

A DFC Special Report: Moving Detroit's Future

Introduction

One issue that has plagued Detroit and the region for decades is mass transit. And, discussions around viable transit solutions have only amplified in recent years, from successes such as the QLine opening to failures like the Regional Transit Authority millage not passing. And, now, we are being presented with yet another path towards improved transit with the [plan](#), recently outlined by Wayne County Executive Warren Evans.

As one of the key issues facing the city and the region, the Detroit Future City (DFC) Strategic Framework provided recommendations to improve access to transportation for residents as well as creating connections to job centers across the city and region. This is envisioned by the creation of high speed bus rapid transit (BRT) routes along major corridors with connections from feeder routes that serve Detroit's neighborhoods.

Since the release of the Strategic Framework in 2012, there have been great strides taken to improve the transportation system in the region. Detroit's bus system has increased frequency and serves more locations. New routes have been introduced, such as the Freshwagon, connecting six neighborhoods to Eastern Market, the 80, connecting the Lower Eastside with Midtown and New Center, and FAST routes along Gratiot, Woodward and Michigan Avenues. The QLine, the city's most notable transit improvement connecting Downtown to New Center, marks the return of the street car to Detroit 60 years after the city's original street car system ceased operation. There are continued improvements planned, including the city's pilot to connect students with public, charter schools and after school activities.

As we continue to move forward it is important to understand where we are today. It should be no surprise that the Motor City is dominated by the automobile. In Detroit, 82% of employees travel to work in an automobile, with 70% driving alone. And, 25% of Detroit's households do not have access to a private vehicle, making a large portion of the city's residents dependent on the region's meager transit system to reach a limited set of destinations both inside and outside the city [1].

Means of Transportation to Work

- 70% Drove Alone
- 13% Carpool
- 8% Public Transit
- 1% Bicycle
- 3% Walked
- 1% Other
- 4% Worked from Home



Source: American Community Survey 2016 1 Year.

As the recent bid for the second Amazon headquarters proved, a strong mass transit system is key to the competitiveness of Detroit and the region. And, as the revitalization of the city, particularly in Greater Downtown, continues, we must consider how we move people in and out of the core, and to and from job centers. Detroit faces a set of unique challenges and a mass transportation system will need to meet the needs of all residents.

This special report takes a look at several issues that must be considered as we move forward as a city and region.

Creating Vibrant Places

As the resurgence of Detroit continues, there will only be increased pressure and congestion within the city's core. Over the last five years, Downtown Detroit has added more than 700 units of housing and the number of jobs has increased by almost 4,000 to 73,634. Ninety-nine percent of these job holders, 72,913, commute from outside the Central Business District [2]. And, they are commuting to only 65,000 available parking spaces[3]. This has led some companies having to provide private buses to move their employees in and out of the city's center.

While this may be considered a "good" problem, the issue will only be exacerbated by the slew of new mega projects, such as the Hudson's site development and the Monroe blocks, and redevelopment of long vacant buildings such as the Book Tower and Metropolitan Building. The addition of the QLine will help, although its limited reach will need to be supplemented to be able to move people into the core from beyond New Center.

As we move forward into the future, we must consider the kind of city we want to be. In the past we have relied on the automobile, subsidized by inexpensive surface parking. With greater demand for land within the city's core, we must ensure that we can move people in and out efficiently and not distract from our downtown being a vibrant urban place.

Regional Competitiveness

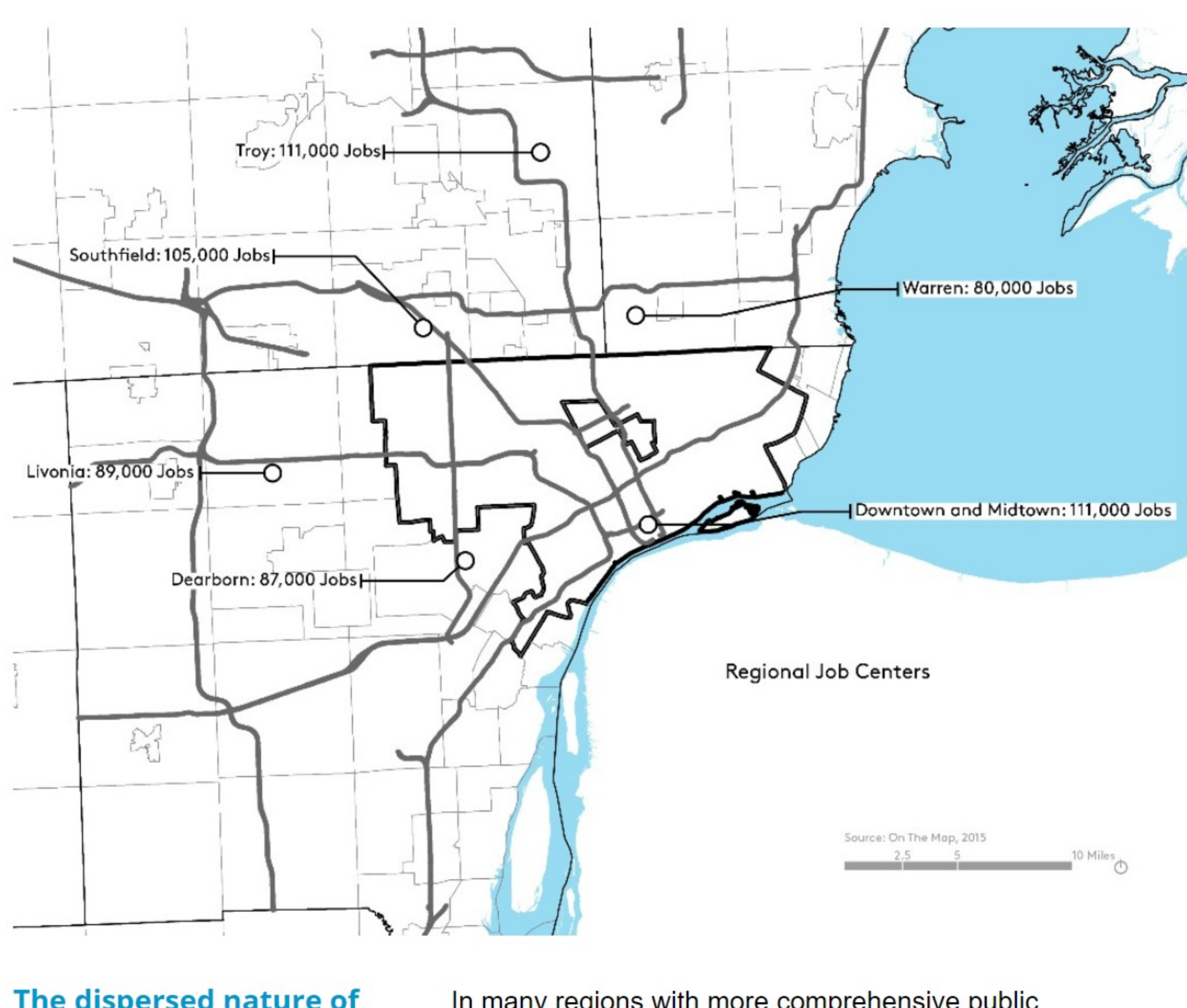
A number of factors contribute to a city's competitiveness and ability to attract business and residents. Recently the bid for the second Amazon headquarters gave us the opportunity to examine Detroit and how it compares to other cities across the country. It is clear that there are points where this region is lacking, and comprehensive mass transit is one of them; a key factor that led to the demise of the bid. While we may have missed on the opportunity to attract Amazon to the region, this is an issue that will reoccur in the future when other businesses consider their location choices.

A second factor in the failure of our Amazon bid was the presence of talent and our ability to attract talent. Over the past five years, Detroit has seen a 63% increase in residents who are 25 to 34 years old and have a four-year college degree [4]. However, the total number in this cohort is extremely small at just over 17,000 residents, which is fewer than 18,000 in that group who reside Grand Rapids. As millennials continue to prioritize urban locations with access to mass transit, improved transit options will help to attract these residents and build the talent pool within the City. The addition of mass transit will only increase the city's competitiveness and build off the strength of the dense urban core.

Creating Connectivity for Residents

When making arguments for improved mass transit, there is often a focus on its ancillary benefits. These arguments include increased economic development, attraction of residents and businesses, and creating dense urban places. While these are all benefits of an improved mass transit system, we must not lose sight of the primary focus of mass transit, which is to move people throughout the city and region, and provide the public with access to a range of destinations, including the region's job centers.

This is especially important in Metro Detroit where there are major employment centers sprawled across the region. These include the 111,000 jobs located in Downtown and Midtown, and the 111,000 in Troy, 105,000 in Southfield, 87,000 in Dearborn, and 80,000 in Warren[5].



The dispersed nature of the region's job centers provides an additional challenge for the 25% of Detroit's households that do not have access to a private vehicle [6].

In many regions with more comprehensive public transportation systems, living without an automobile is a viable lifestyle choice, but for many in our region this is not the case. The low incomes of Detroit residents and exorbitant cost to own and maintain a vehicle limit the opportunities for many residents across the city and region.

Looking toward the Future

As we look toward the future of transportation, it is important to consider how mobility may change, how we can accommodate new technology such as autonomous vehicles, and how we can ensure that the plans being developed benefit all residents of our region.

As we consider the future of regional transit not only in Metro Detroit, but across the world, the considerations of autonomous vehicles have become a matter of "when" instead of "if." While new mobility options are becoming more and more a reality every day, it is unclear are the effects that they will have on the future of cities.

The future is not certain, but what is clear is that there is the opportunity to provide a range of mobility options for residents of the city, these include autonomous vehicles, car and ride sharing. We must consider the effects of new forms of mobility on all residents and ensure that we are building a transit system that can meet the needs of those who need it the most. We also must be proactive in examining how new forms of mobility can create benefits for all. This is of particular importance as new technologies emerge and proliferate. While there are obvious potential benefits of providing mobility to those with limited options, it is important that these are considered as a supplement to strengthen mass transit and do not erode services to the general public.

A high quality and reliable mass transit system must be considered as a keystone element to the future of our city and region. Improved mobility options have the opportunity to connect residents to locations across the region. We often lament how we have fallen behind other cities and regions, however if we have the vision and leadership we can improve mass transit within the city and region and become competitive with other cities across the country.

In 2016, a millage increase to fund the proposed regional transit system, including bus rapid transit and improved bus service across the region, failed by 18,000 votes [7]. Although this vote was only two years ago, it should again be time to consider the funding for a regional transit system. To best serve Detroit and the region a transit proposal should consider the following points:

- Clear system with dedicated funding source, and increased transit funding to match other places
- A system that supports the growth of the region
- Need to think of transportation system as part of a way to connect people to opportunity.
- System that can work with Detroit's unique challenges (dispersed job centers, low income residents, etc)
- Consider the future innovations and how they can affect transportation in the region

The "Connect Southeast Michigan" transit plan proposes a new millage to raise \$5.4 billion to fund improvements to the bus system would be a good start to improving transit in the region. There are examples of recently completed transit projects such as the green line that connects Minneapolis and St. Paul, or Nashville's \$5.4 billion proposal to expand transit service across their region including light rail along five corridors and rapid bus along six corridors.

The benefits are clear and building a competitive, connected region where residents are provided with a variety of mobility options must be a priority. As we move forward we must consider the transportation investments that we make and the long term regional impact. These investments will pay dividends as we create a system where residents are connected to opportunity, we build a region that can attract talent and business through creating vibrant urban places.

[1] American Community Survey, 2016 1 Year

[2] On the Map, 2015

[3] Crain's Detroit Business

[4] City Observatory

[5] On The Map, 2015

[6] American Community Survey, 2016 1 Year

[7] Detroit Free Press

