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Hop on the Bus, Gus: The Power of Community Transportation

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Change is in the air and we don't have to go much further than the next gas station to get a whiff of it. Gas prices at the pump continue to climb. Every winter, heating oil and gas seem to become less affordable—reminders that our society can no longer rely on cheap oil to fuel its economy. We have two choices: let things happen and be pawns of the “system” we created, or make a conscious effort to embrace change as an opportunity to make necessary adjustments to the way we conduct our lives.

The attention paid to oil and natural gas prices is a good indication of the importance these hydrocarbons have in our society. We have built our society's infrastructure around the ready and cheap availability of fossil fuels. Nowhere is this quite as obvious as in our transportation infrastructure. We have allowed ourselves to become extremely dependent on cars, without which life in most communities would seem impossible. In order to get to the grocery store we need to drive, in order to go to work we need motorization. As a matter of fact, we have designed and re-designed entire communities to facilitate easy access by car.

In order to continue our car dependent lifestyle we would need to find an alternative source of energy to replace the ever more rare petroleum that has fired our engines. The chance for such finding such a source is, however, rather slim. It may not be in our best interest to do so, anyhow.

Why? Because our car dependent society has problems that go beyond those generated by the reliance on oil.

We may want to consider the need for change as an opportunity to reconsider how well our transportation serves society. In doing so, we may find that rather than simply refueling we'd like to retool it to better serve the changing needs of our society.

Consider the following:

We live in an aging society. New England especially is expected to experience a sharp increase in its population of older citizens. Aging is often accom-

panied by the gradual loss of the ability to drive. As we age, our incomes tend to decrease, so that even if we can still drive it may become less and less affordable to do so. We must adjust our transportation system to reflect this reality.

Road congestion is increasing. We have become quite used to morning traffic reports of our congested roadways. Car dependent development has led to increasingly long commutes from home to work. At the same time, our departments of transportation struggle to keep up with existing road maintenance, while being asked to build new roads to accommodate the thickening flow of traffic.

Cars do not work for everyone. Remember the time before you got your license, the time before you had your own car? How did you get to games? How did you get to the movies? Someone had to give you a ride, and a lot of time went just into organizing that ride. This is the situation many people with disabilities face, who, for one reason or another, cannot get a driver's license. We all want our independence to go where we want when we want.

All of this points to weaknesses in our current transportation system. We have to face the challenge of replacing oil as our main source of energy, but also of redesigning our current unimodal transportation system into a diversified mobility infrastructure to better serve society. Our transportation system needs to be jazzed up. We need to introduce some competition and flexibility into the mix.

Financial advisers tell us to diversify our investments to reduce vulnerability. The loss of one investment has a much-lessened impact if it makes up only a small portion of our overall portfolio. We are not only advised to diversify the type of investments we make but also to diversify across investment management companies. The nature of this advice is quite obvious: “Don't put all your eggs in one basket.”

The American value of individuality implicitly acknowledges the importance of diversity. For what else is individualism but an acceptance of the fact that we are each different and unique? While individual needs and beliefs can produce friction between people, this friction may also spark innovation and advancement. An absence of innovation leads to stagnation and obsolescence. We might consider diversity a necessary characteristic of a healthy and secure system.

In order to have a healthy and secure transportation system we must ensure that it reflects the diverse access needs of its users through multiple modes of mobility. A diversified mobility infrastructure requires a commitment to change and innovation. It also offers the opportunity for technological innovation and continued economic and social prosperity.

Cars offer many benefits and will continue to be an important element of future mobility. We, as drivers, can determine when we leave and where we want to go. An obvious element missing in our mobility mix is adequate public transportation. Public, or “community” transportation systems are those that do not require the ability to drive, and are designed to move larger groups of people efficiently and effectively. We already have

some community transportation available in Senior Transit and other human service transportation alternatives. However, availability is very limited—so limited, in fact, that its continued availability is in question.

Efforts are currently under way to better coordinate existing services that make the best use of resources and increase access. This is a necessary step and may become the first on a road to the development of a true alternative to car travel. Community transportation can only be a real alternative when it is convenient enough. Convenience is determined by frequency which is predicated on community support. Community support for a healthy and secure transportation system goes well beyond funding to include an understanding that we are better served as a society over the long term if all of us can participate and contribute. For it is a commitment to the participation of all that ensures the necessary diversity required for a healthy and secure system.

It is much cooler to live in a society that is innovative and smart than in one that is afraid of change. Let us make sure that our transportation system reflects our collective ingenuity and passion to be the best we can be, so that we can all get there from here.