

# Help Yourself—to Help from Public Transit

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Some time ago Ben Petty asked me to discuss before this group the interest of public utilities in traffic problems. The electric, gas, water, and telephone utilities are somewhat involved in this; but for transit, the word "interest" is too mild. We live with this problem even more than you do because you have to sleep now and then, while our vehicles battle traffic all day and all, or most, of the night.

Don't get me wrong here, however. If I thought that I could come up here and really tell you anything new about your problems, I would be as naive as the father who faced the duty of telling his six-year-old son that a new baby sister had entered the family ranks. After some hemming and hawing around, he said "Johnnie, what do you think? This morning when the nurse went out into the garden—right out among the cabbages—she found a beautiful little girl, so now you have a sister. Why don't you sit down and write to brother Joe at school, and tell him about it?" The information was calmly received and the letter duly written. The father was somewhat curious to find out how the youthful mind had handled the problem; so he opened the letter to the older brother and read: "Dear Joe: You owe me a buck. It was a girl."

I understand that you *do* have a few traffic problems, such as:

1. To secure maximum use of streets now partly used, by reducing congestion and delay.
2. To increase safety on those streets.
3. To recommend regulations that police can (and will) enforce.
4. To keep elected city officials happy.
5. To keep merchants happy.
6. To keep pedestrians happy.
7. To keep motorists happy.

Etc.,—ad infinitum.

8. *And even*—to keep transit companies happy.

At least we have one advantage in this respect. Almost anything you can do to speed up general traffic and reduce delays will help us too, and you will find us more willing to cooperate than some of the other groups.

A noted traffic engineer recently said, "Tomorrow the downtown districts may be studded with the abandoned remains of buildings, as are the cities of Europe today." Another commentator on this subject expressed his view in this manner, "The parking problem is the great American fumble—a huge practical joke that we persist in playing on ourselves."

You and I know that today's congestion problems are caused by the private automobile. Does that statement mean that transit is prejudiced in presenting its views? Definitely not! We know that we could not even begin to carry the entire passenger load in any city of this state—*but*, in none of the larger ones at least, could that load be handled without us.

For instance, in Fort Wayne a cordon-count about two years ago showed that of those entering the business district, about one in eight walked. Of the remainder, fifty-four percent reach the business district by automobile and forty-six percent by transit vehicles. The picture has not changed much since then. Of course, the larger the city, the greater the proportion carried by transit.

Our streets are narrow—42 feet wide through the business district on our main street, Calhoun, with most of the stores and office buildings on this street or within a block of it, and seven or eight through transit lines running right down this main thoroughfare.

A four-hour check made just last Thursday afternoon on Calhoun Street showed transit vehicles comprising 25 percent of the traffic (a rather high figure), but carrying 85 percent of the *people* using the street. It is interesting to note that passengers per auto varied from 1.49 to 1.80 in 15-minute periods of the check and averaged 1.64 for the entire time. This is close to the national average of 1.7 people per car.

### SOME AUTHORITATIVE VIEWS

The American Road Builders Association published a report of their Committee on Mass Transportation (as *Technical Bulletin No. 139*) in 1948. They canvassed officials of 312 cities over 25,000 and had returns from 112 (36 percent). That report says: "We have conclusive evidence (from the 112 replies) that public officials view a modern system of local mass transportation as a community essentiality and a material aid in helping to solve the growing problem of street congestion, particularly in the middle-size and larger cities."

The report also states that "public officials in cities of all sizes feel that the elimination of curb parking would greatly speed up not only

mass transportation service, but all other moving traffic and reduce street congestion.”

Probably most of you are familiar with a 1948 publication of the Eno Foundation for Highway Traffic Control titled *The Prohibition of Curb Parking*. From that I quote: “Many streets in downtown districts accommodate large volumes of commercial vehicles and public carriers. Obviously, consideration must be given to the needs of these vehicles for loading and unloading. However, their needs cannot be evaluated to the exclusion of those of private motorists . . . every effort should be made to relieve the demands of transit and commercial vehicles for space at the curb.”

Not all transit companies or their representatives feel the same way about the parking problem. For instance, many times you may have seen transit ads advising “Leave your car at home for your wife to shop, and ride with us to work.” A few weeks ago a man with years of transit experience advocated an entirely new viewpoint on this (Felix E. Reifschneider in the November, 1948, *Mass Transportation*). Taking cognizance of the fact that the rush hour load is unprofitable because such a large proportion of equipment can only be used for a few hours a day, he said,

Why not urge downtown workers to use their autos for going to work, and park them on the downtown streets? This will lighten the rush hour load, which is particularly unprofitable these days, . . . Every development of the last few years has made extra service during rush hours more and more expensive to operate, . . .

If downtown employees take all the parking space, then shoppers who drive downtown later will be unable to find any place to park, and will be obliged to use transit vehicles, . . .

Traffic congestion during the day would be reduced because autos wouldn't be shifting from one parking place to another at frequent intervals, and there would be less frequent turnover in use of parking spaces. . . . The mid-day auto user would cease to cruise looking for parking space as soon as he learned that none was available.”

Maybe that is an easy answer to all our problems!

Although different elements cause traffic congestion in different cities, there are many features common to most locations. Bob Hope's friend, Vera Vague, might say, “You sailors are all alike, thank Heaven!” We could well say our problems are all alike—but we have no thanks at that point! We do know that the congestion is there, and our present streets in almost all instances must serve for a long, long time. It *could* be much worse in any of your cities without transit to help reduce con-

gestion. If there is any doubt in your minds on this point, just refer back to the transit strike in Philadelphia last February. Press reports indicated that in spite of car pools, private buses and determined hitchhikers, absenteeism was reported at almost 20 percent; school attendance dropped heavily. The Chamber of Commerce estimated losses to merchants running into tens of millions, *and the streets were practically impassable.*

The interests of city and traffic engineers and the transit companies are almost parallel at any time. Let me give you a little example from Fort Wayne in regard to location of bus-stops. Two years ago you heard at this Road School a very complete discussion of the arguments for near-side or far-side stops by Charles J. Walker, City Traffic Engineer of Gary. I read that report and I must meet that man. I see he is on the present Road School program. We not only bear the same name but we speak the same language, because he said in his opening paragraph: "Today without mass transit facilities, cities would cease to exist and there would be no urban traffic problems. Therefore, if we are to prolong the life of our cities, we are obliged to plan the very best possible transit facilities, laying emphasis upon both economy of operation and safety to the public." Amen!

Now, the average transit company holds no brief for stops on the near-side or the far-side of an intersection. The only question is, Which will do the best job? Let's follow through on that Fort Wayne experience.

#### A TYPICAL EXAMPLE

On Calhoun Street, previously mentioned as our main business thoroughfare, street cars were operated until June 27, 1947, with trolley coaches operating in the car track area also. On August 9, 1947, all stops in the former car-track area were abandoned, and we pulled to the curb for loading and unloading our trolley coaches, and an occasional gas bus, for ten blocks in the center of the business district on Calhoun. After a period of operation in this manner we made a comparison of *traffic* accidents involving our vehicles in any way, regardless of who was at fault, for the first seven months of 1947 (in the center) and 1948 (with near-side curb stops).

The results here were rather startling. The transit system as a whole had a 5 percent *decrease* in accidents, but on this stretch of Calhoun there were 22 percent *more* accidents. Most of the increase involved other vehicles turning right onto the intersecting streets and our vehicles pulling away from the near-side stops.

Certain types of accidents decreased sharply. When street cars and trolley\*coaches were operating in the center of the street, it was common for autos to plow into the rear of standing transit vehicles. This type of accident was reduced more than half when buses pulled to the curb. Accidents involving pedestrians were reduced from seven to three. Despite these decreases, there were 25 more accidents involving transit vehicles on this stretch of Calhoun Street.

Following a study of these statistics, we agreed with the city traffic and police officials on a trial change to far-side stops in this area. Our blocks are just slightly over 300 feet long, and only three of our coaches can unload at the curb in the half block on the far side, so that actually we have mid-block stops for individual coaches, as each coach pulls up to the alley for unloading if the space is clear.

Far-side stops were instituted on September 20, 1948. In January of this year, we made an accident comparison for this section of Calhoun for the last three months of the years 1947 and 1948. We found that traffic accidents involving transit vehicles decreased from 85 to 47, a drop of 45 percent. The reduction, or practical elimination, of two types of accidents chiefly accounted for the difference. Accidents involving right-hand turns of automobiles in front of our vehicles at various corners were almost entirely eliminated. Accidents involving coaches pulling from the curb into the line of traffic were greatly reduced.

We do not have any actual data or checks regarding the effect on general traffic conditions on Calhoun, but several competent observers have expressed the unanimous opinion that a much greater volume of vehicular traffic is being handled on Calhoun, and there is appreciably less delay in moving all traffic through this section. You are all interested in accident reduction, more volume and less delay—so, just help yourself to a little help from transit!

### TIMES HAVE CHANGED

Conditions change in a few years. In 1944 a leading traffic engineer, D. Grant Mickle, discussing commercial parking operations in cities of 50,000 to 200,000 in *Solutions to Local Parking Problems* said: "In these towns, *ten cents for all-day parking is the limit most motorists will pay even for a choice central location.*" How many of you from cities of that size could find a choice central location parking lot with a dime fee today?

Don't be afraid to suggest trying something that has not been done before—if you are convinced it is sound. Remember the story of Boss

Kettering of General Motors when he was told it was impossible to drive from Detroit to Dayton in less than a certain time. He is reported to have taken his fellow worker down there easily in a half-hour less, but the chap wailed: "Of course you did it, but you didn't stick to Route 25." It may be time to change routes.

The old problems were being solved years ago—even during the reign of Louis XV, according to an item I read a few days ago. It was fashionable then for the noblewomen to drive their own carriages through the streets of Paris, and the congestion became almost intolerable. Louis and his ministers had to do something. They forbade driving by any woman less than 30 years of age. Problem solved at once!

### TRANSLATE FACTS INTO ACTION

May I stress the importance of doing something after you get your facts. One single corner situation remedied by action is worth reams of grandiloquent reports on over-all plans—with no action. Use a little intelligent selfishness. Make your own way easier by making it easier for the other fellow.

Sometimes I wonder if you do all that you should to cooperate with the Police Department and the City Councilmen. Give them the story in advance so that they have the *facts* on which your decisions are based. Show them that accident prevention and reduction of congestion is good politics!

Remember what the old lady said of the girl who was getting into wild company, "That girl has a past—in front of her." Don't let your city be one with a past in front of it!

What does transit want you to do? Well, here are a few remedies that could be considered, if they have not already been done in your community:

1. Adequate bus loading zones—*well marked*—if you want travel lanes left clear.
2. Center marking on narrow streets—if you want the big vehicles to stay on their own side.
3. Through-street designation generally on transit routes—if you want to keep down intersection accidents.
4. Consideration of changes in signal timing and prohibition of turning movements at some locations—if you want to move people through the intersections 50 at a time instead of 1.7 per vehicle.

5. Sensible parking restrictions in the rush hours—if you want to move *all traffic*.
6. Eternal reiteration—to all groups—of the advantages of staggered hours—if you are looking for the quickest way to increase street capacities.
7. Consideration of the place of transit in your plans, and opportunity for us to present our views *before* changes are made.

Our community of interest is unmistakable. By working together we *can* better conditions for *all* users of the streets.