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DUMP THE RHETORIC Transit's Misleading Public Relations Campaign

By Wendell Cox

Claims of transit ridership increases greater than autos rely on "apples to oranges" comparisons calculated from an unrepresentative base year. Calls to "Dump the Pump" and use transit to avoid higher gas prices are baseless rhetoric. The reality is transit is not available for most urban trips and cannot be made available at a price society can afford.

One thing a \$45 billion industry can afford is very expensive public relations. For years, the nation's transit industry --- which spends nearly five times per mile of travel as all public and private spending on automobiles¹ --- has pumped out press releases claiming that its growth rate is faster than that of automobiles (includes sport utility vehicles and light trucks). Now the industry is calling on the nation to "Dump the Pump" and ride transit on June 8, 2006.² In fact, despite the unprecedented increase in gasoline prices, transit *continues* to lose market share.

Spinning Transit Trends: "Spin" is critical in advertising, especially an objective description of the facts would convey an undesired message. The transit lobby claims that transit use has increased 25 percent over the past 10 years, compared to a smaller increase of 22 percent in driving. There are two problems with this.

The first problem is the choice of years. Ten years ago, in 1995, transit's ridership hit the lowest level in two decades and had dropped more than 10 percent since 1989. More than one-half of transit's gain since 1995 was simply recovering its losses from 1989.

The second problem is the choice of highway data. The transit lobby uses overall road travel data in its comparison, rather than urban road travel. This is inappropriate, since transit is an *urban* mode and does not provide service between urban areas. Since 1995, urban travel by car has increased 34 percent, well above the 25 percent increase reported by transit.

The reality is that even measured from 1995, transit's poorest year in decades, transit's urban market share has fallen seven percent. Now, approximately 1.6 percent of urban travel is on transit.³

¹ (<http://www.publicpurpose.com/ut-drvg1960.htm>)

² (<http://www.publictransportation.org/contact/stories/default.asp>)

³ (<http://www.publicpurpose.com/ut-usptshare45.htm>)

The Reality: Transit Still Losing: Spin as the transit lobby might, a more balanced look at the trends reveals an even dimmer picture. Over the past 20 years, transit ridership has increased 12 percent, while automobile use has increased nearly seven times as much, at 83 percent. Transit has gained, but urban car use has risen 175 times as much (See Figure 1). Transit's market share has fallen substantially.

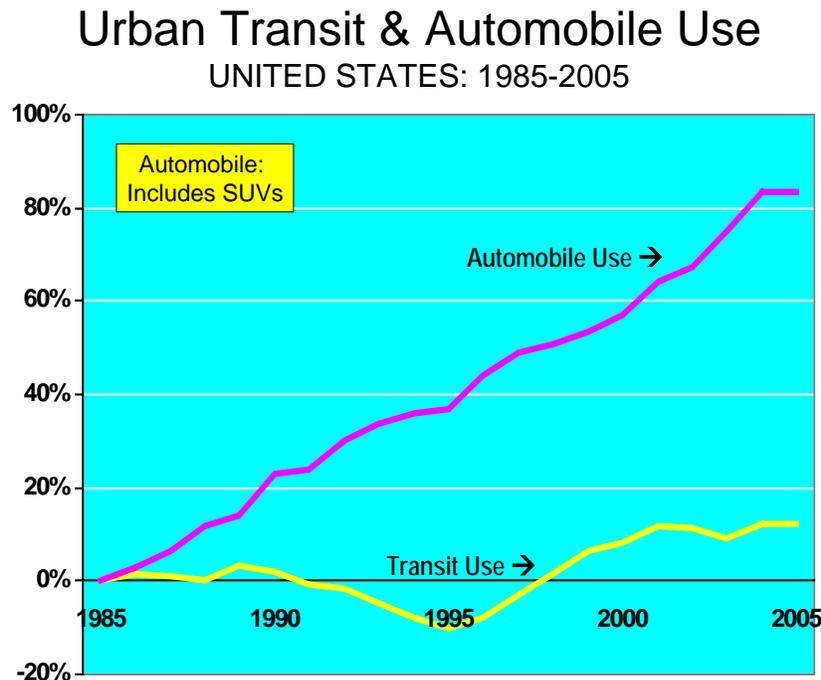


Figure 1

But what about using transit to avoid higher gas prices? Perhaps the transit lobby's "Dump the Pump" campaign is born of frustration that transit has not been the beneficiary of significant ridership increases as gas prices have risen. From 1999 to 2005, the average price of gasoline doubled in the United States, yet urban car use rose at double the transit ridership increase rate, and transit's market share *continued* to fall (See Figure 2).⁴

Transit is About Downtown: Why are so few people leaving their cars and getting on transit? Because it would be irrational. For most trips, transit is not an acceptable substitute for the automobile. Transit may be too slow, too inconvenient or, more often than not, transit simply does not go where people are going.

There are exceptions. There is no better way to get to Manhattan below 59th Street or the Chicago Loop than transit. And, people use transit to those destinations. The reality is, however, that the frequent, high quality service to downtowns with 2,000,000 jobs as in Manhattan or 500,000 as in downtown Chicago simply cannot be justified to much smaller downtown

⁴ (<http://www.publicpurpose.com/hwy-19992005gas.htm>)

Portland, Kansas City or Minneapolis, much less to the 90 percent of jobs located outside downtowns from New York to Phoenix and San Francisco.

The bottom line is that people will not abandon their cars to get on transit services that do not go where they are going. Not at any price. Transit does a good job of providing travel to the nation's largest downtown areas. But, as for a transit in the rest of the urban area, it would simply be too expensive to provide. Even the transit lobby offers no such vision, confining itself to empty platitudes. It's time to dump the rhetoric.

Urban Transit & Auto Use & Gas Prices

UNITED STATES: 1999-2005

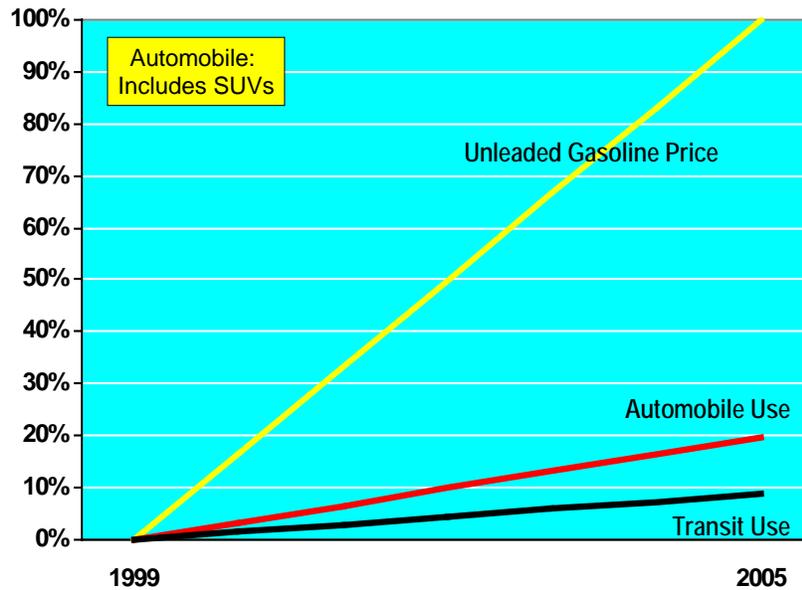


Figure 2