

JONATHAN BRAY



US cities are getting smart on growth

Experience in America has shown that smart growth can benefit public transport - but the trick is to help make great places

▶ Regrettably the word ‘smart’ may not automatically be the first word that springs to all readers’ minds in relation to the United States at present. But did you know that on the same day that Donald Trump failed to gain the votes of an overall majority of US voters a whole series of pro-transit plebiscites were won by thumping majorities?

Throughout the US last year, in 23 states and communities of all sizes, voters considered nearly \$200bn of local investment for public transport at the ballot box - with 70% of the proposals getting the majority they needed.

Most emblematically this included a ballot in the fabled freeway city of Los Angeles on ‘Measure M’, where 70% voted ‘yes’ to a permanent sales tax increase to fund a major expansion of the county’s public transit system. ‘Measure M’ will bring in \$860m annually for decades and will fund transportation projects which will dramatically transform the region, including a rail line to LAX airport as well as an expansion of LA’s light rail network.

Additionally, Measure M will pay for much-needed sidewalk improvements, pothole repairs, cycling infrastructure, bike share expansion, and a network of greenways. So what’s going on and why is this a good augury for public transport in the UK too?

The US benefits from having the excellent American Public Transportation Association (APTA) - a public transport trade body that knows the right research to do, the best way to articulate it - as well as how best to

share expertise and lobby at a level that’s several notches above the lowest common denominator. Our friends at APTA tell us that the revival of public transport in the US is all about the economy, stupid (a pithy pre-Twitter aphorism associated with a previous president that would have made a good tweet today!). America’s relative comparative advantage is research and development, technology application and innovation (like all those ‘Made in America’ delivery systems for addictive ‘digital sugar’ on your smartphone you will be checking shortly).

In fact, by 2040, 38% of America’s job growth and 50% of its GDP growth will be from the six broad industry groups often



associated with clustering in the United States. These companies want to cluster together because access to skilled workers and bright ideas are vital - and only a few areas have the right mix of people and investment. These companies thrive on workplace collaboration and social interaction. More freeways and car parks isn’t going to do it for them given how space hungry and atomising that approach is. Which is where public transport comes in - alongside an urban realm that people want to spend time in with good access on foot and by bike (of which more later). And there is a further reinforcing feedback loop too which benefits public transport.

In the old days if you wanted that job of your dreams you would have to move to where your employer was. In-demand millennial, tech-savvy, bright sparks do not have to relocate for their employers. The employers need to relocate to where the employees want to live. And what kind of places do these millennial knowledge workers want to live in? Disproportionately they favour neighbourhoods that are good to walk in - not good to park a car in. Cars that they see as an unnecessary burden - old school.

And here’s one more feedback loop for you - which perhaps is not quite such an unalloyed positive for public transport. The rejection of the traditional lifestyle of car ownership and car dependency (and the car-based urban landscapes that come with it) is not just something that these tech company employees embody in their daily lives and location decisions - they also are facilitating this lifestyle’s wider destruction on an epic and potentially massively profitable scale. Because this is where the Uber, Lyfts and other ‘mobility as a service’ behemoths of tomorrow are emerging from.

Of course not everybody in the US is a denizen of these hipster, tech enclaves. Out in the burbs, at the strip malls, on the rural plains and in the decaying rustbelt towns this other America isn’t feeling much of the trickledown from the tech bonanza. This could be one factor in the election of Donald Trump - who as the champion of the old economy (such as coal and oil) could lead a federal shift to prioritising freeways and cars. We shall see.

But what does all this mean for the UK? The ‘Flat White Economy’ (as Doug McWilliams christened the creative, tech and

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media sector in the book of the same name) is a growing part of the UK economy, not just the US economy. Before long it could be the most important part of the economy. And the same clustering of firms in urban locations can be seen in Silicon Roundabout in East London as it can be seen in Silicon Beach in LA. As can the same millennial lifestyle preferences - all good for public transport, cycling and walking.

However, what’s not happened to the same extent in the UK as the US is the effective articulation of these trends by transport and planning bodies. To give another good example from the US, there’s some great stuff being produced by an organisation called ‘Smart Growth America’ which manages to make land use planning compelling and exciting beyond the narrow fraternity of those already steeped in the intricacies and arcane pleasures of debating the merits of different drafts of planning guidance. Check out Smart Growth America’s report on their website called *Amazing Places - six cities using the new recipe for economic development* - to see what I mean. This more dynamic approach to promoting the interplay between place making, economic development, transport planning and land use is something UTG is seeking to do its bit to rectify including via a new report in the pipeline on the transport needs of the new economy.

What else can we learn from the US experience? Los Angeles ‘Measure M’ wouldn’t have been a runner in the first place in the UK because, despite all the evidence to the contrary, Whitehall still thinks it knows best and keeps local fiscal and financing options on a choke lead or restricted to a few limited ‘flavour of the months’. Whereas in reality devolved authorities need a wide range of fiscal, planning and funding options because only a few will work politically - given very varied local circumstances.

Another lesson is that the bus industry will need to adopt a far more sophisticated argument than giving the same answer to every question. That answer being ‘more bus priority’ (usually expressed in an open ended and unspecified way). That’s not to say bus priority isn’t important. Of course it is - which is why UTG initiated (with the industry) the ‘bus priority works’ campaign complete with bespoke brochure and website. By more sophisticated I mean facing up to the fact that although public transport is one part of



The KC Streetcar has spurred transit-orientated development in Kansas City



Buses are helping Seattle to cope with its rapid growth



Washington DC is viewed as a smart transport showcase

the equation that makes places where smart growth happens - so is a high quality urban realm and good access on foot and by bike.

It’s no longer just a matter of big vehicles speeding people to city centres - it’s about the nature of those places when those people get there. Which means non-specific, open ended demands for bus priority risk not connecting - unless they link into a wider vision of how the urban bus is part of a bigger picture of making places where people want to be and where smart growth can happen.

APTA and Smart Growth America certainly get the need for this more sophisticated approach - and it’s working. How bus design fits into the equation is a theme I want to return to in a future column but I heard an interesting presentation at a recent UITP meeting in Manchester which stressed the need to get far more serious about good bus design so that the bus symbolises the way cities are changing and want to change. Otherwise, the risk is that, according to the presenter, churning out the

‘same old shoeboxes’ risks the bus being seen as part of the past when compared with the more sleek design of other high tech vehicles, smart devices or gleaming new business hubs.

None of this is easy but at the same time I don’t share some of the gloomier prognoses that are currently fashionable about the bus being in some kind of inevitable death spiral unless there’s a bus lane on every street. On the contrary, if we are smart, then as in the US, smart growth can benefit public transport - just as long as we remember that the task in the future will be to help make great places as well as get people to them. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.