THE TAXI'S ROLE
IN URBAN AMERICA: TODAY AND TOMORROW

MARTIN WOHL
Professor of Transportation System Planning,
Carnegie-Mellon University

ABSTRACT

Changes in the economic and demographic characteristics of US cities over the past two decades have modified but have not diminished the need for extensive public transportation service in these areas. The vast bulk of trips to work, to shop, and for most other purposes within large American cities are still made by residents of those cities, a significant portion of whom do not own or have access to an automobile. Expensive and far-ranging programs to enhance surburban commutation to the central city by means of rail rapid transit do little to meet the needs of those who still must rely upon local, extensive service within the city.

One form of public transport — the taxicab — offers the quality and flexibility of service which even those of limited means find well worth the price. As a consequence, fleet taxicabs serve almost 40 percent more passengers than all US rapid transit systems and about 60 percent as many passengers as all bus transit systems. Removal of archaic and restrictive regulations governing the number and use of taxicabs in major US cities would promote more effective and widespread use of this, the only form of public transit that still operates — at a profit — without public subsidy.

Introduction

Conventionally, the urban transportation problem is viewed as that of reducing downtown traffic congestion, of improving suburban-to-downtown commuting, and of “getting people out of cars into transit”. The most talked about “solutions” for these problems invariably include: the construction or extension of suburban rapid transit lines, as well as subsidization of both new and existing facilities; transit fare reduction if not free transit; downtown auto bans; parking fee surcharges and congestion tolls for autos. But seldom is improved taxi service even placed on the list. And rarely does this kind of rhetoric get us more than heavy capital commitments for new or extended transit lines, new but still conventional buses or rail cars, and heavier transit deficits. Traffic congestion seems just as bad as ever; transit
service seems little better — at least for most urban dwellers — and the problems of pollution, noise, and energy consumption remain unabated.

What, then, is the urban transportation problem? And what role do and might taxicabs as well as the traditional transit forms play in it, both today and in the near future?

**Some Background Data on Population, Employment and Transit Usage**

To really understand the most critical aspects of the urban transportation problem — or, more properly, the set of problems — and in turn, the possible solutions, we need to start with a look at population, employment and travel patterns in and around downtowns, central cities and suburbs as they really are and have been.¹ In so doing, however, some myths will be exploded — and a common basis will be provided.

First, most people who work downtown in big US cities — and they are the prime customers of transit systems (especially those of the rail type) — live today where they always have lived, within the central city and not in the suburbs. In New York, for example, and even though its suburbs are blanketed with over 700 miles of commuter railroads (and 500 railroad stations), more than 80 percent of the people who work downtown (i.e., south of 61st Street in Manhattan) live in one of the five city boroughs rather than in the suburbs. In Chicago, whose suburbs are served by more than 400 miles of commuter railroads, roughly 75 percent of the people who work downtown live within 10 miles of the Loop. Similarly, in low density Washington, D.C., about 80 percent of the downtown workers live within six-miles of the core. (In both cases, the distances roughly correspond to the city limits in the two cities.) Also, these are not atypical cases.

Second, the pattern is similar for central city workers. Presently (and historically) they tend to live within the central city rather than commute from the suburbs. For the thirty-three largest metropolitan areas, about two-thirds of their central city workers live within the city limits. In New York City, the figure rises to almost 90 percent; in Chicago and Philadelphia,

---

¹ Cities (or, more specifically, “central cities”) refer to political subdivisions or jurisdictions which are incorporated as such. The city of New York, for example, includes the five boroughs of Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Richmond; by definition, this incorporated area is “the central city” of the New York metropolitan area, the remainder of which is “the suburbs”. The downtown area of a city, while arbitrarily defined, generally is intended to include only the most dense employment area within the city; usually, the terms “downtown” and “central business district” (or, CBD) are used interchangeably. In New York, for example, most analysts regard the portion of Manhattan below 61st Street as its downtown or CBD.