Issue: The 2016 election saw the passage of ballot measures to enable new transit investments in Atlanta, Indianapolis, Los Angeles and Seattle. But in Washington, D.C. and other cities, years of neglect of transit systems are burdening public officials with funding, safety and service challenges. Meanwhile, ride-hailing services are continuing to evolve to fill increasingly essential roles. As governments look to provide and enable all these mobility options, how do they ensure that successful communities are built around transit, that housing remains affordable and that those communities work for all their residents?

Transit investment was a big winner in the 2016 election, with voters approving significant ballot measures in Atlanta, Indianapolis, Los Angeles and Seattle that could dramatically reshape those communities in the years ahead. In all, 77 ballot measures were approved during 2016, which are expected to generate $170 billion in transit funding. It was part of a larger trend Smart Growth America President and CEO Geoff Anderson has been seeing for some time.

“Seventy percent of the ballot initiatives around transit passed (in 2016),” Anderson said at the Transportation for America (T4America) Capital Ideas II Conference in Sacramento in November. “That’s been consistent since the year 2000. I can point to dozens and dozens of places where leadership of all stripes has been advancing downtown revitalization, making sure that as revitalization happens we’re paying attention to displacement and making sure that the benefits of new investment are accruing to the people who have lived through hard times in neighborhoods.”

Anderson, who ran the Smart Growth program at Environmental Protection Agency during the George W. Bush administration, said it’s all part of a 20-year experiment to revamp the nation’s cities.

“It’s not perfect yet and there’s a lot of work still to do but I’d say there is a remarkable level of consensus out there among the American public for moving in this direction and that for me means that we’re going to need to continue working very hard at the local level, at the state level,” he said. “Transportation … is incredibly important not just as a vehicle of moving people back and forth but really as an opportunity to help people achieve the goals they have for their lives and to reshape and play a role in reshaping communities into the kind of communities that support the lifestyles and lives they want to live.”

**Atlanta’s MARTA Expansion**

The Atlanta region was one of the big winners on November 8. Voters in Atlanta and surrounding Fulton County approved a one-half cent sales tax increase that is expected to raise $2.5 billion over 40 years to pay for a new light rail line, a transit station, increased bus service and other upgrades to the MARTA transit system. It was all set in motion by Georgia’s 2015 transportation funding legislation and a 2016 follow-up bill that had an unlikely champion—House Speaker Pro-Tempore Jan Jones, who hails from the Atlanta region.

“She has not been a fan of MARTA,” said Jones’ colleague, Rep. Stacey Abrams, the Georgia House
Minority Leader, at the T4America conference. “She has not been a fan of public transit. But she saw what we were seeing, which is that companies were leaving suburban Atlanta to come in town because they needed millennials to be able to get to work. And after the third major company moved out of a major suburban area ... she recognized that we had to take an important step forward.”

Abrams said Georgia has significant divisions along party lines, along racial lines and along urban, suburban and rural lines that have exacerbated transportation challenges over the years.

“Georgia cannot survive if we continue to ignore all of those divisive issues,” she said. “Gwinnett County is the second largest county in the state. It is now a majority minority county. It is entirely suburban. It is almost landlocked. And the poverty that is growing in that county is because people literally cannot get to work, they cannot get out of the county. They have up to an hour-and-a-half commute. That’s if they have a car. If you’re waiting for the bus, God be with you. And so what I think we’ve created is a predicate for how going forward we can have a thoughtful conversation that is bipartisan in nature, that doesn’t ignore the challenges and the distinctions that come with being in the minority, whether it’s a racial minority or a political minority but recognizes that we all have the opportunity to work together to get the work done and I’m just very proud that I’ve had a chance to be a part of it.”

**Los Angeles’ Measure M**

A ballot measure approved in Los Angeles, Measure M, is expected to be even more transformative for a region that has come to be known for its nightmarish traffic. Voters approved the extension of an existing sales tax and an additional one-half cent increase that are expected to generate $120 billion in funding over 40 years that will allow for investments in rail, bus rapid transit, bike and pedestrian projects. For the City of Angels, it is a transit comeback story.

“Seventy-five or so years ago (the Los Angeles transit system)... had all been closed down,” noted Denny Zane, executive director of the advocacy group Move LA. “There had been a vast system prior to that and it was all closed down by the auto industry, the oil industry and the rubber industry. Now after Measure M, we are recreating this system and then some—a far more modern transportation system perhaps than any city in North America and that’s pretty extraordinary for a city that was a backwater of automobile industry hegemony.”

Zane believes Measure M was successful in November because voters liked the scope and vision of the plan for transit in Los Angeles.

“One of I think the most important lessons that we learned in Los Angeles County is that fortune favors the bold and in fact voters favor the bold,” he said. “That’s where you really are able to generate this sort of critical mass coalition and political resources to effectively advocate and where you can present a vision that will actually motivate voters beyond the high-propensity but tax-averse voters. So I would encourage people to think about perhaps if what they’ve been doing in the past has been to seek too little from the voters, to expect too little from them and that in fact if you were a bit more proactive, more aggressive, more system- rather than line-oriented, for example, that you might find the public more motivated to support it and I think easier to create a coalition around it.”

Advocates for Measure M said they were also able to attract votes by translating the $120 billion tax commitment into a number that was easier for voters to comprehend.

“It turns out this is less than 10 cents a day on average per person,” Zane said. “And so you say to folks ‘would you pay 10 cents a day for one of the most modern transportation systems in the world?’ It’s not even close. People go ‘yeah!’ Even conservatives go ‘yeah!’ In some ways, I think we’ve just
failed to translate these tax obligations into their real person-level impacts. ... People don’t see (10 cents a day) as very much. They see $120 billion as a lot.”

Aging Transit Systems Present Challenges

While many communities will be looking to use new transit dollars to expand service, some transit systems in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic are feeling the impact of years of chronic neglect.

“You should all feel free to use D.C. and the Metro system as the example of what not to do,” said Maryland State Delegate Brooke Lierman at the T4America conference. “There have been a couple of fatal crashes ... over the last few years mostly because of deferred maintenance. It has gotten so bad that the federal government has said ‘we’re going to take you over if you don't fix it.’ (The Metro) is funded by three different state governments so it’s impossible to hold anybody accountable. But right now they’re having to literally shut down entire lines to repair them over the next year or so and ... (it is causing) headaches ... for commuters from Virginia, D.C. and Maryland. ... I will tell you those state legislators are hearing about it every day ... and they are very engaged now on maintenance for the Metro system.”

A fire on the Metro last spring resulted in a 29-hour shutdown of the entire subway system and prompted a program called SafeTrack to perform maintenance on the system. But the frequent service disruptions and slowdowns have taken a significant toll on ridership. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, which runs the Metro system, reportedly has a $290 million budget gap. WMATA executives have proposed budget cuts that could result in less frequent service, more service cuts, higher fares and employee layoffs. Many believe additional federal support and perhaps a regional sales tax are needed to ensure the long-term health of the system.

Boston’s 120-year-old subway system, known as the T has also faced significant challenges. The Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority, which operates the T, has about $9 billion in debt and a maintenance backlog of over $7 billion. The transit system experienced more major mechanical breakdowns than most of the nation’s other transit systems in 2014. Last winter, the MBTA pulled the plug on late night T transit service.

Transit Agencies Partner With Rideshare Firms

As some cities have faced transit service cuts and other communities underserved by transit have sought to expand their reach, rideshare companies (also known as transportation network companies or TNCs) like Uber and Lyft have stepped in to fill an increasingly essential role. Among the examples:

- The Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority in Florida ran a six-month experiment during which they supplemented half the cost of an Uber rider’s trip up to $3 to or from a transit stop in a small, underserved part of the transit system.
- Joint marketing efforts in Philadelphia and North Carolina’s Research Triangle have encouraged commuters to connect to transit via Uber.
- D.C.’s Metro system is said to be looking at working with Uber and Lyft to pool services as they seek to permanently cancel late-night subway service.
- The MBTA has also looked to the ridesharing industry to fill in the gaps caused by service reductions.
- Transit agencies in Nashville, Summit, NJ, Centennial, CO, San Francisco, Atlanta, Dallas, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh and even rural Nebraska have either contracted with rideshare companies or have contemplated their role in filling transit gaps.

But many see problems with this trend. Among them:
If passengers abandon transit in favor of single occupant rides on Uber and Lyft, that could significantly contribute to traffic problems around the country.

Opponents of measures to increase funding for transit have used the proliferation and popularity of Uber and Lyft to argue that buses and rail are old technology that shouldn’t be supported with additional tax dollars. That was one of the arguments opponents used to defeat a referendum in Detroit that would have authorized a $4.6 billion plan to double regional investment in transit.

The rideshare companies themselves have even gotten into the act of kicking transit while it’s down. Uber got into some trouble in 2016 with the transportation policy community for running a print ad that showed a woman waiting for a subway train with the caption “You can’t miss an Uber.”

Several transit systems have also looked to defray the costs of providing paratransit services for the disabled by partnering with Uber and Lyft. But disability advocates and others note that the ridesharing services have faced criticism over the accessibility of their vehicles and the competence and ability of drivers to accommodate disabled riders. “I think this is extremely important as public agencies are looking to lower their service costs by signing on through contracts with TNCs (that they make) sure these drivers know how to lift individuals if they need assistance getting in and out of the vehicle, how to do that properly without hurting the individual passenger or themselves,” Jana Lynott of AARP told me in an interview for Capitol Ideas last year.

Transit agencies, state and local government officials and others will have to carefully weigh all these issues in 2017 and beyond as they seek to best serve a traveling public increasingly seeking multimodal mobility.

Further Reading & Resources

Transit Ballot Measures


Public Transit


Pennsylvania: “Repeal Pennsylvania’s Act 44: The transportation funding law threatens to bankrupt the turnpike or devastate mass transit, neither of which is a happy prospect,” [36] (opinion) Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. December 18, 2016.


“They Can Just Take an Uber: Cities across the country are cutting public transportation because they think ride-hailing services will fill the gap. They’ll regret it,” [39] Slate. December 14, 2016.


Transit-Oriented Development


Rideshare Companies


**Texas:** “Uber wants to return to Austin, spokesman says.” [70] The Texas Tribune. November 17, 2016.


“How cities can work with Uber and Lyft to create bigger, better transportation networks.” [76] Curbed. September 8, 2016.


**Texas:** “What happened in Austin after Uber and Lyft got up and left.” [82] CNBC. August 18, 2016.


Active Transportation


Impact of Trump Administration


Transportation & Communities

“Seattle Starts $21M Loan Fund to Promote Affordable Housing Near Transit,” [122] Next City.
December 14, 2016.

- **California:** “Sacramento asks developers to open wallets to keep city streets from clogging.” [125] Sacramento Bee. December 8, 2016.
- **Illinois:** “Chicago Housing Authority Gets New Affordable Housing Tool.” [133] Next City. October 26, 2016.
- “Affordable Transportation and Affordable Housing Need to Go Hand-in-Hand.” [137] Streetsblog, October 14, 2016.
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