



Modern light rail system provides transportation options in Houston, Texas.

## Building the Wheels of the Clean Energy Economy: Public Transportation for the 21st Century

*Every dollar taxpayers invest in public transportation generates \$6 or more in economic returns.<sup>1</sup>*

For more information, please contact **Deron Lovaas** at 202-289-2384 and visit his blog at [switchboard.nrdc.org](http://switchboard.nrdc.org)

In too many cities and towns across the nation, Americans are spending more time in their cars—and stuck in traffic—when traveling between home, work, and school. And they are paying dearly for it. In 2008 alone, drivers in the United States poured approximately half a trillion dollars into their tanks. This dangerous reliance on our vehicles, which keeps us addicted to oil and causes serious pollution, is a threat to our health, environment, and national security. Fortunately, developing a modern, efficient public transportation infrastructure will address each of these challenges by creating millions of needed jobs, reducing our reliance on foreign oil, combating global warming, and serving as the foundation of the clean energy economy.

### Early Support for Clean, Efficient Transportation

Nearly two decades ago, Congress enacted the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). This landmark bill rightly gave more funding and power to regions to fund transit options other than just highways, such as light rail, that would improve air quality and save energy. And while this law promoted more transit lines and bike paths—and even improved the compatibility between plans for clean air and plans for transportation—it did not do enough. For example, while a large new “Surface Transportation

Program” was set up such that funding could be “flexed” to purposes besides highway-building, just 13 percent of available funds were directed toward building mass transit between 1991 and 2006, with most states opting not to take advantage of this opportunity.

### Providing Transportation Options for the 21st Century

With the current law set to expire in September 2009, Congress will have the opportunity to pass legislation that will usher in a new set of public



[www.nrdc.org/policy](http://www.nrdc.org/policy)

October 2008

© Natural Resources Defense Council

## Building the Wheels of the Clean Energy Economy: Public Transportation for the 21st Century

transit systems and to connect our cities with rail lines as well as highways. Such legislation should include the necessary support, including major financial investment, for the deployment of available, cutting-edge technologies. In addition, the new law should support the next generation of transportation solutions here in America, including transit-oriented development and infrastructure with built-in bicycle and pedestrian access. In short, the time has come to move beyond the era of needlessly long commutes, unhealthy air, dangerous global warming, and skyrocketing fuel prices by making a massive investment in a balanced set of low-carbon transportation options.

### Linking Transportation and Smart Growth

Living close to the office or school is the best way to shorten your commute, thus saving time and money and reducing pollution and stress. Yet much of the housing development in recent decades has pushed the exact opposite, selling the idea that the best value comes from living in communities far from urban areas and public transportation systems. Missing in that equation is the cost of transportation: a two-adult household can save more than \$6,000 each year by using public transportation rather than relying on their own two cars.<sup>6</sup> Increasing the availability of affordable housing that is close to job centers, public transportation hubs, or both, can bring substantial savings for families and needed reductions in pollution for communities.

Visit [www.nrdc.org/smartgrowth](http://www.nrdc.org/smartgrowth) to learn more.

### Steps to a Cleaner, Greener, and Safer Transportation Future

As a founding member of Transportation for America—a growing coalition of developers, housing advocates, transportation experts, and conservation groups that is tired of business as usual—NRDC is focused on building the high-performance and highly efficient transportation system. Together we must adopt policies to:

- 1. Build to compete.** From rails, to buses, to bikes, America must retake the lead when it comes to transportation ingenuity and innovation.
- 2. Invest for a clean, green recovery.** There are rail and rapid bus projects in 78 metro areas across the country waiting and ready to go; investing in them can create almost 7 million good jobs.<sup>2</sup> In general, investment in public transportation creates 19 percent more jobs than new road or bridge projects.<sup>3</sup>
- 3. Fix what's broken.** A thorough infrastructure restoration program could generate nearly 15



#### How We Got (Stuck) Here

We have learned recently—and quite painfully—that a transportation investment strategy of over-reliance on road-building contributes to problems, such as suburban sprawl and exceedingly long driving commutes.

million good jobs and provide opportunities for expanding mass transit.<sup>4</sup>

**4. Stop wasteful spending.** State transportation departments in states such as Pennsylvania and Tennessee have taken the necessary step of scrapping ill-conceived road projects in recent years, saving taxpayer dollars that could be better used for forward-looking transportation projects.

**5. Save Americans money.** Building more public transportation will provide the option to skip costly trips to the gas station in favor of hopping on convenient commuter buses and trains. Further, public transportation already saves us 1.4 billion gallons of gasoline each year—the equivalent of 34 Middle Eastern supertankers.<sup>5</sup> More investment in public transportation will put money back into the American economy rather than into the coffers of unfriendly suppliers of oil.

<sup>1</sup> American Public Transportation Association, [www.apta.com/media/releases/050217communities\\_go.cfm](http://www.apta.com/media/releases/050217communities_go.cfm).

<sup>2</sup> Reconnecting America's Center for Transit-Oriented Development, *Realizing the Potential: Expanding Housing Opportunities Near Transit*, Federal Transit Administration and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Report CA-26-6004, 2007

<sup>3</sup> Sierra Club, 2004 Surface Transportation Policy Project study, [www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/report04/transit.asp](http://www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/report04/transit.asp).

<sup>4</sup> Surface Transportation Policy Partnership analysis of Federal Highways Administration JOBMOD computer model, developed in conjunction with Boston University and Battelle Memorial Institute, 2004.

<sup>5,6</sup> American Public Transportation Association (Prepared by ICF International), "Public Transportation and Petroleum Savings in the U.S.: Reducing Dependence on Oil," January 2007.