



**ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND**

finding the ways that work

**Testimony of Andrew H. Darrell**

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**Before the**

**U.S. Senate Committee on Banking Housing and Urban Affairs**

**At the Oversight Hearing, “Strengthening the Ability of Public Transportation to  
Reduce Our Dependence on Foreign Oil”**

**September 9, 2008**

Good morning Chairman Dodd, Ranking Member Shelby and members of the committee.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Andrew Darrell. I am Vice President for Living Cities at Environmental Defense Fund\*.

It's no secret that over the past year, Americans have felt a powerful financial wallop from rising gas prices. At a time of economic uncertainty, high gas prices have raised the cost of driving to work, of the family vacation, of the simple act of driving to the grocery store. According to U.S. Public Interest Research Group, the average American family is now spending close to one hundred dollars a week on gasoline. Transportation is the second-largest household expense for the average American household, second only to shelter (and ahead of food).

As a result of high gas prices, Americans are driving less. According to the Federal Highway Administration's data, which has been gathered since 1942, the past year has brought the steepest decline in vehicle miles traveled ever recorded.<sup>1</sup> That's a steeper drop than even during the gas crisis of the 1970s. This is true across the country: rural interstate highways saw some of the biggest change; the Midwest, West and the South have seen sharper declines than the Northeast, and in June, driving was down nearly 8 percent in Alabama from a year ago.

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\* Environmental Defense Fund, a leading national nonprofit organization, represents more than 500,000 members. Since 1967, Environmental Defense Fund has linked science, economics, law and innovative private-sector partnerships to create breakthrough solutions to the most serious environmental problems. For more information, visit [www.edf.org](http://www.edf.org).

Some of this shift undoubtedly means less travel. But Americans are also turning to transit like never before – especially for essential trips like going to work. To this testimony, I am attaching a map that EDF produced using data from the National Transit Database that shows the many places across the country where transit ridership has jumped along with gas prices. This is a challenge for the whole country.

In the first quarter of 2008, public transit ridership rose by 88 million trips compared to 2007<sup>2</sup>. The following remarkable statistics have been reported in the media:

- A 42% rise in commuter rail use for South Florida in June 2008 versus 2007<sup>3</sup>
- Charlotte saw a 34% jump in transit ridership this February compared to last February<sup>4</sup> Some express bus routes are seeing gains as high as 70%<sup>5</sup>
- In Denver, ridership up 8% from last year, despite a fare increase and a slowing economy<sup>6</sup>
- In Austin, express bus service jumped 69% in July over last year<sup>7</sup>
- In Nashville, ridership is up 11% - a million more trips a year<sup>8</sup>
- In Minneapolis, June ridership was up 20% over last year and is the highest it's been in 25 years.<sup>9</sup>
- Ridership is up even in more rural Western states: For example, new records on Casper Wyoming's bus system this summer<sup>10</sup> up 23% from last year<sup>11</sup> 40% growth in Boise City's ValleyRide commuter buses<sup>12</sup>; and an 8% increase in Omaha's Metro Area Transit ridership over last year.<sup>13</sup>

- Express commuter bus in Denton County, a suburb of Dallas, saw a 53% increase in ridership this June versus last June – despite the fact that ridership is usually lower in the summer since the bus is typically used by students.<sup>14</sup>
- In my own hometown of New York City, there are over 300,000 more subway trips a day.<sup>15</sup>
- 9 out of the 10 most sprawling regions (according to Smart Growth America’s sprawl index), including Atlanta, Dallas, and Southern California, have seen transit ridership growth since last year.<sup>16</sup>

These trends reveal a basic truth: Americans are looking for an affordable and sustainable ride to work. The question is: is government prepared to meet that demand?

Americans are making the sustainable choice: but are our transit networks ready?

Without federal help, they cannot be.

The answer so far is that transit networks are struggling. Yes, an increase in ridership can mean more revenue from the fare box. But that revenue can barely keep up with increased operating costs. After all, bus networks feel the pinch from increased diesel prices too.

Transit systems are clearly struggling with significant budget gap:

Minneapolis: \$15 million<sup>17</sup>, Nashville: \$3 million<sup>18</sup>, Charlotte: \$4 million<sup>19</sup>, South Florida: \$18 million<sup>20</sup>, Denver: \$19 million<sup>21</sup>, Seattle: \$70 million<sup>22</sup>.

And those increased revenues are certainly not enough to allow for capital investment in expansion. When Americans turn to their transit networks, they should be able to find enough buses, enough light rail cars, enough subway cars to meet the demand.

From the point of view of public health, air quality and the environment, this turn to transit is a good thing. The transportation sector accounts for 30% of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions, and in many large metropolitan areas, over 70% of the added air cancer risk comes from traffic. The worse the traffic, the more severe the problem: a car in stop-and-go traffic can emit three times the pollution of one moving freely. More than 30 peer-reviewed scientific studies confirm that exposure to traffic pollution is linked to a wide range of disease, from asthma attacks to heart disease, stunted childhood lung development, cancer – even lowered IQ in children.<sup>23</sup> Less driving means less traffic pollution, and less exposure to traffic pollution is essential to health and the environment.

Expanding transit is essential to reducing dependence on foreign oil. Two-thirds of oil in the United States goes to transportation, with the largest share consumed by cars and trucks.<sup>24</sup> Overall, the typical public transit rider consumes on average one half of the oil consumed by an automobile rider<sup>25</sup>, mainly because they can integrate transit use into their daily routine. Nationwide, public transportation saves our country over four billion gallons of fuel each year, which translates into billions of dollars in avoided gasoline costs.<sup>26</sup>

Expanding transit is also a wise economic investment. It brings jobs, from construction to installation, equipment manufacturing and operation. And it relieves congestion on the streets, making for a better business climate. Congestion, for example, costs New York City about \$13 billion a year in lost productivity, wasted time, and wasted fuel.<sup>27</sup>

The Metropolitan Planning Council in Chicago estimates that congestion annually costs that City over \$7 billion. According to their recently released report, for every hour a driver sits in stop and go rush hour traffic, he or she loses about \$15. Expanding transit can ease the gridlock on our streets.

Transit agencies are trying to innovate to create networks that fit the many different communities in our country. For example:

- In Charlotte, NC, a new light rail system opened last November with projected weekday ridership of 9,100. By April ridership reached 18,600 – surpassing its 2025 projections and already accounting for 20% of total system-wide trips.<sup>28</sup>
- In Kansas City, Missouri their new MAX BRT bus service cut trip times by 25% and now helps connect an estimated 150,000 jobs to the city<sup>29</sup>. The system is now being expanded to additional corridors, while ridership is on the rise, up 12% from last year.<sup>30</sup>
- In communities like Maplewood, New Jersey and Hialeah, Florida, van networks pick up suburban commuters on their local streets, dropping them off at the train station so that commuters traveling to job centers can save fuel by leaving their cars at home.<sup>31</sup>

- In Alabama, the city of Montgomery piloted 3 new bus routes in 2000. Today that system has expanded to 16 routes and services almost 400% more trips.<sup>32</sup> But demand continues to rise as driving plummets, with 8% fewer miles driven in June compared to last year.<sup>33</sup>
- In Chattanooga, Tennessee ridership is up 14% this year<sup>34</sup> as citizens choose from a variety of transit options: commuter bus routes complete with Wi-Fi and park-and-ride lots, free downtown shuttle buses with emissions-free electric engines, and on-demand vanpool servicing rural parts of Hamilton County.<sup>35</sup>
- In New York City, new Select Bus Service on crowded routes has shaved 20% off of travel times by using dedicated lanes, clean-fuel articulated buses and signal prioritization technology.<sup>36</sup>

Innovations like these make transit a practical alternative to high gas prices. After all, what better economic stimulus can there be than to offer Americans an affordable and sustainable ride to work?

This is why EDF is here today to ask for immediate federal help for our country's transit systems. When Americans turn to transit, we believe it is essential to meet them at the subway station, at the bus stop, at the light rail stop with good and expanded service. Across the country, transit systems are trying hard to do just that – but they need financial help to meet growing demand.

We urge immediate federal action to:

- **Provide emergency grants** to expand transit service to meet rising demand, for example by bringing new buses and rolling stock into the system quickly;
- **Support transit innovation** , for example through highly-efficient technologies, like light rail and bus-rapid-transit, that can deliver transit results in communities that do not have good access now;
- **Get the most out of existing networks**, by providing financial support to ease the backlog of maintenance needs and upgrading signalization and other technologies that allow transit systems to work more efficiently;
- **Expand access to transit**, for example by making transit easier to access from residential areas through local van pools or encouraging residential development near transit hubs; and
- **Invest in energy efficiency** of transit networks. A hybrid-electric transit bus, for example, uses far less fuel than a traditional diesel bus.

We ask you to act quickly to provide an infusion into transit networks this year. That will help Americans weather the surge in gas prices now.

America also needs a long term strategy. The upcoming reauthorization of the federal transportation bill provides a remarkable opportunity to provide one. In that reauthorization, we urge you to dramatically expand the resources available to cities and states ready to deliver clean transportation choices. Transit innovation, clean freight infrastructure and the best and most efficient technologies are essential not only for the environment, but also for America's future economic competitiveness.

Expanding transit now is just the right tonic to help get through tough economic times. It is also a key solution to tackle climate change, reduce dependence on foreign oil, and boost the economic competitiveness of our population centers.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

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