

Public Transit op-ed 12-06 (885 words)

By *Jim Carnes*

We don't expect Alabama drivers to carry a shovel and their own supply of asphalt for pothole repair. That's one thing we have governments for – to provide for the upkeep of the common good, such as roads and bridges, police and fire departments, health inspections and public schools. Why, then, do we expect Alabamians who don't drive to patch together their own transportation?

Every day, inadequate public transportation in our state keeps thousands of people from meeting basic needs. A small-town mom, for example, risks losing her factory job every time her car breaks down. An urban retiree who doesn't drive can't get to the dentist. As low-wage jobs shift to the suburbs, urban and rural workers face increasing transportation challenges. Without reliable rides, rural Medicaid patients miss essential evaluations and treatments.

Half a century after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the State of Alabama provides no public transportation funding. We're one of only 4 states – and the only one east of Colorado – that fail to do so. A 1952 amendment to Alabama's Constitution makes it illegal to use state gas tax and license fee revenues – a logical source of transit funds – for any purpose other than building and maintaining roads and bridges.

As in many other parts of the United States, owning and operating a private vehicle is a way of life in Alabama – only more so. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005 American Community Survey, Alabama leads the nation in drivers who commute alone – about 1.6 million people, or 83.9 percent of the state's workforce. Only about 211,000 residents, or 10.9 percent of workers, carpool with friends, family or co-workers. Less than ½ of 1 percent of Alabamians use public transportation to get to work. In fact, more Alabamians reported *walking* to work than taking public transit!

Even the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) recognizes the need for improved public transit. In 2000, the department commissioned the University Transportation Center of Alabama (UTCA) to conduct a public transit needs assessment. The report (available online under the keywords “Alabama Public Transportation Needs Assessment”) makes a clear case for reform. It found that several of the 27 rural transit providers in the state do not offer complete service in their areas. Almost 1.3 million rural Alabamians do not have access to public transit services. Three of the state's largest counties – Mobile, Montgomery and Tuscaloosa – have urban systems but no rural service. These counties account for 61 percent of the people without access to rural transit. Overall improvement of the system is hampered by the lack of a central driving force. The ALDOT-sponsored assessment concluded that the logical central driving force could be ALDOT's own Multimodal Bureau.

Yet ALDOT has consistently – and successfully – opposed efforts to release state funding for transit. Since the mid-1990s, local transportation advocates around Alabama have proposed a variety of plans for dedicating small portions of state gas tax and license fee revenue to public transportation. All attempts, including the most restrictive one – which

would have diverted a maximum of 2 percent of the \$486 million annual revenue – have failed. ALDOT has argued that it needs all existing revenues to maintain and expand the highway system.

Even without state funding, public transit is making a difference in many Alabama communities. Rural areas like Baldwin, Autauga and eight West Alabama counties benefit from on-demand programs. A few years ago, the City of Montgomery changed its bus system from on-demand-only to predominantly fixed-route service. Both types of systems have proven successful when good management is matched with communities' specific needs.

ALDOT-sponsored research points to a funding breakthrough. In its 2000 report, the University Transportation Center noted: "ALDOT recognizes that ... federal funds are insufficient to provide the high-quality transportation services it desires for Alabama citizens and is working to add state funds to the public transportation system."

If the Alabama Roadbuilders Association gets its wishes at the Legislature, an opportunity may soon be at hand. Roadbuilders executive director Billy Norrell is calling for new revenue for highways. He points out what most drivers already know – that congestion on Alabama's roadways is increasing at a startling rate. He also notes that highway construction costs are skyrocketing. It doesn't take much of a leap to realize that investment of state dollars in public transportation – which reduces congestion and saves asphalt, in addition to making life easier for commuters and the air cleaner for everyone – is part of the solution.

It's time to remember that ALDOT is no longer the Highway Department. The agency changed its name in 1993, and its Web site now displays the following mission statement: "To provide a safe, efficient, environmentally sound intermodal transportation system for all users, especially the taxpayers of Alabama. To also facilitate economic and social development and prosperity through the efficient movement of people and goods and to facilitate intermodal connections within Alabama. ALDOT must also demand excellence in transportation and to be involved in promoting adequate funding to promote and maintain Alabama's transportation infrastructure."

That statement covers a lot more transportation than just roads and bridges. Our state tax dollars should, too.

Jim Carnes is communications director at Arise Citizens' Policy Project.