



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Human Transit: How Clearer Thinking about Public Transit Can Enrich Our Communities and Our Lives

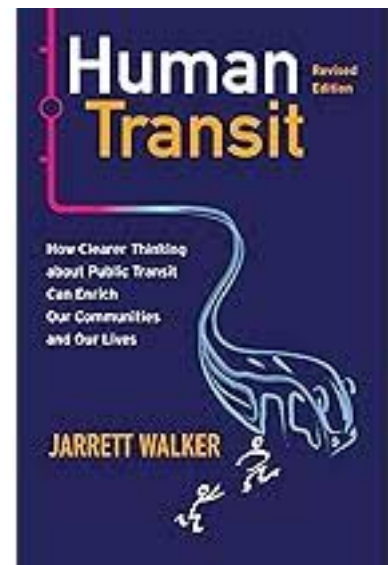
By Jarrett Walker

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Feb. 5, 2025 to discuss *Human Transit: How Clearer Thinking about Public Transit Can Enrich Our Communities and Our Lives*. Jarrett Walker is a consultant who specializes in transit network design.

This is a book about how transit works: the places it takes riders to and from, what allows buses, trains and streetcars to do these things effectively and efficiently, and why these things matter. Its premise is that most people, including elected officials, urbanists, riders and even some transit officials, barely know how transit works. As a result, we make poor decisions about lines, services and ridership.

The book examines the misunderstandings. (Example: comparing transit to highways and automobiles. Building transit is nothing like building a road, Walker writes, and transit's economics, geometry and impact on cities are nothing like the demands of cars.) And Walker shows where discussions about transit—even among its friends— get sidetracked. (Example: arguments about transit modes. Trains, buses and streetcars all have advantages and disadvantages, he writes. The trick is finding the right places for each mode.)

In the end, the book makes two big arguments. First, we need transit to create thriving, livable cities. Second, transit can help us create these cities—but only if we understand its strengths and limitations and build around its strengths. In a city still unsure of transit's potential nearly 50 years after MARTA's first trains began running from Avondale to Georgia State station, there's much in this book for Atlantans to learn.



Four Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are four big ideas drawn from *Human Transit* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. We need to reconcile expertise and voice in transit decision making. As the book makes clear, there is a science to designing transit that is effective and efficient. But we also need citizens and elected officials to make known what they want. What we lack is a process that puts these things in conversation and ends with good decisions.
2. There is a “virtuous cycle” to transit IF it is designed and operated right. This means transit that takes people where and when they want to go, and does so at a good price with comfort, safety and reliability. If we do these things, ridership will grow and the additional fares can fund expansion, which would increase ridership even more. And the cycle should repeat on and on.
3. There are changes in Atlanta’s housing density and residents’ work schedules that give us a chance to expand transit’s appeal and usefulness so transit serves everyone at any time. One way would be to move from “peak” service to “all-day” transit.
4. Making transit competitive with driving will require changes large and small and unprecedented levels of collaboration among governments. A great opportunity would be adding fast, frequent bus service to suburban highways like Buford Highway in DeKalb and Tara Boulevard in Clayton County. It would require state cooperation in redesigning these highways. But the opportunity for affordable, reliable bus service that can serve all riders is worth the effort.

Why Do These Things?

Should local leaders support transit and take on the long process of reorienting Urban Atlanta’s streets and neighborhoods so that transit becomes more effective? We think so. Here’s why:

- We are choking on traffic, and congestion will grow only worse if we do not find a way to make transit a realistic alternative to driving.
- It’s not just congestion. Cars take a toll on cities, from the demands of parking and to the threats they pose to pedestrians. (The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group has discussed two books on the high cost of cars: [Right of Way: Race, Class, and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America](#) and [Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World](#).)
- Transit is freedom. Done right, it allows people to come and go to many places at a reasonable price. It does not require a driver’s license, so teenagers can take a train or bus. It makes accommodations for those with disabilities. It changes the way you experience a city because you notice things from a bus that you would not see driving a car. And if you want to have a beer, you can do so knowing you will not endanger others.
- If we do not ease congestion and build a more walkable city, Urban Atlanta’s economy will suffer because talented people will not move to an inaccessible, traffic-choked city.
- Transit makes cities more affordable.
- As more low-income and working-class families move to the suburbs, the need for transit outside of our most urban areas will grow.
- We have a system to build on. MARTA hasn’t had the impact its founders hoped, but we do not begin with a blank sheet of paper. We have critical elements in place including rail connections to Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, major sports and cultural venues, and urban centers like Midtown, Buckhead, Sandy Springs, Decatur and College Park. We can make MARTA more successful.

What Are the Obstacles? What Are Our Strengths?

Even the most worthwhile efforts create opposition. So our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Money. Transit is expensive to build and operate. MARTA does not have enough funding to build the transit system we need.
- MARTA has some self-inflicted wounds. Among them are a lack of cleanliness, frequent and cancelled services, poor usability and the perception that its trains, buses, stations and bus stops are unsafe.
- MARTA lacks political adeptness. When it ought to be making allies, it sometimes makes enemies, as the recent dispute over closing the Five Points station during a repair and reconstruction project made clear.
- We still do not have the density to support transit in most parts of Urban Atlanta.
- We've made parking so cheap and plentiful, it rewards those who drive.
- There's a "sunk cost" issue with car ownership. Once you buy a car, and commit to monthly payments, insurance, maintenance and fuel, you have an incentive to drive it everywhere. Transit's difficult task is to persuade people not to buy cars—or second cars.

Does Urban Atlanta have strengths that could help us with some of the obstacles? We discussed Urban Atlanta's strengths as well. Here are some:

- Atlanta is still growing. We are not a declining urban area.
- While still not enough, the city of Atlanta and some of its suburbs are becoming more densely developed. The city of Atlanta's population has grown by 23 percent since 1990 without adding a square inch of land.
- That said, we still have underdeveloped parcels such as parking lots. This means density could get much greater, especially if we shift more people from cars to transit.
- The appeal for urban lifestyles remains strong. Transit makes urbanism possible.
- Work is changing, as are commuting patterns, so there are opportunities for change in transit.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles and some impressive strengths. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers, using our strengths:

- We need a strong, effective transit advocacy group that stands apart from MARTA and other area transit systems but works tirelessly to improve them and argue for their funding.
- One way transit advocates could help is by showing residents—from schoolchildren to seniors—how to use Atlanta area transit systems as an alternative to driving.
- Advocacy can help, but MARTA must do its part by expanding its customer base. And that means redesigning the rider experience so transit becomes a true alternative to driving. Fortunately, Atlanta has an abundance of companies that are deeply experienced in customer service. It's time for MARTA to enlist Atlanta's corporate community in designing a system everyone can use at any time.
- As it redesigns the rider experience and improves frequency and reliability, MARTA can also call on organizations that depend on MARTA, like the Falcons and Hawks, downtown hotels and convention facilities, museums and theaters, Hartsfield-Jackson Airport and others to show their visitors how to save time and money by taking MARTA.
- We need to make the true cost of driving more apparent. We can start by ending parking mandates for developments and charging more for city-managed parking.
- Let's have more "streets alive" events where we close streets to cars—and open them to all other uses, such as cyclists, pedestrians, skateboarders, and children's play. If we want more people to appreciate transit, let's make its possibilities and results more visible. These events help.
- Appearances matter. Let's make MARTA stations inviting and maybe even beautiful. They would be great places for public art.

A Synopsis of *Human Transit*

Human Transit: How Clearer Thinking about Public Transit Can Enrich Our Communities and Our Lives is 237 pages, with an introduction, epilogue and 17 chapters. There are also notes, a preface and an index. This is the revised edition, published in 2024. An original edition appeared in 2011.

Jarrett Walker is a consultant who specializes in transit network design and related urban planning issues. In February 2025, his firm was consulting with MARTA on a redesign of its bus routes.

As mentioned above, this is a book about how transit works, what makes it efficient and effective, how its economics work internally and for its riders, and why cities could benefit from building toward transit's strengths.

Two mistakes leaders and citizens make, Walker says, are comparing transit to other forms of transportation like automobiles and arguing over modes, such as trains, streetcars and buses. That's because transit is nothing like highways and cars, and each mode has strengths and weaknesses. Building a rail line where a bus could better operate would be a waste of money, a hinderance for riders and a loss of transit's considerable benefits for cities.

A key concept that Walker introduces in *Human Transit* is that of transit's "geometry." The geometry he has in mind is something Walker calls "access to opportunity," which is where a person can be in a period of time if she takes transit. For running an errand, a person might consider 15 minutes to be a reasonable travel time. Going to or from work might be 30 minutes. Headed for an evening of entertainment, she might allot up to an hour.

And here is a place where Walker takes us deeply into how transit works. This period of time involves three elements: time spent walking to and from a transit stop, time at the stop waiting for the bus or train, and the transit journey itself. When you map cities, as Walker's firm does, transit officials may be disappointed to learn how limited transit's "access to opportunity" truly is.

But that is when you get to work, figuring out how to expand access, again by focusing on all three elements: easier pedestrian access to transit stops, more frequent service, faster rides, and a host of things cities can do to locate future work, homes and stores closer to transit stations and bus stops.

Why do all these things? Because they're good for riders (again, it expands their access to opportunity). But transit is also good for cities.

One way, Walker explains, is through its use of space. Whether by bus or train, transit moves people far more efficiently than cars and does it using only a portion of the space that cars demand. That's true on roadways and train tracks but it's especially true on both ends of the journey. Cars require a huge amount of space for parking. Transit makes few demands other a little room for bus stops and a location for transit stations, which are often tucked into other developments. (Parking's impact on cities was explored in detail in [Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World.](#))

Transit has other benefits. It has limited impacts on the environment. Cars and trucks are a major producers of air pollution. It is an efficient use of labor. If you catch a bus or train, one driver can safely transport scores of riders, who are free to read, work or relax. With automobiles, you don't get a 1-to-60 ratio of labor. You get 1-to-1 or perhaps 1-to-2.

There's more. Pedestrians walking to and from transit stops make city streets livelier and safer. Transit spares families from paying for cars—or second cars—with cars' added costs of insurance, maintenance and fuel. Avoiding these costs makes cities affordable and preserves economic diversity.

Finally there's congestion and its negative impact on urban economies. Because it uses labor and space so efficiently, Walker writes, "transit allows growth in economic activity without growth in congestion. It allows a city's economy, and hence its employment, to grow beyond the level where road congestion would otherwise stifle it."

But saying that transit is better for cities does not mean it is without cost. And here is where Walker explains transit's cost structure. Again, transit does not work like cars and highways. With highways, a state government builds roads and, except for traffic enforcement, transfers day-to-day expenses to the motorists.

Transit holds on to the expenses. Some of these costs are in the form of equipment, technology and maintenance, but the lion's share is labor: bus and train drivers, transit police, cleaning crews and maintenance workers.

In recent decades, a particular headache for transit was scheduling. Before the 2020 Covid pandemic locked down offices and shifted some work to homes, transit systems were focused intently on their "peaks," periods in the morning and evening when commuters surged into downtowns and then surged out. Systems designed around these peaks scheduled more trains and buses in these hours, then cut back service at other times, like middays, nights or weekends.

It may seem easy to add buses and trains for a few hours a day, but it turns out to be much harder to schedule drivers around these peaks. After all, not many people are happy working a few hours in the morning, taking time off at midday, then returning to work for an evening shift. Mostly, it meant two full shifts to cope with a few hours of high demand.

Covid offered transit systems an alternative, Walker says—a chance to move from "peak-only" service, where rush hour drove scheduling decisions, to "all-day service." That's because, while the pandemic reduced overall transit ridership, the reductions were almost entirely in peak periods. Demand at other times (the "all-day" periods) remained steady.

The opportunity: Build more frequent service that operates over longer periods, so riders start taking transit for errands and entertainment as well as for getting back and forth to work. In other words, expand the "access to opportunity" by making transit more frequent and reliable at more hours.

Walker sees yet another opportunity in suburban highways. The highways he has in mind are high-speed, multilane roads often lined with stores, restaurants and apartment complexes. Think of Buford Highway in DeKalb County or Tara Boulevard in Clayton County.

Pedestrian advocates, like Angie Schmitt in [Right of Way: Race, Class, and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America](#), considers these roads to be among the dangerous in America for anyone walking or cycling. Walker agrees but sees potential in them for bus transit.

The density and mix of commercial and residential along these highways are promising, he says, and they have lanes that could be dedicated to buses. They would require considerable investment in pedestrian infrastructure—sidewalks, crosswalks, signals and the like—but even this doesn't have to be done all at once, he writes.

Would this turn Tara Boulevard into an urbanist ideal? No, he says, but it could solve a lot of problems for struggling families and bring many new riders to transit.

There are other things to learn from *Human Transit*. Among them: Where rail transit is better than buses and where buses are better. Why you wouldn't want to run a commuter rail system (it's all "peaks"). The nightmare of cul-de-sacs. How to think about fares. Why frequency is freedom. Why transit lines in

straight lines are better than loops and “on-demand” transit is an economic pit. And how poor state decisions about highway design can make transit difficult. (Walker’s example is from Clayton County.)

Who would benefit from reading *Human Transit*? Transit officials and city planners, certainly. There is much cities can do to make transit work better. But elected officials, transit advocates, neighborhood leaders and urbanists should also learn how transit works, just as we should also learn about law enforcement, public schools and zoning work. Urban Atlanta cannot thrive without transit systems. This book shows us what makes these systems work—and how they could work better.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn’t to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.