Whither Transit: Chaos or Conquest?

An Address By

U. S. Senator Harrison A. Williams, Jr.

80th Annual Meeting

American Transit Association

Adolphus Hotel, Dallas, Texas

October 17, 1961
Following is a complete text of the speech delivered by Senator Harrison A. Williams, Jr. of New Jersey before the General Session opening the American Transit Association’s Annual Meeting in Dallas:

I am happy to be here with you today to discuss some of the problems and prospects facing mass transportation in the urban areas of our country.

As many of you probably know, in June, Congress approved a $75 million program of loans for transit equipment and facilities and grants for some demonstration projects in this field. Congress also approved a sum of $42.5 million for the same purpose at a later date, and we’re still a little unsure how much the Housing and Home Finance Agency will actually be able to spend on the program this coming year, but this kind of confusion is not unheard of in Washington, as you may know.

At any rate, I was talking with a person the other day who is knowledgeable in the field of urban development, and he said: “You know your program of helping to preserve open space in and around the urban areas is a good one. It’s riding with the tide of history. But your mass transportation program is bucking the whole trend of urban development. The future clearly belongs to the automobile.”

He could have added that these who have some interest in seeing that the future does belong to the automobile have coined a new word that rather nicely solognizes their goal. They call it “automobility.”

Automobility, as I understand it, means roughly the inalienable right of any individual to drive his car anywhere he wants to at any time he wants to.

It’s worth noting that the Constitution, in its guarantee of free speech, doesn’t mean that you can yell “fire!” in a crowded theatre. But I suspect, that nine times out of ten, an infringement on the freedom of speech will win out before an infringement on automobility.

The great puzzle to me, in view of the dominance of this philosophy, is how the elevator has managed to survive the onslaught of automobility. The elevator is of course a form of vertical mass transportation, and I really can’t think of any logical reason why these elevators have not long since been replaced by automobile lifts so that everyone who wanted to visit the observation deck of the Empire State Building or the furniture floor of Neiman Marcus, for that matter, could just drive off the street, onto the lift and up to the ultimate destination.

Of course this is a far-fetched and ludicrous idea. The size and cost of building an Empire State Building or Neiman Marcus big enough to accommodate the automobiles of all the people who use these buildings every day would be staggering. And even if we, as citizens, didn’t find the idea ludicrous, you can bet the developer and owner of the building would.

Yet when it comes to horizontal transportation these considerations of relative costs fade away, and the philosophy becomes one of “anything goes.” Or perhaps I should say the philosophy is, “If anything goes, let it.”

Admittedly the total costs of providing horizontal transportation for every automobile at every time of day are a little hard to pinpoint with accuracy. But we do know that traffic jams cost the nation about $5 billion a year in time and wages lost, extra fuel consumption, faster vehicle depreciation, lower downtown retail sales and so forth.

Then we have maintenance costs, traffic control costs, parking costs, loss of tax ratable property, and a host of intangible social costs: air pollution, the loss of trees in a street widening project, the hardships of displaced families and so forth.

Speaking of traffic control costs, I notice that last week New York City started a program to alleviate traffic congestion in the area of Manhattan south of 20th Street. The reaction to the new plan was so enthusiastic that the cost somehow got lost in the shuffle.

But according to a report in the New York Times, the project “involves a central control room that receives reports of developing traffic congestion from policemen in fifteen radio cars on motorcycle and one police helicopter.”

It appears that there will be more policemen working to reduce traffic tieups in lower Manhattan than there will be people working in the whole Federal government on improving mass transportation in the coming year.

Then there are the costs of urban sprawl, which gets a powerful assist from the highway program, by enabling house-hunting families, commerce and industry to move farther out into the countryside, which creates a demand for more streets and highways, which, in turn, draws more people and business out, in an apparently endless cycle.

Low-density sprawl makes it impossible for private enterprise to provide adequate modern mass transportation in these areas without going bankrupt. And then, dependent on the automobile, these outlying residents start converging inward to work in the morning, cruising traffic jams and making it impossible to provide satisfactory bus transportation in the higher density areas where it is economically feasible to operate.

That is one cost of sprawl. There are also the additional costs of almost every kind of community service that are necessary to serve a population widely dispersed all over the countryside. More roads, more police stations, more fire stations, more schools, more sewers, more utility lines, more earthwork, more floods, more water pollution. And less of nature’s open space to enjoy.

There are probably a lot of reasons why the direct and indirect costs of horizontal transportation aren’t subject to the same scrutiny that a Public Utilities Commission, say, gives to a request for a transit fare increase. The costs are, of course, to some extent intangible.

But much more important, I think, is the fact that there is no single governmental unit that feels the total impact of the cost, as there is in the case of the owner of a building who would have to bear the whole brunt of the cost of making it possible for cars to reach every floor of the building.

As an illustration of this cost diffusion, I recall a discussion not too long ago when one of the participants in the discussion asked: “How much longer are we going to continue this fantastic federal subsidy to the highway program?” Whereupon someone else jumped up and said: “Wait a minute. These roads are not subsidized. They pay for themselves out of the gas taxes and other user-charges.” The first fellow replied: “That’s beside the point. When a local government has put up 10 per cent of the cost of a highway while the Federal government puts up 90 per cent, that’s a subsidy so far as the local budget is concerned.”

On the other hand, a local government that wants to buy a new fleet of buses for its own transit company, or for a private operator, in order to expand and improve service must contemplate bearing 100 per cent of the cost of the endeavor. Or a city that wants to construct a new rapid transit network, though it may cost only one-fifth as much as the same amount of highway mileage of comparable capacity and though the wisdom of the project may be demonstrated by the studies, is obviously going to have to spend far more out of the local budget than it would to get the comparable highway built.

This basic economic factor has its impact in every way down to the local planners charged with formulating solutions to such problems. Where is the planner today who will recommend a rapid transit system mass transportation system to the city fathers when there is 90-10 highway money staring him in the face and nary a cent (at least until this year) for mass transportation? Or what is the reputation of the planner now who has tried it?

Except for perhaps a few independent consultants who can afford a big splash every now and then, the premium today is on “thinking small.” And the smaller you think, the higher your rating in the public arena, because you are a man who has demonstrated his realism, who doesn’t get led away from practical first-step solutions by Utopian visions.

Inevitably, along about this point in the dialogue, you hear the statement: “Well, these cost considerations really don’t make any difference because mass transportation serves such a limited function and for only about 20 hours a week. But highways can be used 24 hours a day, all year round, for the home-to-work journey, for the afternoon shopper, for the traveling salesman, for the doctor who must use his car, for freight movement, for countless commercial services, for the trip to the theatre in the evening, for the visit to the homes of friends and yes, even bus transportation.”

I must admit that this argument has a convincing ring. But on closer examination, I think the flaws become apparent.

For example, there is a proposal to widen Shirley Highway, a major artery leading into Washington past the Pentagon in Arlington from a four to an eight-lane road for a distance of 42 miles, at a cost of between $13 and $20 million. The project was
approved by Congress so fast this year that it would make your head swim.

The reason? Simply because Shirley Highway is a nightmare of traffic congestion two hours in the morning and two hours at night. But what about the rest of the time? Through the rest of the day the highway operates at less than capacity, and at night you could almost use it as an auxiliary landing strip for National Airport.

Clearly the reason we are spending $13 to $20 million on a 4.2 mile stretch of road is to meet precisely the same 20-hour-a-week need that transit meets.

And then what? After you widen Shirley Highway to accommodate more cars, you get a bottleneck on the Potomac River. So you build another bridge, and then you overload the district streets. So you tear out some buildings and widen them, then you pour that many more cars into the downtown business district. So you build more parking lots and garages, which leaves that much less space for retail activity that presumably was the cause of the demand for access in the first place.

Admittedly this cycle is hypothetical in this particular instance, but it is typical of the process going on in most of our cities today.

There is another question that usually crops up at some point along the line. On occasion I have been asked: ‘Do you know the day of the year when traffic congestion is worst at the Lincoln Tunnel in New York?’ Mother’s Day. There is no question that weekend and holiday travel is a problem that mass transportation is least able to solve.

Yet even for recreational travel, the possibilities exist for improvement. I understand that the Pennsylvania and Reading Seashore Line, running between Philadelphia and Atlantic City, tried out a few special weekend trains to the seashore resort this summer but turned a literal hundreds of people away. I needn’t add that the railroad is feverishly petitioning for discontinuance of all its passenger service.

As an amateur skier, I have been amazed at the public transportation services available to most ski areas, capitalizing of course on the fact that a lot of people don’t like to get caught with their wheels spinning in snowdrifts. Take a plane or train to the nearest major city, and almost every substantial resort will meet you at the terminal and take you the final lap.

Nevertheless weekend and holiday vacation will always be a problem. But I wonder how much of this is due to the desire to get away from the urban areas because we have done such a poor job in making the environments livable, interesting and attractive. Perhaps the answer is not more roads, but more urban renewal, more urban open space, more recreation facilities.

Finally, much as I favor weekend and holiday recreation, I think we must face up to some basic public policy questions as to how much, in this day and age, we can afford to spend on highways and its accessories in order to meet this weekend need. We have a whole array of national needs, from military defense to education, which have in my mind a higher priority than expenditures for weekend travel. Perhaps

we will just have to endure crowded roads on the Fourth of July.

So I come to the inevitable conclusion that we must have a balanced transportation system for our urban and metropolitan areas, large and small.

I have to smile at the phrase “balanced transportation system.” It is such a beautiful phrase because it can mean all things to all men—and it usually does. You can scarcely go to any reputable transportation conference these days without hearing the phrase “balanced transportation system” re-verberating through the halls, coming from the lips of every participant. The railroad man wants it, the highway man wants it, the mass transportation system wants it. The highway commissioners want it. The city traffic engineers want it. And no doubt the American Transit Association wants it.

Perhaps I should now stick my neck out and describe my conception of the proper balance between mass transportation and highways.

First I think highways are here to stay, and I think further there is no question that we need them—for precisely the reasons so often described, to meet transportation needs that can be met in no other way. For commuters who because of home or job location must commute, for afternoon shoppers, for traveling businessmen, for many freight purposes, for visits to friends and so forth. These people—and that means most of us at one time or another—need a basic highway network to get around in our rapidly expanding urban and metropolitan areas.

The need for built-up highways with substantially greater capacity than the normal average daytime or non-rush hour need, we are developing an imbalance that will plague us and our cities for years to come. In other words, if we are going to build almost exclusively for a rush-hour demand, I am convinced that the money would be better spent on transit than on highway. It is inherently more efficient, it has capacity for expansion, it takes less space, it costs less per mile, and it does not clog the central city with cars that must be parked.

The question that haunts us all is whether people will actually use the transit services provided. Perhaps we would find that after spending all this money on new rail or express bus transit people would continue to jam the roads with their cars.

Implicit in this question is the supposition that the transit facility must attract enough riders to make it financially desirable. The real question is not whether a particular service is self-supporting from the fare box, but whether any deficit is approximately compensated by a reduction in cost for roads, repair, traffic control, parking and so forth that would be incurred if the riders were using their automobiles rather than the transit service.

This is certainly a far more sensible, though still inadequate, basis for determining whether to provide a particular transit service than the self-supporting basis so commonly accepted today.

But suppose, even on this new basis, enough people will not use the service to justify the expenditure, even though the service is as convenient and modern and reasonably priced as it is possible to make it.

Then I am afraid the time will have come when it will be necessary to employ more stringent infringements on the right of automobility.

If people continue to jam the highways and clog the city at rush hours with their cars, even though a perfectly adequate alternative transit service is available, then I think the time has come to initiate such steps as the imposition of tolls on these highways during the rush hours.

No doubt the automobile clubs will rush to their mimeograph machines to condemn this new move, but I want to make clear that I think this step is warranted only where adequate alternative transit service is available. I don’t think there is any justification for imposing penalties on urban automobile travel and saying, in effect, “get to work some other way,” when the car commuter looks around and sees only a few dozen buses or railroad cars that always seem to break down, never run more than once every half-hour, and seldom go anywhere near his destination.

But being an optimist, I don’t think it will be necessary to impose such controls when adequate alternative service has been provided. Transit in the city of Philadelphia in the post-war years has never provided anywhere near competitive quality of service. If it is tried I think it will attract enough riders to make such regulatory devices as tolls unnecessary.

The question of transportation balance, however, extends beyond the proper balance between highway and transit. There must also be a balance among mass transportation services. This is not a problem facing smaller urban areas with only one type of public transportation, usually bus. But it is a problem in the larger metropolitan areas that have a variety of transit services or would like to create new ones to supplement existing ones.

Where urban areas enjoy or would like to enjoy any combination of bus, commuter railroad, or rail transit service, I believe it is extremely important that these services be coordinated and integrated to the maximum extent possible to avoid needless duplication of service and to provide the best possible portal-to-portal service by utilizing the particular advantages of each type of service.

This coordination is vital because in my mind the problem is not, as many people seem to think, primarily one involving the finance of the various roads. The real problem is traffic congestion, with all its attendant problems and costs, and the question is how we best go about solving it through improvement of mass transportation.

Obviously we are not going to solve all our problems by building a transit line or resecuring a commuter line that at the same time puts a competing bus company out of business. Nor are we going to have much success with rail transit if there are not adequate adjacent fringe area parking facilities or adequate bus feeder service to the rail stations or adequate transfer service at the downtown end. Nor are we doing much good when several separate bus companies have to compete with each other


along parallel routes instead of working out complimentary services.

It seems to me that there are two needs involved here. First, although there are probably many private transit or bus company representatives here who feel with justification that they have just about been regulated to death, I think the urban areas of this country must assume much greater responsibility for public transportation service than they have in the past. But at the same time there has to be a shift from the narrow attitudes that have characterized public supervision in the past, stemming from transit's heydays, to a broad understanding of the importance of transportation to the welfare and character of the community, and an acceptance of public responsibility for the financial burdens of providing a comprehensive and coordinated transportation system. Of course private enterprise has a vital role to play in developing such a system.

Part of the public responsibility must at the same time be concerned with the injurious effects that may befall a particular segment of the industry in the development of a comprehensive system. I do not see how, in good conscience, an urban area whose plan calls for the construction of a rapid transit line can fail help in the adjustment of a bus company, for example, which may be adversely affected by such an improvement. And not only the owner, but his employees as well. Perhaps a solution in a situation such as this would be to arrange to have the competing bus company provide feeder or transfer service instead, with public financial support if necessary.

While I am still on the subject of "balance," I would like to say a few words about the riders of public transportation themselves, particularly in the smaller urban areas.

I would like to urge a more balanced consideration for the needs of all the people—I understand it is about half of the population—who cannot drive because they are too young, too old, too infirm or too poor. It seems to me that we have an obligation to help meet their transportation needs, particularly in the 300-odd smaller communities which have either lost all public transportation completely or have drastically curtailed it. Likewise I think the thousands of people who are riding to work every day in antiquated railroad relics deserve somewhat more decent treatment, whether or not the improvement reduces traffic congestion by attracting new riders.

In summary I would say we need more cooperation in the transit field, more coordination of transit and highways, more comprehensive transportation and land use planning, more public acceptance of responsibility, and one other thing. . . . Oh yes, and money.

I will have to say that to do the job properly there will have to be substantial Federal, State and local assistance. But I do not think there should be Federal subsidies to perpetuate existing mass transportation operations. It would be most unwise, I think, to merely throw good money after bad by subsidizing the costs of deficits rather than trying to remedy the cause of it.

I do not know at the present time whether a comprehensive program of Federal assistance should take the form of grants, loans, guarantees or a combination of any of them, but I strongly feel that whatever the form of the assistance it should be directed at the causes of the deficits, where they exist, and toward those capital improvements which will make the greatest contribution toward attracting new riders (or at least stopping the departure of old riders) and thereby help alleviate the problem of increasing traffic congestion.

The Administration is presently studying proposals for a comprehensive long range urban transportation program, and I am also studying various legislative alternatives. I would greatly welcome the comments of any individual here on the problems and possible solutions as you see them.

In any event, I hope you all will join in actively supporting passage of comprehensive legislation early next year to cope with this long neglected but vitally important problem. With this program, plus the other efforts I have mentioned, I believe transit in the U.S. can move away from a course to chaos and toward the path of conquest of the daily traffic jam.