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Transit Access and Regional Coordination in Metropolitan Detroit

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Since peaking at 1.85 million residents in around 1950, Detroit's population has declined to less than three-quarters of a million in 2010.¹ Detroit has effectively traded population with its suburbs, with the regional population holding steady despite a rapid outflow of people from Detroit proper (see Figure 1). A trip to Detroit in March 2014 brought UCLA Urban Planning and Policy students face to face with the challenging environment Detroit citizens cope with. While the mostly low-income population that remains in Detroit requires adequate public transportation for job access and basic mobility, transit competes with all city services for extremely scarce resources. Furthermore, the city's mismanagement, coupled with a lack of regional integration, has catalyzed the deterioration of transit provisions. In addition to funding and management problems, Detroit area transit has two disjointed and dysfunctional systems, one for the city (DDOT) and one for the suburbs (SMART). Meaningfully improving the transit access of city residents will require a true regional transit operator, in turn requiring that Detroit and its suburbs learn to live and work together. Reflecting on our weeklong exploration of city neighborhoods, we evaluate the poor coordination between transit agencies in the Detroit region, and use census data and a city-to-suburb commuting example to illustrate the barriers transit users face in the current system.

Current State of Public Transit in Southeast Michigan

A long history of regional division is one of the most significant and frequently cited challenges facing Detroit as the city tries to get back on its feet. Almost everyone we spoke to on our trip—including local politicians, community organizers, and academics—cited public transportation as one of the city's biggest problems. Whether they directly acknowledged it or not, their complaints related to regional governance and the inability of transit agencies in Southeast Michigan to coordinate. Besides unreliable buses, these people spoke of the plight of Detroiters who were unable to reach jobs because of the two uncoordinated transit

¹ Detroit, City of. Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2012. <http://www.detroitmi.gov/Portals/0/docs/finance/CAFR/Final%202012%20Detroit%20Financial%20Statements.pdf>

providers. Many employment opportunities were perceived to be lost because, as goes the saying, “you can’t get there from here” in Detroit.

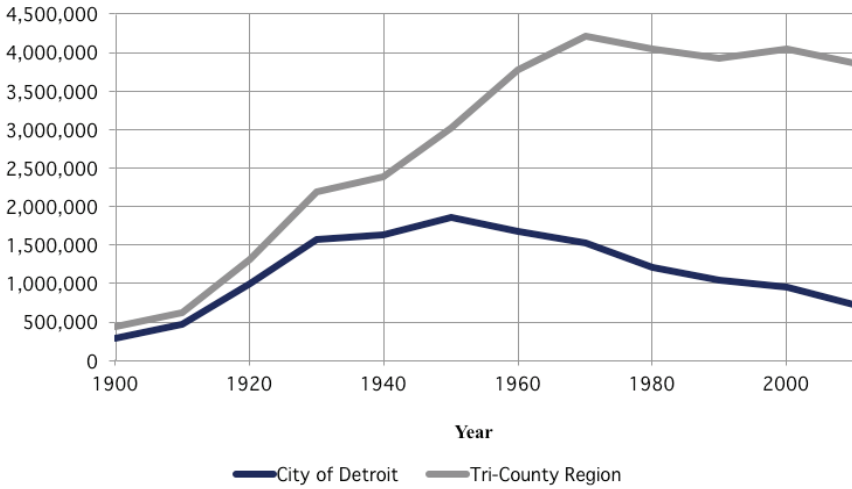


Figure 1. Southeast Michigan population statistics 1900-2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014)

Two separate and mostly uncoordinated agencies provide public transportation in the Detroit area. The Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT), the largest agency, provides service chiefly within the city itself. Funding challenges for DDOT have led to poorly maintained buses and service cuts at near-crisis levels in recent years, reducing the reliability of the bus system tremendously. This is well documented in the local news,² and we observed firsthand numerous bus stops with dozens of passengers waiting for buses in the cold for long-delayed routes. Another agency, the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART) serves almost exclusively suburban commuters with jobs downtown. The refusal to serve local stops in Detroit frustrates passengers who would benefit from the opportunities that integrated regional service would provide.

Meanwhile a third agency, the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) was created in 2012 after years of failed political attempts and a nudge from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA).³ One of the RTA’s tasks is to coordinate DDOT and SMART for truly regional service delivery. But why was it necessary to create a third agency to solve this problem rather than legislate and mandate for coordination? Despite SMART’s general manager being hired to serve as the chief executive officer for the RTA, the new leader resigned after just five months to return to SMART. By our visit in late March 2014, the RTA had been without a

² Huffpost Detroit. “Detroit Bus Service Cuts Take Effect, Frustrated Riders Voice Concerns.” March 5, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/02/detroit-bus-service-riders_n_1317218.html

³ Detroit Free Press. “John Hertel to Leave Regional Transit Authority CEO Post, Stick with SMART.” January 14, 2014. <http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2014301140044>

leader for months and had thus far failed to accomplish any sort of coordination. In concept, the RTA could be exactly what the region needs for transit solutions. In practice, the RTA has shown little progress in mending the rift between city and suburbs.

Perhaps the greatest challenge Detroit faces in repairing its transportation system is establishing a political incentive for organizations to overcome the massive financial gap between city and suburbs. In the absence of political pressure, the SMART system has a strong fiscal interest in avoiding costly service provision to a central city that cannot provide much additional revenue. While Detroit's recently elected Mayor Mike Duggan can be expected to champion Detroiters dependent on DDOT, what do the suburbs gain from unifying transit service?

Measurable Impacts of Deficient Regional Transit

The split between central city and suburban transit in Detroit is more than an abstract failure of regional unity. Given the ever-growing gap in economic prosperity between city and suburbs, as well as the widespread lack of car access within the city, the absence of a true regional transit system imposes enormous transportation burdens on the city's residents. Focusing on transit access to jobs, we can readily see the time costs that the disjointed transit system creates. Of the estimated 200,188 workers that lived in the city proper in 2012, over half (51%) traveled out of the city to reach their jobs. Despite high rates of carlessness (26% of Detroit's households didn't have access to a car), only 9% of total workers and 7% of workers commuting to suburban counties commuted via public transit. It should be no surprise, then, to see that transit commuters in Detroit face vast time barriers to reach their jobs, especially those with jobs in the suburbs. Among all Detroit transit commuters (both those staying within the city and those traveling elsewhere), the mean one-way travel time was 55 minutes, and about half of all transit commuters experienced times in excess of an hour.⁴

To make the challenges of reaching jobs through transit more concrete, we looked at the places where people work in the Osborn neighborhood in Detroit's east side, one area in which we interacted with community organizations (see the map in Figure 2). While the greatest spatial concentrations of employment are within Detroit proper—in the city's Downtown and Midtown neighborhoods, respectively—jobs held by neighborhood residents are scattered throughout the region. To assess how the split transit systems actually impede access to these jobs, we focused on four particularly dense suburban job centers—three malls and one business corridor—and examined transit schedule data between each of these job hotspots and an Osborn community center.

⁴ All figures from 2012 5-year American Community Survey.

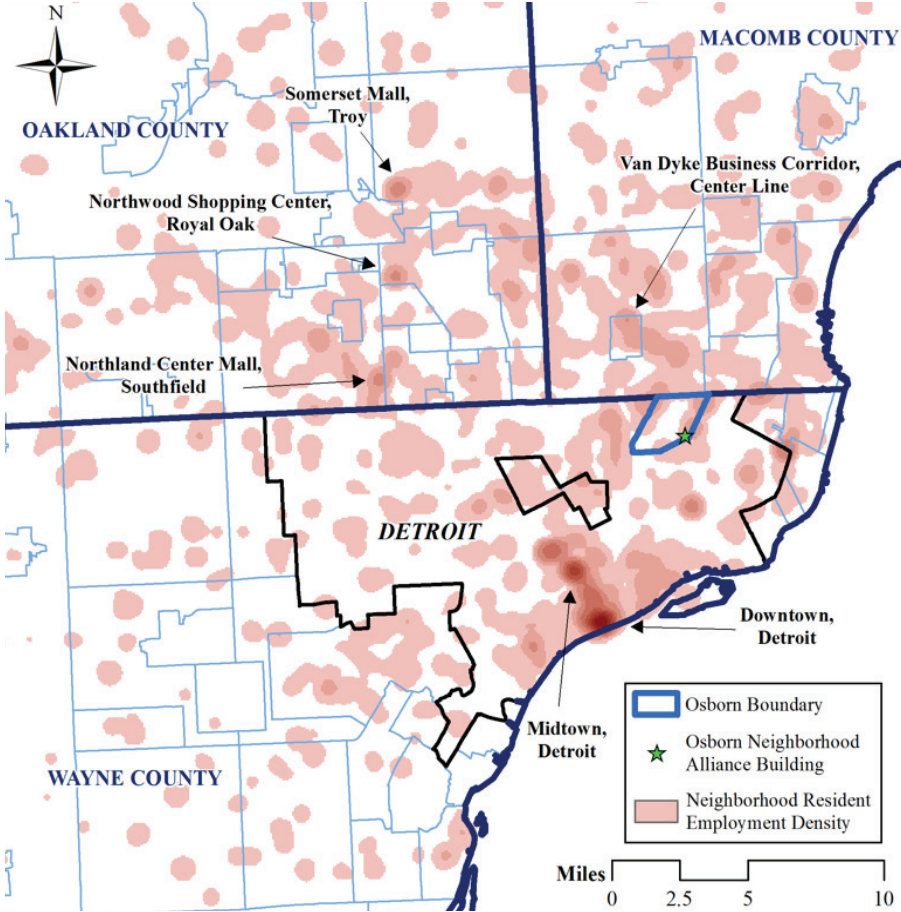


Figure 2. Employment density locations for residents of Detroit’s Osborn neighborhood [(LODES v7.0, U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 (<http://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/>))]

As shown in Table 1, bus travel to even the most commonly accessed suburban work locations is exceedingly burdensome for Osborn residents. With the exception of a mall in the inner-ring suburb of Southfield, all of the examined work trips require at least two transfers (i.e. three buses are required to make the trip), often with substantial waits. Additionally, each of the tested morning commutes takes over an hour, with trips to the densest suburban job cluster—the Somerset Mall in Troy—taking an hour and 41 minutes there and an hour and 55 minutes back. Finally, it is important to note that these trip times are based on route schedules—i.e., trips where all buses are running according to plan. With high numbers of transfers and relatively infrequent service, travelers are at great risk for experiencing unexpected delays. In the context of wage work, such unpredictable service may mean

the difference between holding a job and not. If Osborn is to be a viable neighborhood to which community leaders encourage Detroiters to relocate, it must have better transit access to existing job opportunities that are not dependent solely on Downtown and Midtown.

<i>Destination</i>	<i>Morning Commute Time</i>	<i>Morning # of Transfers</i>	<i>Evening Commute Time</i>	<i>Evening # of Transfers</i>
Somerset Mall, Troy	1h 41 min	2	1 h 55 min	2
Northwood Shopping Center, Royal Oak	1h 24 min	2	1 h 26 min	2
Northland Center Mall, Southfield	1h 7 min	1	1 h 14 min	1
Van Dyke Business Corridor, Center Line	1h 9 min	2	45 min	2

Table 1. Transit trip characteristics between Osborn community center and designated suburban employment centers [Google Maps transit travel directions (<https://www.google.com/maps/>)]

<i>Destination</i>	<i>Earliest Morning Arrival</i>	<i>Latest Evening Departure</i>	<i>Standard Drive Distance/Time</i>
Somerset Mall, Troy	6:56 AM	9:29 PM	18.8 mi / 26 min
Northwood Shopping Center, Royal Oak	7:52 AM	10:54 PM	14.8 mi / 25 min
Northland Center Mall, Southfield	5:43 AM	10:31 PM	13.0 mi / 22 min
Van Dyke Business Corridor, Center Line	7:37 AM	10:15 PM	6.1 mi / 12 min

Table 1 (cont'd). Transit trip characteristics between Osborn community center and designated suburban employment centers [Google Maps transit travel directions (<https://www.google.com/maps/>)]

Potential Ways to Improve Transit Access in Detroit

There are obvious ways to improve transit access in the Detroit region, such as coordinating DDOT and SMART routes and schedules, but these may remain pipe dreams without cogent and consistent leadership. Superficial coordination efforts exist, such as an interagency fare agreement, but these do nothing to resolve service segregation or poor quality. Meanwhile, placing a third agency (RTA) in the mix seems a less efficient approach than revisiting the legislation that separated the agencies decades ago. While agency coordination requires more than a state-level mandate to be effective, an agency tasked with providing regional transportation (rather than the current agencies' politically segmented service areas) would be a step in the right direction.

However, given Detroit's critical lack of resources and the city's increasingly sparse population, the best transit agency still could not possibly serve all users and destinations efficiently. A successful RTA should play a role in coordinating regional vanpools and other job access strategies to link Detroit residents with job centers both within the city and in the surrounding communities. Informal transit opportunities should be fostered among community organizations such as the Osborn Neighborhood Alliance. A strong network of para-transit service—coordinated with hospitals and health centers, retirement communities, schools, and other groups—could provide critical links to promote both physical and mental health. Nongovernmental, pop-up services like the Detroit Bus Company,⁵ which provides free transportation to and from after-school programs, are likewise valuable, but they would need to be scaled up dramatically to meaningfully fill gaps in transportation needs.

Above all else, the issues of regionalism and segregation need real resolution. A catalyst for regional coordination is necessary to make any progress in that arena. The city of Detroit itself is on the right path; getting streetlights back on, basic services restored, major streets paved, and buses on schedule will improve the city's reputation among its neighbors. Still, getting the suburbs interested in better coordination will be a far greater challenge, given decades of growing separation. With effort and advocacy from affected groups on both sides of Detroit's borders, and a great deal of patience, a regional transit system can help put everyone back on the path towards economic stability. ■

⁵ Brasuell, James. 2014. DIY bus company delivers badly needed transit service in Detroit. Planetizen, May 22. <http://www.planetizen.com/node/68922>