and made many such changes. Schedules and contracts have already been adjusted to give drivers

Some kinds of efficiencies are good, but others are just cuts in service by another name.

fewer and shorter breaks now than they once had, for example. Many drivers now work split shifts, so that RIPTA does not have to pay them during low-demand times of day. To imagine that there are many more opportunities like this is not necessarily the best strategy.

Furthermore, what managers often mean by seeking efficiency is to examine which buses are full and add buses there and looking at what buses are empty and eliminating them. RIPTA has been doing this for several years, as well. The problem is that bus runs are linked in subtle ways. It's often the case that buses that are not filled or even patronized very often add to the utility of the buses that are used more often on the same route. For example, a bus route with many runs

Efficiency can be subtle: bus runs that are not heavily used may be crucial to the success of other runs.

during commuting hours, but no evening runs will be of limited use to people who occasionally have to work late. (Or even people who want to go out for a drink after work.) A later bus makes it possible for a person in this situation to use the earlier buses, even if he or she will rarely be seen on the late bus. An increase in the number and lateness of buses—to insure that no one risks getting stuck by missing the last bus—would go far to making these runs feasible to use, and increasing the number of riders on those lines. The same dynamic is true of middle-of-the-day buses, which reassure riders that they can get home quickly during the day if there is an emergency. Little-used buses can make other buses more useful.

Unfortunately, the converse is often true. Eliminating “underutilized” bus runs can have a tremendous impact on the full ones. If a bus route is rendered inconvenient by the loss of runs, ridership will decline, even if the buses that remain are the ones that are (or were) full. A vivid demonstration of this effect is apparent in this history of the number 14 line that serves East Greenwich and North Kingstown. Elimination of one less-frequented evening bus meant that the remaining bus was always completely full. For a while, immediately after the schedule change, the remain-

ing outbound afternoon bus was full to overflowing, and RIPTA would occasionally summon a second bus, but many riders simply stopped taking the bus, and now the multiple morning buses are no longer full, as they routinely were just a few years ago. In this way, a change intended to “increase efficiency” has acted to slash ridership, even though the impact on the schedule—cutting just one half-empty bus—seems minimal.

In other words, it “seeking efficiencies” has a different and more positive sound than “slashing service,” but they are often synonymous nonetheless.

4.2 Lower barriers to entry by others

RIPTA conducted a survey recently of Rhode Islanders’ attitudes towards the bus. The findings were that a large proportion of people cannot (or will not) take the bus, no matter what. But the survey also showed a tremendous potential for growth in ridership from people who want to take the bus, but cannot, for several reasons. According to this survey, the people who do ride the bus regularly are only a small proportion of the people who *want* to do so. If the system could expand to accommodate these potential riders, it could have a tremendous impact on the number of cars on the roads.

In addition to route and schedule changes that might be necessary to change people’s minds about the bus, there are a variety of what might be called barriers to entry that should be overcome, to make attracting new riders easier.

Put the bus schedules into a single book

RIPTA bus schedules are available as separate brochures for all the different lines. This is a very confusing way to deliver the information, and means that someone who is familiar with one line may not know how to get across town for an unusual errand. There are not so many bus lines that they cannot fit into a single schedule, and printing technology is available to make adjusting even a large document easy. Such a book could also contain the system route map, to make trip planning even easier.

Wider distribution of fare products RIPTA

passes are available in many supermarkets now, but these passes are used by people who are already committed riders. The day passes, or RIPTIK books, which are more likely to be used by casual or occasional riders, are only available at Kennedy Plaza. Making these more widely available would make it easier for people to experiment with the bus. Making them (and the regular passes) available by mail would also help, though this is most likely to be an aid to regular riders. It would be feasible to offer day passes or RIPTIK books by the drivers themselves, too.

Cleaning bus stops and park n' rides The suburban Park n' Rides are lonely places, filled with parked cars and not much else. That their bus shelters are also mostly filled with trash until it blows away helps attract no new riders. Repairs to the bus shelters happen very slowly, if they happen at all. Dirty and broken bus shelters send a very effective message to potential riders: go elsewhere.

Renumber lines This proposal sounds minor, but anything to reduce confusion on RIPTA lines will help improve the accessibility of the service to new and potential users. Currently, several lines run on several different routes, but using the same numbers. A bus marked 66 might stop at the airport, and it might not. Simply appending a suffix to the numbers to identify the different route variants—66A might go to the airport and 66B skip it, for example—will help people get on the right bus and avoid embarrassing and inconvenient mistakes.

4.3 Fare zones

RIPTA charges the same fare statewide. In many ways this is an acknowledgement of the reality of bus costs: the distance has very little to do with it. A 30-minute bus ride that only goes from Providence to Pawtucket costs almost as much to provide as a 30-minute bus ride from Providence to Bristol. Nonetheless, there are ways to change

RIPTA's fare structure to encourage riders. For example, not too long ago, the RIPTA trolley service was a low-cost way to shuttle from one side of downtown to another. The trolleys now cost the same as the regular buses. Restoring them to a low cost, or free would help people get around downtown, and would encourage ridership beyond the limits of the free zone by introducing people to the system who might not otherwise take advantage of the system.

Another way to do this might be to emulate Seattle. On that city's buses, the fare is zero in the downtown area. The way it is managed is that you pay your fare when you get on a bus headed for the downtown. For

buses headed out of town, you pay when you get off. RIPTA could adopt this model at minimal cost.

RIPTA can be made more inviting for new riders by measures that will improve service to faithful ones.

4.4 Late flex buses

Late buses can be expensive to establish, but it is possible in some regions of the state to have one bus or van serve several routes just to take people home. This would accommodate a few riders an evening, and would have the effect of making the other buses more appealing. Someone who works in Providence could have dinner after work, or work late, or see a movie or play, and still get home on the bus.

4.5 Bicycles

State transportation policy continues to treat bicycles as recreational devices rather than forms of transportation. The state has and maintains a delightful variety of bicycle trails, but these are not necessarily paths people can use to get to work or to a store. Federal transportation dollars are available to create bicycle lanes, and they have been extensively used in Rhode Island. Unfortunately, the way this is typically done is to declare some city street or state road part of the bicycle network, and

use that money to repave the street. Then the bicycle lane markings are forgotten or ignored, and the net result is a shiny repaved road, but no better access for bicycles. For example, Broadway in Providence is designated a bicycle route, and this was the source of funds for its last repaving. But try finding the bicycle lane indications.

With more bicycle paths, and marked bicycle lanes, bicycles have the potential to be an important part of the state's transportation network, but not until transportation planners take this possibility seriously. Like the pedestrian issues outlined in the first chapters of this report, what is needed

Bus Rapid Transit, bicycles and light rail should all become components of state transportation policy.

is for planners to assume that these improvements will become important, and to defend them against the town council members

who will question their utility. (After all, few of them ride bicycles.) If constructed and improved, facilities for bicycles create opportunities for people to seek alternate ways to get around. If they're not constructed because "people won't use them," then of course people won't use them and nothing will change.

4.6 Bus Rapid Transit

Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is a catchphrase that describes using buses to run point-to-point routes, as opposed to routes with many stops along the way. In many cities, BRT is a new idea, and can be an inexpensive way to increase the capacity of the transit system. Many BRT systems run on dedicated roadways, like Boston's new Silver Line MBTA route, built to provide more direct service to Logan airport. Other BRT systems run on regular roads, though some of those use special bus lanes. Some use stations like a subway station, where the fare is paid at the gate, and not when boarding the bus. Pittsburgh is making extensive use of BRT service, and Santa Monica has also recently established a BRT line, to serve its downtown.

In several important ways, BRT is not so different from service already offered by RIPTA.

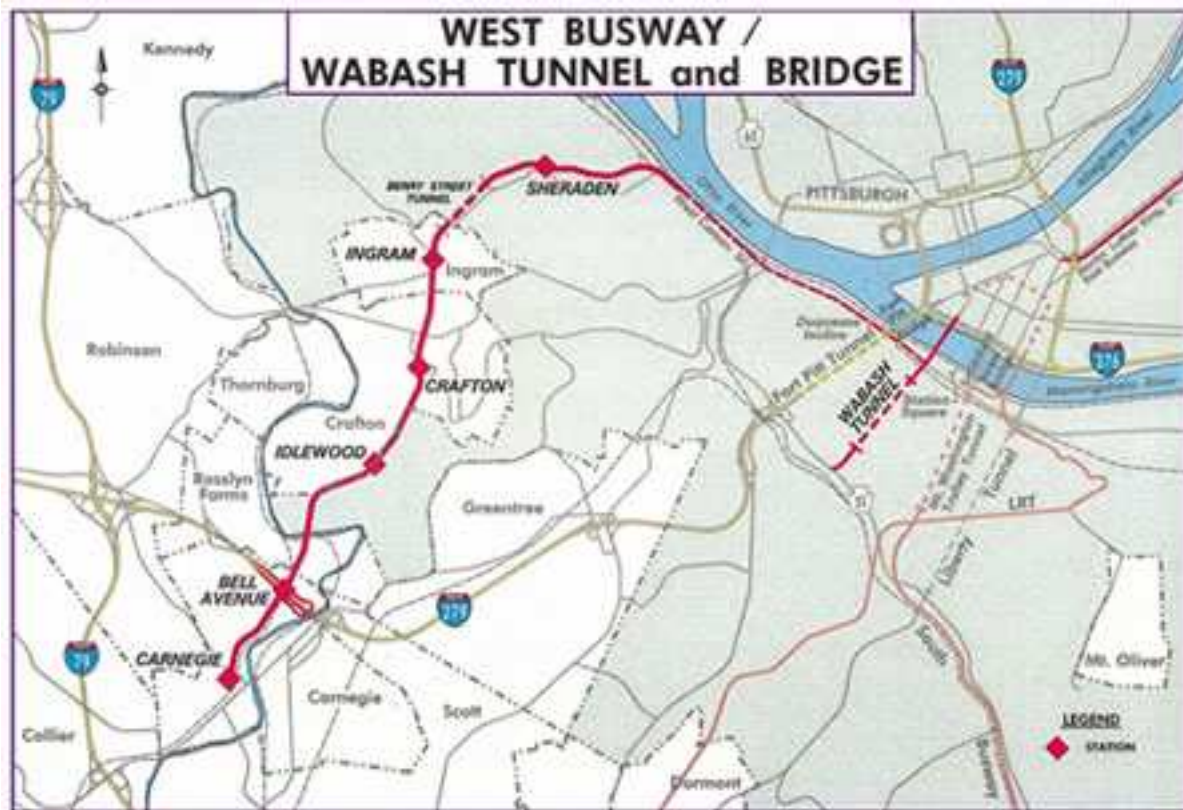
There are several suburban lines that operate point-to-point, such as the routes that serve the Park n' Rides in Warwick, Coventry and Westerly. These use the same roads as everyone else, but they run direct, without intermediate stops.

There are locations that would be well-served by point-to-point express buses, and it might be worth experimenting with some routes. For example, there are a tremendous number of state offices in Cranston, at the Pastore Center, which also houses a hospital and a homeless shelter, in addition to the new traffic court, where people who want to get their drivers licenses restored have to go. An express bus from this area to Providence would have a large potential ridership, particularly if it landed near the statehouse or the state office buildings on Smith Street. Other potential destinations might be some of the suburban industrial parks in the Blackstone Valley, or Quonset. Another way to use such a system would be to use it to link the "spokes" in RIPTA's routes, providing connections from one line to another. This might make it possible to get from, Warwick to Johnston without going into Providence, which is how it must be done now.

Another way in which BRT would improve ridership is by making the bus lines visible, even when they're not running. One of the advantages to a system like a light rail line is that the line itself is a signal that reliable transit exists here. People can make life decisions about where to move, confident that if they move near a rail line, some service will be there for them. To a lesser extent, bus shelters and park n' ride lots have a similar effect. These are, in effect, concrete manifestations of a promise to provide transit service into the future. To the extent that a BRT line involves dedicated stations and busways, it will show the same kind of promise, and result in similar decisions about where one can expect to find service in the future.

4.7 Commuter Rail

Rhode Island already has a substantial addition to its public transportation network in the planning phase. This is the expansion to the commuter rail that will come from opening new rail stations in Warwick and North Kingstown. Ser-



Pittsburgh Busway Map. In this BRT system, the bus travels on its own dedicated roadways for the solid lines, but on regular roads on the dashed lines. The stations are far apart, and service is fast, mimicking what would be available from a train.

vice to these stations will be a welcome addition to the state, but right now, neither station will appear in a pedestrian-friendly environment. The North Kingstown station will be within a quarter-mile of a relatively busy Park n' Ride lot, but there are no sidewalks or crosswalks between the two locations, and some very busy traffic to negotiate. The Airport station in Warwick will be on an existing bus line, but with all the attention paid to automobile access and connections to the airport, little has been said about making the station an easy one for buses to negotiate. The site is not tremendous, and pressure to use space for more parking instead of a bus stop will be substantial.

The other aspect of the proposed commuter rail line is that it will travel on the existing rail line. This is fortunate for you if you happen to live there, but will not help commuters in Lincoln, Cumberland or Bristol.

4.8 Light Rail and Streetcars

Light rail lines are a source of some controversy around the nation. Many cities have invested in the construction of such lines, and many have been quite successful. Light rail has the potential to be fast, clean and inexpensive to operate. Unfortunately, it is also relatively expensive to build. One of the nation's biggest light rail success stories was in Portland, Oregon, but the reason it was so successful had a great deal to do with the Metro planning authority there, which oversaw planning in a huge area surrounding the city. Without that kind of planning apparatus in place, Rhode Island would be taking a big risk to spend significant sums on this kind of transportation network.

On a smaller scale, there are two places in Providence where private developers are seeking the construction of light rail lines: down Valley street, and Allens Avenue. Depending on the source

of the financing for these projects, they have the potential to be useful additions to the city's transportation network. These projects are envisioned to be important features to neighborhood-wide development projects in those areas. They have the potential to create tremendous new value to the owners of property along the proposed routes. Therefore, the people who stand to benefit most from the project should be the ones who take the risk of construction. Any financing scheme that lets the operating or financing costs of these projects displace the operating or financing costs of RIPTA's normal operation must not be countenanced.

Chapter 5

Showing the Way

RHODE ISLAND'S TRANSPORTATION system is in a difficult situation. We have a tremendous amount of traffic on our existing roads, and there is very little we can do about it right now. This is so partly because land-use patterns make it unlikely that capacity expansions can improve traffic, but also because important federal policies like the Clean Air Act militate against this choice. Furthermore, the state has essentially exhausted its resources, even borrowing against future federal transportation dollars for road improvements that will not increase capacity very much at all. We simply cannot build our way out of the problems we're having.

What's more, our transportation system is very expensive. The list of hidden subsidies to automobile transportation shows that auto travel is among the most expensive ways to get people from here to there. With the advent of \$3-a-gallon gas, the expense is even more obvious, and it's no surprise that thousands of Rhode Islanders have sought alternate ways to get around, by getting on the bus.

All this is before you consider the threat to our state from potential rises in sea level due to global warming. Within our state alone, billions of dollars of real estate are at risk from this threat. Our nation, the single largest contributor of greenhouse gases on the planet, has a moral responsibility to act positively to reduce the production of these gases, and one of the most effective ways to do that is to reduce automobile travel.

This is to say that not only do we have a serious problem on our hands, but that the solution to that problem is within our grasp. To imagine that the problem we face is that the bus system's budget is not adequate to its need is to misunderstand

the issue entirely. The real issue is that a million Rhode Islanders need to get from here to there and back again each day, and we have chosen the most expensive, most polluting, most wasteful method to do so that could possibly be designed. But it does not have to be this way, and the tremendous increase in riders that RIPTA has experienced over the past few years shows us the way. Our state is at a juncture. On the one hand, we can choose to skimp

The demand for RIPTA's service has never been greater. That is, we have problems with traffic and pollution, but we have a solution, too, if we want one.

on public transportation, as we have been doing for a generation, and watch as the buses become a less and less useful form of transportation even while demand for transportation alternatives rises dramatically. Or we could seize the opportunity to expand the system's capacity, using the surge in demand to capture new riders and thereby keep many more cars from clogging up our roads and highways. That is the choice.

By judicious investments in RIPTA's capacity and a commitment to maintaining the buses as an important part of the state's transportation network, our state can lead the way and promote a cleaner, cheaper, and safer way to get around our state, saving money for our citizens, cleaning the air we breathe, and unclogging our roads. The choice could hardly be clearer.