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Arlington, Texas, has contracted with Via.



By [Scott Beyer](#) | Columnist

The organization Strong Towns recently introduced the hashtag #OrderlyButDumb to describe top-down plans that are large and straightforward, yet ignore the complexity of urban life. To me, the hashtag perfectly describes public transit these days.

For decades, cities have overseen transit monopolies that use heavy infrastructure, fixed routes and set schedules, under the premise that these will spur surrounding growth. And in many cities, they have. But thanks to the rise of the gig economy, workers often find themselves making multiple trips in a given day, and public transit has proven inflexible -- unable to get them from point A to point B in a timely manner, or at all. As a result, even densifying cities have seen declining ridership.

Contrast that with private transit, which has grown in success by pursuing “microtransit.” This model stresses malleable routes, on-demand service, smaller vehicles and minimal brick-and-mortar infrastructure. Companies include the bus services Via and Chariot; the ride-hailing services Uber and Lyft; and the bike-share services Zagster and LimeBike. Their flexibility lets them locate where demand exists, rather than counting on populations to come to them. Given these industry shifts, will cities stick with the “macrotransit” model, or embrace and even subsidize microtransit? St. Louis, where I recently spent some time, could be a case study.

For decades, the population there has declined, with percentage losses similar to Detroit’s. But this hasn’t stopped St. Louis from building infrastructure to anticipate a growing future. The city’s transit agency built an east-west rail system that the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis has called a boondoggle, citing minimal induced development and dreadful farebox recovery. The agency has also built a fancy downtown transit center and is considering adding bus rapid

transit. Meanwhile, St. Louis' population and its transit ridership both continue to decline. Between 2015 and 2016, it saw an almost 7 percent decline in ridership.

But St. Louis has made one pivot toward microtransit. In March, its downtown development district launched a four-month pilot project to roll out electric shuttles that can be hailed by an app and are free to riders. This mirrors a shift other cities have made toward microtransit. In 2016, Kansas City, Mo., hired Bridj to manage a small downtown van fleet (an experiment that ultimately failed). Arlington, Texas, has joined several other cities in contracting with Via. And Los Angeles County just launched an Office of Extraordinary Innovation to improve its microtransit imprint.

These examples are just the start, says Rahul Kumar, a mobility director at TransLoc, a microtransit consulting firm. In the future, microtransit companies may become the sole transit providers in smaller cities. For big cities, they may supplement existing systems by solving the first-mile/last-mile problem. "If you can actually encompass an entire short journey with a microtransit vehicle, while having that work hand-in-glove with a larger, high-capacity network, that's the ideal," says Kumar.

Indeed, these new microtransit companies could increase the flexibility of transit, creating systems that are complicated yet smart, not orderly but dumb.



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