



## Montana's Bus Systems Harmful to Taxpayers and Environment

By:

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We're often told that public buses are the most cost effective and energy efficient means of transportation available for our cities. But a recent MPI study found that, as is often the case with one-size-fits-all solutions, this perception doesn't hold true in rural states like Montana. When compared to driving private automobiles, public transit in Montana costs more and takes a greater toll on the environment per passenger mile than does driving that same mile in a private vehicle.

In addition, high subsidies on public transit systems siphon away nearly half of Montana's gas taxes that would otherwise be available to build, improve or maintain our public roads. These subsidies support a system that Montanans use to fulfill far less than 10 percent of our travel needs, despite the fact that it's cheap or even "free" to the rider.

The cost per passenger mile of driving in Montana is substantially lower than that of public transit, and is mostly borne by the person doing the driving. Contrary to popular belief, there are few federal or state subsidies to highways. To the extent that subsidies do exist, local governments are the primary source.

The average cost of driving in Montana—including subsidies—is a little under 23 cents per passenger mile, or about a penny above the national average. The average cost of public transit in Montana, meanwhile, is about \$1.76 per passenger mile, with more than 90 percent of that cost subsidized by non-transit users.

Using a different measure, Montana transit riders pay an average of less than 40 cents each time they board a bus, while taxpayers kick in an average of more than \$5 to support each of those trips.

Public transit also takes a heavy toll on the environment. Montana's urban buses use on average twice the energy and release more than twice the carbon emissions into the atmosphere per passenger mile as a light truck. A Toyota Prius would be nearly 6 times more efficient.

The major problem is that urban buses in Montana run mostly empty, filling just one-sixth of their seats. Bus systems in larger cities nationally are much more efficient per passenger mile for the obvious reason that they carry more passengers per mile. As a high mileage, low population

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state, we have to decide if want to spend and pollute more by promoting an ill-suited policy “solution,” or if maybe we should look at other options.

It's quite clear that Montanans who are concerned about either public expenditures or climate change and air pollution should be looking for alternatives to traditional urban transit models that rely on buses and scheduled routes to move people around. The question is whether we impose a solution by forcing more people to ride buses, or whether we seek choices that take into account local conditions while still meeting the needs of those who want or need public transportation.

There are many options available to help decrease the costs and environmental impacts of public transit in Montana. Removing state and federal government bias toward high cost, high emissions vehicles that run scheduled routes regardless of demand and allowing communities to tailor their transit programs to local conditions should be one of the first steps toward creating more cost effective and environmentally friendly systems. Some options include smaller vehicles or shared on-demand taxis, privatization, and vouchers for those who need assistance. These types of systems would take people where they want to go when they want to get there at much less cost and with a much lower environmental impact.

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The referenced study can be found at [www.montanapolicy.org](http://www.montanapolicy.org).

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