

Right Answer to the Wrong Question

What's the solution for a downtown street with more cars than it can handle? To many people, the problem is traffic congestion and the answer lies in how to relieve the traffic. Often the proposed solution is transit. After all, transit can move more people in the same amount of space, so that should reduce the number of cars on the road, and voila—fewer cars would mean less congestion. That's how many transit systems are sold to the public and to elected officials: Invest in transit to relieve traffic congestion.

Fortunately (yes, fortunately), it's not true. We can expect more from our transportation system than just limiting ourselves to the people already here—and moving some of them to transit so that those remaining can drive our main street as fast as they can. What we want is to help those people, and even more people, experience our communities' great places. In fact, we want as much demand as we can generate—it's the activity that we should be aiming for. Our transportation system should do everything it can to facilitate as many trips as it can.

To adapt a Yogi Berra-ism: Transit helps a downtown that is so congested nobody wants to go there anymore. Since the transit solution moves more people, more people can and will come—some by transit, as well as those in cars and others by active modes. The benefit is that travel times stay roughly the same but many more people get to come. If we're trying to solve congestion, the transit solution only works if we freeze the number of people coming downtown.

APA's motto is Making Great Communities Happen. To do that, we need active, vibrant land uses that are interesting to many different people. Take King Street in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, as an example. King Street has one moving lane in each direction serving a mix of dining, retail, private

offices, and the city's government center. During the street's most active times, traffic moves slowly, but it includes five bus and trolley routes that move many people even though the number of cars is unchanged. APA designated King Street as a Great Street in 2011, in part because of the way Alexandria answered the question of how best to support its main street: Use transit to accommodate more people over moving cars faster.

Let's start asking different questions. How does our transportation system help us create and sustain great places? Now transit becomes the right answer to the right question: It helps us to accommodate as many person-trips as possible. Transit adds capacity and increases the potential for more people to access places and circulate. Transit sends the message that we welcome more people to our most interesting districts. Transit supports our creation of vibrant, active places.

Unfortunately, when we cling to the "transit solves congestion" message, we are aiming at a problem we probably don't want to solve. At the same time, we've proposed a solution that, even though it solves the right problem, ends up underappreciated because we promoted the wrong expectations. And that—worst of all—breaks trust with the communities we serve.

The problem with a downtown street with more cars than it can handle is that more people can't come. So as planners, let's stop proposing transit as the answer to the question of how we relieve traffic congestion and start recognizing it as the answer to how we support our great places.



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