



Project Number

BDV25-977-45

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Understanding Ridership Trends in Transit

June 2019

Current Situation

Millions of Floridians use mass transit every day, many as their main means of transportation. Yet, over the past few years, transit ridership has declined, with Florida's decline in ridership exceeding the national trend. Transit agencies often plan five and ten years out, and to do so, they need to understand the needs and attitudes that lead to, or discourage, mass transit use.

Research Objectives

University of South Florida researchers investigated trends in Florida transit ridership, comparing the trend across Florida regions and comparing Florida with the national trend.

Project Activities

Data from individual transit operators is provided regularly to the Federal Transit Administration through the National Transit Data program. The researchers first used these data to study the trend in declining transit ridership and to understand its causes. They then examined possible responses to ridership decline, based on their analysis of the trend.



A bicyclist waits for a bus at a light rail depot in South Florida, demonstrating the interconnection between public and personal transit modes.

Among the causes of the decline that the researchers ruled out were any declines in number of routes or stops, crowding, or fare levels. The researchers found no meaningful decrease in service quality across the agencies reviewed. Land use patterns, which change very slowly over time, did not explain the recent downturn. An extensive analysis of the available data for Florida transit riders supported factors like increased household auto availability, increased options to substitute communication for travel (work from home; e-commerce), and increased options to utilize transportation network company services and, in some cases, bikeshare or other emerging travel options. Transit users now have choices that may offer more speed, convenience, and flexibility. The most relevant factors may differ across Florida regions.

Mass transit will remain the mode of choice for many Floridians and a mode that many Floridians use occasionally; therefore, transit services must make plans for serving the public at reduced ridership levels, given that ridership has continued to decline and that causative factors are likely to persist. The researchers outlined possible responses to declining ridership by addressing paratransit and demand-responsive services, improving service accessibility, and enhancing service features. They suggest that some transit agencies will be challenged to reconfigure their services to maintain some of the overall advantages of mass transit, such as reduced air pollution, reduced energy use, and reducing transportation land use. Transit agencies will, as well, have to find ways to preserve the advantages they offer to the individual rider such as enhanced quality of life for riders without other options and economical transportation.

Project Benefits

Careful analysis of transit ridership can enable transit companies to plan appropriately and continue to provide the many benefits to their communities that their services offer.

For more information, please see www.fdot.gov/research/.