

Book Sheds New Light on U.S. Urban Transit

By Robert Poole, Jr.

Cliff Slater has written an eye-opening book about U.S. urban transit. Since I am one of a dozen or so people cited in the front of the book as having been helpful to him over the years on transportation questions, I will acknowledge being friends with Cliff since the early 1980s. This review is not based on friendship but on my estimation of the fresh light the book sheds on transit systems that are poised on the threshold of major changes.

Slater's book is titled *Transit: Its Growth, Decline, and Pending Demise* (Booklocker, 2024). The focus is almost entirely on U.S. transit, with occasional comparisons to transit in the United Kingdom. It's really two books in one. Parts I through IV are historical, covering transit growth (1831-1923), the automotive revolution to 1923, the roller coaster years 1923-1946, and turmoil (1946-1983). Those chapters tell a story of changes in technologies, from horsecars 1850-1885, to electric streetcars 1888-1923, and then on to motor buses and jitneys in the 1920s. A lot of this was familiar ground to me, having read books like *Streetcar Suburbs*, histories of the red car system in Los Angeles and the privately franchised subway companies in New York City.

Slater is a data maven, and the book includes 29 figures and 36 tables, drawn almost entirely from either federal data sources or from industry organizations such as the predecessor of today's American Public Transportation Association. The data clearly show that peacetime U.S. transit ridership (then mostly streetcars and some buses) peaked in 1926, and only grew again during World War II when gasoline was rationed and no new cars were being built. The data from the 1930s shows unequivocally that motor buses (as they were called then) were faster and less costly than streetcars and that buses were rapidly replacing streetcars until the start of the war. And once the war was over, transit ridership plunged and new generations of diesel buses continued replacing streetcars, for sound economic reasons.

Only when it comes to part V, called Renaissance, do we get serious policy questions along with increased data. This section tells the story of how Congress was persuaded that transit systems were failing and that federal aid to enable them to replace ancient streetcars would lead to a transit renaissance. Slater cites the arguments made by transportation economists John Meyer (Harvard and Yale), John Kain (Harvard), and Martin Wohl (Carnegie) in a 1962 book for the federal Office of Technology Assessment and in their highly regarded follow-up, *The Urban Transportation Problem* (1965). They had a decidedly different view from those who believed a transit renaissance would follow federal funding. They emphasized that suburbanization had already changed the role of traditional downtowns, and that flashy new transit could not bring it back. Slater cites quite a few other transportation economists such as Melvin Webber of the University of California, Berkeley, and George Hilton of UCLA, some of whom testified before congressional committees explaining why the envisioned transit renaissance was highly unlikely.

And, of course, Slater discusses and debunks the infamous 1974 Snell hearings, in which Senate staffer Bradford Snell set forth the idea that a conspiracy of General Motors and several other companies destroyed "more than 100 electric streetcar systems in cities." Slater's scholarly debunking of this legend was published in the journal *Transportation Quarterly* in 2003 and is

summarized in the book, following the detailed history of cities eagerly replacing run-down streetcars with faster, more flexible, and less expensive buses.

In Part V, Slater uses an array of detailed tables and figures to document how massive federal transit funding failed to restore pre-war central business districts and particularly failed “to get people out of their cars.” His numbers—all from federal sources—show that federally funded light rail and heavy rail systems cost a lot more than promised and, in most cases, delivered far less ridership. Some of the numbers in these tables, such as subsidies per boarding in different modes of transit will be news to even many well-informed transportation nerds. And as for large-scale heavy rail systems (like BART in San Francisco and the Red Line in Los Angeles) reducing congestion on their respective freeways, Slater cites urban planners’ making this impossible by approving huge increases in urban core density, which sparked enough additional auto commuting to offset any traffic reduction that heavy rail might have brought about.

I’ve only hit a few highlights of this eye-opening new book. I will close with a news note to me from the author. He says that Amazon is refusing to fill orders for the book from Hawaii, where Cliff lives, and where he has been an opponent of the \$5.3 billion 20-mile elevated rail project, still only 75% built since construction began in 2010 and now estimated to cost \$12.4 billion. There’s more about this online at cliffslater.com.