

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

This article about an increase in mass-transit ridership incorrectly said transit officials estimate that 40,000 jobs would be created by 736 transit projects nationwide if federal money were made available. The correct number is 340,000 jobs.

New Ridership Record Shows U.S. Still Lured to Mass Transit

By Lena H. Sun
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Americans rode subways, buses and commuter railroads in record numbers in the third quarter of this year, even as gas prices dropped and unemployment rose. The 6.5 percent jump in transit ridership over the same period last year marks the largest quarterly increase in public transportation ridership in 25 years, according to a survey to be released today by the [American Public Transportation Association](#).

Ridership growth began hitting record levels last year and continued through the first and second quarters of this year, spurred in large part by gasoline prices that topped \$4 a gallon in July, the industry group said. But the third-quarter increase is notable, it said, because gas prices began falling and unemployment rose, trends that tend to drive ridership down.

Instead, ridership has gone up across the board nationwide. More than 2.8 billion trips were taken from July through September, rising 8.5 percent on light rail (streetcars), 7.2 percent on buses, 6.3 percent on commuter rail and 5.2 percent on subways.

"It's very rare to see when virtually every part of the country and every mode of transit is up," said APTA President William W. Millar. "As other costs in their lives have gone up, Americans are looking for ways to economize, and in most communities, transit is still a bargain."

Americans drove 4.4 percent less, or almost 11 billion fewer miles, in September compared with September 2007, the 11th straight month of declining driving, according to the [Federal Highway Administration](#). In early July, the national average price for a gallon of gas was \$4.11, but it fell steadily through the quarter, dropping to \$3.63 at the end of September.

Even though pump prices continue to plummet, transit officials said riders are sticking to buses and trains. Preliminary data for October show the upward trend continuing. In Los Angeles, rail ridership jumped nearly 17 percent in October compared with the same period last year. [Loudoun County](#)'s commuter bus ridership rose 25 percent in October over the previous year and more than 25 percent for the first 13 days of November from last year. The national average price for a gallon of gas was \$1.73 yesterday.

The trends are likely to boost support for more transit funds in the economic stimulus package that Congress will send to President-elect [Barack Obama](#). With the economy in a recession, Obama pledged Saturday to create the largest public works construction program since the building of the federal interstate highway system in the 1950s. The project is a key part of his plan to create or save 2.5 million jobs over the next two years, he said. Obama gave no cost estimate.

Democrats hope to send a spending package that could exceed \$500 billion to the [White House](#) by Jan. 20, when Obama takes office. At a meeting with Obama in Philadelphia last week, governors estimated there were \$136 billion in "ready-to-go" projects that go beyond traditional bridge and road repairs to include public transit, water and sewer plants.

For the longer term, Democrats also hope to increase funds dramatically for the country's five-year transportation spending plan that expires in September. Public transportation advocates say investing in transit creates jobs, reduces

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America's dependence on foreign oil and helps combat climate change, all goals of the incoming administration.

Despite ridership demand, severe budget deficits and declining sales and property tax revenues have already forced many transit agencies to raise fares and cut service. Dozens more are considering service reductions.

Fares and tolls in New York will increase 23 percent in July; severe cuts in bus and subway service are slated for spring. In Washington, Metro officials say they hope to maintain service levels next year by cutting other costs. Maryland officials are proposing reductions in MARC commuter train service and the fast-growing commuter bus service, effective Jan. 12. The Cleveland transit agency cut bus and rail service by 3 percent and raised fares 25 cents last month.

"We understand ridership demands are putting a strain on transit agencies, and their costs are going up and they don't have the money to add additional capacity," said Jim Berard, a spokesman for [Rep. James L. Oberstar \(D-Minn.\)](#), chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Transit officials have identified 736 ready-to-go projects nationwide, valued at \$12.2 billion, that would create more than 40,000 jobs if federal money is made available. An additional \$20 billion in improvement work could be ready in two years. The 90-day projects include 15 more rail cars for Virginia Railway Express, rail car parts and escalator canopies for Metro, and in Bakersfield, Calif., 24 new replacement buses. "We could have the bid package on the street in 30 days," said Karen King of Golden Empire Transit in Bakersfield.

Even if ridership slows as job losses grow, industry officials say a sizable portion of the population seems to have made the switch to transit. The breadth of change is most significant at bus agencies serving smaller communities, which have posted quarterly double-digit increases for about a year, Millar said.

"We've been watching these systems," he said. "You know something is really starting to change when you get these kinds of middle-class riders who thought they would never need the bus."

In the greater Lansing, Mich., area, the bus system carries about 50,000 riders on an average weekday, but the third-quarter increase was 14.5 percent, officials said. October ridership jumped 9 percent over the same month last year, the largest increase in the agency's 35-year history, according to chief executive Sandy Drago.

"We have seen ridership going up for the last couple of years pretty steadily, and we're in the car capital," she said. "We're seeing more briefcases in the last year and more people in business suits riding into downtown."

Even after fares rose to \$1.25 in the spring, Lansing residents voted last month to increase property taxes to boost transit funding.

Bus and rail officials say support for transit goes beyond ridership. On Election Day, voters passed 25 of 33 ballot initiatives to increase local and state taxes for public transportation. The communities included Jonesboro, Ark., Aspen, Colo., Greensboro, N.C. and Los Angeles.

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

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