

DEMOGRAPHIA

THE ILLUSION OF TRANSPORTATION CHOICE: PORTLAND

A disproportionate share of people who commute on transit to non-downtown locations do not have access to cars. With less choice, low-income people without cars tend to walk further distances to access transit service. In some cases, walking for a longer distance could make it possible to avoid long transfer times and marginally reduce travel times. But for low-income people, there is little if any transit service to suburban locations that does not consume an inordinate amount of time. The situation is similar for low-income commuters to suburban locations in virtually every major metropolitan area.

Portland has led the nation in adoption of “smart growth” strategies. With respect to transportation, this has included building two light rail lines and substantial service expansions. Yet, commuting to work, especially to non-downtown locations, remains burdensome. The average outer area (suburban) job commute by transit¹ consumes the equivalent of nine 40 hour work weeks per year compared to the time required to commute by auto.

- Downtown jobs are accessible to an estimated 69 percent of residential locations in the service area at a travel time 1.5 times (50 percent more) than the automobile. By contrast, only nine percent of near-downtown jobs and three percent of the jobs outside the inner city are accessible by transit that takes 50 percent longer than car (Table).
- Downtown jobs are accessible to an estimated 78 percent of residential locations in the service area at a travel time 2.0 times (100 percent more) than the automobile. By contrast, only 35 percent of inner area (except downtown) jobs and 22 percent of outer area (suburban) jobs are accessible by transit that takes twice as long as an automobile.

In view of the extraordinary time required for commuting to non-downtown jobs by transit, it is not surprising that average incomes of non-downtown transit commuters is so much lower than average. To attract people with access to automobiles, transit service must be auto-competitive.

The Portland situation is better than average. As a smaller urban area, Portland is much less complex to serve than larger areas for transit.² In the larger urban areas that cover much more land area, it is much more difficult for transit to provide travel times that are practical, because of the longer distances that must be traveled. Further, Portland has a

¹ Outer area jobs are estimated at nearly 60 percent of the area labor market.

² This is not the result of “smart growth” policies. In 1990, the Portland urbanized area was approximately the average population density for areas with more than 1,000,000 population.

comparatively high level of transit service compared to the average for urban areas in the United States.³

Transit Access in Portland, Oregon					
Geographic Sector	Transit: Auto Travel Time Ratio	Average Number of Boardings ⁴ per Transit Trip	Jobs Accessible by Transit at Travel Times Relative to the Automobile		
			1.0	1.5	2.0
Downtown	1.46	1.6	0%	69%	78%
Outside Downtown	2.20	2.7	0%	4%	24%
Downtown & Outside	2.06	2.5	0%	17%	35%
Based upon a survey of job and residential locations and transit service in the Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District service area (2002). Methodology described in footnote. ⁵					

³ www.publicpurpose.com/ut-intlvmr.htm,

⁴ A boarding occurs each time a passenger enters a vehicle. For example, a transit trip that requires transferring from one bus to another or from a bus to a rail line would involve two boardings. In the present sample, up to four boardings would be required to complete a trip.

⁵ Based upon a sample of job (5) and residential (18) transit connections using the Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District Internet trip planner for travel February 26, 2002 (90 trip connections). It was assumed that the employee began work at 8:30 a.m. Automobile travel times for the same itineraries were obtained from the Microsoft *Streets and Trips* program and adjusted upward by 1.65, to reflect the Texas Transportation Institute Travel Time Index for Portland in 1999 (latest data available). The Travel Time Index estimates the amount of time a trip takes during peak travel periods compared to uncongested periods. Geographical job weightings were based upon 2000 US Census data. These data are from an ongoing research project and should be considered preliminary. It seems unlikely, however that more comprehensive data would yield substantially more favorable results for transit commuters to outside downtown jobs. It was assumed that both auto and transit commuters would arrive at the job location (parking lot or transit stop) five minutes in advance of the work start time. It was further assumed that downtown auto commuters would require an additional five minutes to reach the work location due to more remote parking requirements.