

**THOUGHT PIECE****Sustainable Transport****by Melvin M. Webber**

I assume we'll want to sustain any mode of transport only if we judge it to be effective and desirable, and of course, only if we think we can afford to sustain it. Over time, we've abandoned any number of modes that failed those tests — horsecars, trolleycars, and pullmancars, among others; and we've kept those that passed the tests — most notably motorcars, airplanes, and ships. In retrospect, it seems we've been pretty draconian in rejecting transport modes that have failed in the market place of public favor.

Now the test for sustainability is being pressed most vociferously against the automobile, because cars pollute a lot, use a lot of land, injure and kill a lot of people, and consume a lot of petroleum. More than that, and perhaps most important of all, automobiles have accumulated a growing circle of critics who regard cars as instruments of evil, deserving to be rejected into the dustbin where the world's sinful and dangerous instruments are consigned.

I find this sentiment peculiar, especially when voiced by liberals who are quick to defend the have-nots of the world. I say peculiar because the poor typically have-not cars as well as the other accoutrements of modern society. Of course, it's not only the poor who want cars, but the vast majorities of populations everywhere. Witness the current explosion in the market for cars in China, where but few consumers have been able to afford the ones that have made it into the marketplace. But we don't need to look to far-off China to gauge consumer demand. A glance out of any office window anywhere in the U.S. should suffice, for Americans remain the world's most avid consumers of cars. If the low-income groups could afford what others own, numbers of cars on our roads would be greater than they already are.

There can be but few questions about why that should be so, because the personal car has become equivalent to the magic carpet. It allows one to go whenever and wherever fancy or perceived need may direct, and at a tolerable price. Cars create access to jobs, medical services, recreational facilities, friends and kin, and indeed to the wide spectrum of opportunities that are the hallmarks of modern urban society. In places where cars are the dominant transport medium, as they are in suburban America, their presence and availability make them integral attributes of modern society, providing essential access to the services

of that society. I find it hard to imagine a mode of egalitarian modernity lacking the accessibility that automobiles supply to the economy and to so vast a proportion of today's people.

Yes, I of course, realize that real and serious costs are associated with cars; many analysts and commentators have been exposing those costs. But I'm also alert to the great benefits that are associated with widespread auto use and yet are typically ignored by those same analysts and commentators. I'm betting that a qualitative and unbiased benefit-cost analysis of cars in contemporary America would show that benefits far exceed costs. I'm also betting the analysis would expose a large deficit accounted by the many carless people who remain handicapped for lack of personal vehicles. If we care about the benefit-cost ratio, we should be advocating a sustainability policy that calls for reducing costs while providing cars for the carless and for those others who still lack adequate access to the benefits of modern times. Concurrently, we also need to invent a form of public transit whose service attributes resemble those of the private car — including door-to-door, no-wait, flexible-route, and no-transfer service.

I expect such a successor to the automobile will eventually prove possible; but, until then, I vote for sustaining and selectively expanding America's currently dominant transport system. Yes, that of course, means additional and large-scale investments in infrastructure — in roads, fuels, safety equipment, practices to lessen environmental damage, and financing systems to assure fiscal reliability for all transport modes. But it also means greater responsiveness to consumer wants and an increase in social equity.

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