

Get on the Bus

A Treatise on the Hartford Bus System
or
The Means to a Better Hartford

By

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If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

- John F. Kennedy

Introduction

There are opportunities for improvement in the Hartford Bus System. This paper will present some personal thoughts of the author, an individual who makes extensive use of the CT Transit system, as well as the results of Internet research, a personally conducted survey as found in Appendix E, and interviews with local CT Transit and Department of Public Works officials.

This paper will demonstrate that unregulated driving habits misallocate scarce resources and ultimately lead to suffering in the environment, economy and community. This paper will also provide several simple improvements to better the existing bus system. Hopefully this paper will inspire thought, dialogue and changes in the way the State of Connecticut, City of Hartford and Greater Hartford Region approach public transit.

Part I - A Treatise on the Hartford Bus System

The city of Hartford is suffering economically. In the city of Hartford, the unemployment rate is approximately 10 percent and the poverty rate is around 31 percent¹. Almost 44 percent of Hartford's children are growing up below the poverty line². This occurs while the Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford regional unemployment rate is around five percent³ and the state poverty rate is approximately eight percent⁴. Clearly there are disparities between Hartford and the surrounding suburbs.

Causes of Unemployment

There are reasons why the city of Hartford is suffering financially. One reason for this suffering is the inadequacy of the Hartford bus system. Flaws in the system limit job opportunities for low-income residents and at the same time hinder business by suppressing supply in the labor market. These flaws continue to depress the local economy and raise unemployment when those who can afford to, choose automobiles over available bus service.

In the Greater Hartford Region, approximately 90 percent of residents have access to an automobile⁵. In the City of Hartford 36 percent of households do not have access to an automobile⁶

Without access to an automobile, how are Hartford's people able to get to work, earn an income and provide for their family? They must find alternate means of transit. One option is taking the bus, but in Hartford the bus doesn't always offer convenient or timely access to locations outside of downtown.

All but two buses in the region travel into and out of downtown. See Appendix D. For citizens that rely on the bus, this limits their employment opportunities. Either they must find work downtown or commute downtown to catch a second bus. For parents who rely on the bus, this guarantees they will spend less time with their children, providing supervision, making sure they eat well and maintaining a positive family environment. Such sacrifices ultimately cost the region more when these problems culminate in a need for increased social services.

In the state of Connecticut, almost 70% of survey respondents cited transportation as their top barrier to employment⁷. The fact that buses do not run frequently in the evening and on weekends creates hardships. For people who do not work a typical nine-to-five job, they are left with two options. Either they choose to not work evenings and weekends or they spend a disproportionate amount of their commute waiting at a bus stop. The first option hurts them financially. The second option leaves them at the mercy of Mother Nature as most bus stops do not contain shelters and those that do are often run down. In the winter this can prove especially trying.

Aside from infrequent bus service, many in poverty cannot find jobs because those who might support their jobs are spending their money elsewhere. For many Americans, the money that they could spend on local goods and services is instead spent on car loans, auto insurance and foreign oil.

CNN estimates that owning a car in Hartford costs the typical person \$9,000 per year⁸. If two-car families were able to become one-car families, if suburban teens had better access to friends and activities without the need of a personal vehicle, if the elderly could give up their car and still retain independence, a large sum of money would be kept in the local economy. According to Transit for Connecticut, a local non-profit coalition, “when people are able to reduce transportation expenses, these savings are typically spent on goods and services, generating additional tax revenue and contributing to the local economy⁹.” Rather than spending that \$9,000 on their automobile, people could spend that money at local restaurants, on local activities or for local crafts. Using money in this fashion would create jobs. More jobs would lead to competition amongst employers and increased wages – a significant benefit to those in poverty.

Eliminating even a small fraction of cars would make a difference as small changes in consumer behavior can have a large effect on the local economy. Any dollar that gets spent locally eventually gets spent several times due to the phenomenon known as the multiplier effect. First the dollar is spent at a local store and goes in part to an employee’s salary. Then that part of the dollar is spent at another local store and goes to a second person’s salary. The greater the regions propensity to spend locally, the more times that dollar will get spent such that a single dollar can be spent from two to ten times before its added effect on the local economy diminishes. Estimates by Transit for Connecticut, suggest that each dollar invested in public transit results in three dollars in economic benefit to the region¹⁰.

Direct economic benefit comes from increased employment and decreased unemployment transfer payments. Indirect benefits come from decreases in municipal costs to pave roads and fill potholes as road traffic lessens. Lower demand for gasoline also lowers the cost of other oil-based products such as tires, asphalt and plastic¹¹, leading to further economic benefits.

Assuming that the regional multiplier effect is only 2.0 and assuming the average cost of owning a car is half of the \$9,000 estimated by CNN, the elimination of 10,000 vehicles,

just one for every 120 people in Hartford and Tolland Counties¹², would put \$90,000,000 into the local economy. Estimating that the average annual cost of employing a person is \$75,000 (accounting for both wages and overhead), a conservative estimate suggests that if 1% of the region's citizens gave up their car more than 1,000 jobs could be created.

Several Benefits of an Improved Transit System

Hartford can prosper as a result of improved public transit. Through a healthy transit system the environment, economy and communities will flourish. Citizens will be able to lead healthier lifestyles, find better jobs and engage in the civic arena.

As proven, reducing the number of cars in the region would increase the size of the labor pool, lower fuel costs and increase employment opportunities. Reducing the number of cars in the region would benefit the environment as well. As more people explore public transit options, a decrease in automobile use will reduce pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions directly. Indirectly, a decrease in automobile use would decrease traffic congestion and commute time, further reducing pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions. Health problems associated with poor air quality would decrease and lifestyle changes due to increased walking would further benefit citizens' health.

Even more, the community can benefit through increased bus use. For an area as culturally segregated as the capital region, maintaining a racially and economically diverse crowd on the bus would provide opportunity for people of different backgrounds to interact on common ground. Socio-economic differences between groups would diminish further if public transportation became the norm. Spending limited funds at local businesses rather than at the gas station would lead to an improved small business community. Estimates suggest that small business accounts for 75% of job growth in the United States¹³. For the 10% who are unemployed in Hartford, small businesses could be the right prescription. If enough businesses develop to create competition for workers, wages would rise and that would be a blessing for the 31% of city residents who currently live in poverty.

Why Current Trends Suggest Use of Public Transit Will Increase in the Future

Current trends suggest that public transit demand will increase in the near future. Globally, more and more people are moving to cities. Nationally, baby boomers are set to retire and gas prices are rising. As these trends evolve into problems, public transportation will become the common solution.

According to recent figures, for the first time in history the majority of earth's population now lives in cities. In fact, a record 3.3 billion people are estimated to live in cities. By 2030 an estimated 5 billion people will live in cities¹⁴. While much of this can be attributed to developing nations, the United States is poised to follow the trend as well.

In the United States, the 78 million Americans who make up the baby boomer generation are approaching retirement. In order to maintain their mobility, and active lifestyles, it is estimated that many may move back to cities¹⁵. Furthermore, social security may put a strain on the finances of retirees and workers. Currently, social security transfer payments account for 7% of Gross Domestic Product. By 2030 the amount is estimated to reach 13% and by 2050 spending on social security will reach 15% of GDP¹⁶. Many economists see this as an impending crisis and propose several solutions. Suggestions include raising taxes, reducing benefits, or allowing increased immigration¹⁷. If benefits decrease or taxes increase, retirees and workers will have less money to spend. In order to make ends meet, many may adapt by choosing public transit over car ownership. If increased immigration is allowed, it is likely that immigrants will settle in cities, as they have in the past. These trends suggest that demand for public transportation will rise.

Rising gas prices also suggest that demand for public transit will rise. For the first time in history, oil has crossed the \$100 threshold. Some analysts suggest oil could reach \$150 per barrel¹⁸. Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela, suggests oil could reach \$200 per barrel if tensions in the Middle East do not subside¹⁹. This poses short-term problems. Gasoline maintains a monopoly status when it comes to driving. As a result America's demand for gasoline is inelastic. Despite large changes in price (almost 800% since

1998²⁰) consumption has actually increased (almost 25% since 1998²¹). Time, however, will make demand more elastic. As prices remain elevated, people will seek other commuting options. Unless electric cars or other technologies become practical, public transit remains the most likely solution.

Part II - The Means to a Better Hartford

There are ways to improve Hartford's bus system. Not all of the solutions require extensive or expensive changes. After relying on the Hartford bus system for the past 18 months, surveying 158 area residents, and speaking with local officials it seems that there are several simple improvements that would increase the effectiveness and appeal of the Hartford bus system.

Develop Cross-town Routes

Currently the majority of bus routes travel into and out of downtown. Two routes do not travel downtown. They are the X and the L routes, which traverse the Putnam Bridge and Bissel Bridge respectively. There are only a handful of locations where two or more routes intersect outside of downtown. See Appendix D.

If one route were to be added to the system, the most utility would come from a Bishop's Corner to Elmwood route. From Bishop's Corner, the bus would travel to the University of Connecticut-West Hartford branch, past St. Joseph's College, onto and along Prospect Avenue through the West End, past the Shaw's Supermarket shopping plaza on Kane Street, to the movie theatre on New Park Avenue and on to Elmwood. A variation on this route could start at the North End housing projects at Mark Twain Drive and Plainfield Street where the S bus stops and could continue past Elmwood to Newington Center. Such a route would intersect existing routes on Albany Avenue, Fern Street, Farmington Avenue, Capital Avenue, Park Street, New Park Avenue, New Britain Avenue and the P route, which travels through New Britain and Newington. Creating this additional route would provide residents, students and tourists with improved access to groceries, jobs,

entertainment and retail while reducing congestion downtown. Employers would have access to a larger labor pool and the economy would benefit.

This route would also intersect the New Britain-Hartford bus-way, which is scheduled for completion in 2012²². Creating a connector route now would support this project by encouraging commercial infrastructure and consumer demand before the bus-way opens.

Maintain Shelters

The task of maintaining bus shelters is currently left to the local municipalities. Due to budget constraints and no mandate, many shelters are dilapidated. Few have timetables, maps or benches. Most are missing windowpanes. For area residents who rely on the bus, this frequently leaves them standing in the wind or rain without adequate protection.

In the wintertime it is not uncommon to see a mound of snow piled in front of bus stops after the plows drive by. After several cold days these mounds can turn rock hard and become an imposing obstacle. For passengers without health insurance or sick time, lack of protection from wind, rain and snow can prove costly.

Poorly maintained shelters are also negative advertising. Suburban residents who currently drive are most likely turned off by the sight of wet, miserable passengers standing next to graffiti and litter. To support current passengers and attract new ones, money should be set aside by the state so that CT Transit is able to maintain all bus shelters at a reasonable standard.

Install Bicycle Racks at Bus Stops

Recently, bicycle racks were added to city buses so that passengers could ride their bike to the bus stop, attach their bike to the bus, travel somewhere, get back on their bike and continue to their destination. Shelters outside of downtown should have bicycle racks as well, so that passengers can ride to the bus stop, lock their bike there and get on the bus.

Decrease the Frequency of Stops

A common reason that area residents don't ride the bus is that trips take too long. See Appendix C. This is also a complaint of many who do ride the bus. See Appendix A. One way to cut down on the length of trips, save gas, decrease traffic congestion and reduce the cost of maintaining bus stops is to eliminate the quantity of stops.

Routes like the E, T or U stop at any corner if a person is waiting. Sometimes the bus stops at one corner to pick up one person and the next corner to pick up two people and so on down the route. Braking, idling and accelerating are the most inefficient uses of fuel. Stopped buses also delay the cars behind them, increasing congestion and leading to further inefficiencies in the regional economy. Eliminating the frequency of stops would allow the bus to traverse its route quicker and at a lower cost.

Reducing the frequency of stops would let city buses function more like express buses. Considering that express-riders rate the bus higher at 5.7 out of 7 compared to 4.8 out of 7 for other riders, it seems that such a change would be well received. See Appendix F.

According to Kevin Burnham of the Hartford Department of Public Works, approving bus stop locations is the responsibility of local municipalities²³.

Increase Weekend and Evening Bus Service

A common complaint of bus passengers is that buses run infrequently in the evenings and on weekends. During these times most buses either stop running or run less frequently. For people who are looking for jobs, this means they must find a job during typical business hours or spend countless hours of the week waiting for buses, when they could be at home with their families. For people who rely on the bus for errands, the lack of weekend and evening buses is aggravating. As one female passenger exclaimed with big eyes and an ironic tone, "Try grocery shopping by bus on the weekends".

There is good news however. According to Phil Frye of CT Transit, the budget will increase in June 2008 in order to provide extended service hours for some routes²⁴.

Foster Smart Growth through Improved Zoning Policy

Smart growth has many definitions but is commonly considered as the creation of commercial and residential infrastructure around public transit. Smart growth supports public transit by providing convenient destinations for transit passengers. Public transit supports smart growth by bringing people directly to and from commercial and residential development. Smart growth and public transportation are like oxygen and fuel. Separate, they are idle. When mixed, it takes but a small spark to begin an amazing reaction. As urban trends continue and more people move to cities, the people will be the spark that ignites the smart growth-public transit reaction.

In order to encourage smart growth and public transportation, zoning laws should be revised. A start would be to allow for taller buildings and mixed-use development along existing and proposed bus routes. Currently, the majority of buildings in Hartford are allowed to be no more than 3 ½ stories tall and there are limits on population density²⁵. By allowing corner lots or all lots to reach a height of 4 ½, 5 ½ or more stories, smart growth will be able to grow organically as economic conditions permit.

By providing more housing and employment opportunities around public transportation some of the 27% of people who do not ride the bus because existing routes are geographically inconvenient might change their mind. See Appendix C.

Increase the Excise Tax on Gasoline for Non-Commercial Drivers

Forty-three percent of express-bus commuters like the cost of the bus. See Appendix F. As they explain, the bus is cheaper than parking downtown. When public transit is the wise financial decision people choose it. Another way to make riding the bus the wise choice is to increase the excise tax on gasoline. This is the method employed by many

European nations (where gas prices are almost double those in the United States) to create demand for public transit. As travelers often recount, it works.

Unsubstantiated rumors suggested that the bus fare would increase by 25 cents in 2008. Comparing the positive effects of riding the bus versus the negative effects of driving, the burden should, more appropriately, be placed on drivers. Rather than increasing the bus fare by 25 cents, the excise tax on gasoline should be increased by 25 cents and it should continue to increase annually. This would send the message that public transit is to be used and respected. By making public transit the wise choice financially, Hartford will receive the benefits of an improved environment, economy and community.

The Little Things

There were other complaints voiced by those who participated in the survey. Often buses are not on time or leave early. Other passengers are loud or rude. Bus drivers are rude and bus stops rarely include timetables, maps or benches.

It is understandable that buses may arrive late due to traffic conditions. Unless CT Transit is prepared to reimburse customers for the losses caused by missed time, buses should never leave early. Considering the infrequency of many routes, a bus that leaves early may delay a passenger by 20 minutes or more. For those who have meetings or for those who punch clocks, a bus leaving early can be quite unfortunate.

Often there are passengers who are speaking loudly or even yelling. There are many passengers who listen to music so loud that everyone can hear it. When this music is full of profanity it can be unpleasant and intimidating. It is up to the bus driver, in his position of authority, to stand up for passengers who wish to have a calm, quiet ride. Bus drivers should be encouraged and required to maintain peace on their vehicles. If bus drivers begin to do this it may help their reputation. As it stands almost 16% of passengers feel that the drivers are rude. See Appendix F.

There is also a lack of amenities at bus stops. Across from Bushnell Park, one Saturday afternoon after a jazz festival, a tourist from Scotland waited 45 minutes for a bus. Because there was no timetable available, she had no idea when the bus was coming and because there was no bench for her to sit on, she was tired and frustrated. Next to her, a family with crying children waited uncomfortably and a man paced back and forth on the sidewalk. Had any of these people known the bus schedule, perhaps they would have spent more time at the jazz festival and had a better day. Experiences like these give the city a poor reputation and likely don't encourage repeat visits.

Collect Better Ridership Data

According to Phil Frye, CT Transit can provide the fact that 13,450,000 Hartford area passengers took the bus last year but they do not know when and where these passengers got on or when and where they got off²⁶. By attaching a clock and a GPS to the fare collectors it would be possible to gather this information. Adjusting routes and schedules to passenger demand would be made easier. Officials would also be able to hold drivers accountable and ensure that buses don't leave early.

Advertise

The common response to the question "Why don't you ride the bus?" was "Because I have a car". The look on the faces of respondents was a mixture of shock, disgust and bewilderment, which seems to imply that the bus is an inferior good. As people's income rises, their demand for the bus decreases. One possible reason for this is cultural. Perhaps people just don't think about the bus. This was another reason why survey respondents don't ride the bus. See Appendix C. In order to get people thinking about the bus, aside from excise taxes, advertising may be necessary.

The recent effort by Governor M. Jodi Rell to promote the bus by providing 10 free bus passes to new passengers is a good step²⁷. Other suggestions for promoting the bus include, making the bus free on Fridays, increasing television or radio commercials

(especially during rush hour) or working with employers to provide subsidized bus fare. Providing brochures with system maps, or selling multi-use bus tickets at locations outside of downtown would also serve to raise awareness. Prime locations for such activity would be gas stations, grocery stores or anywhere lotto tickets are sold

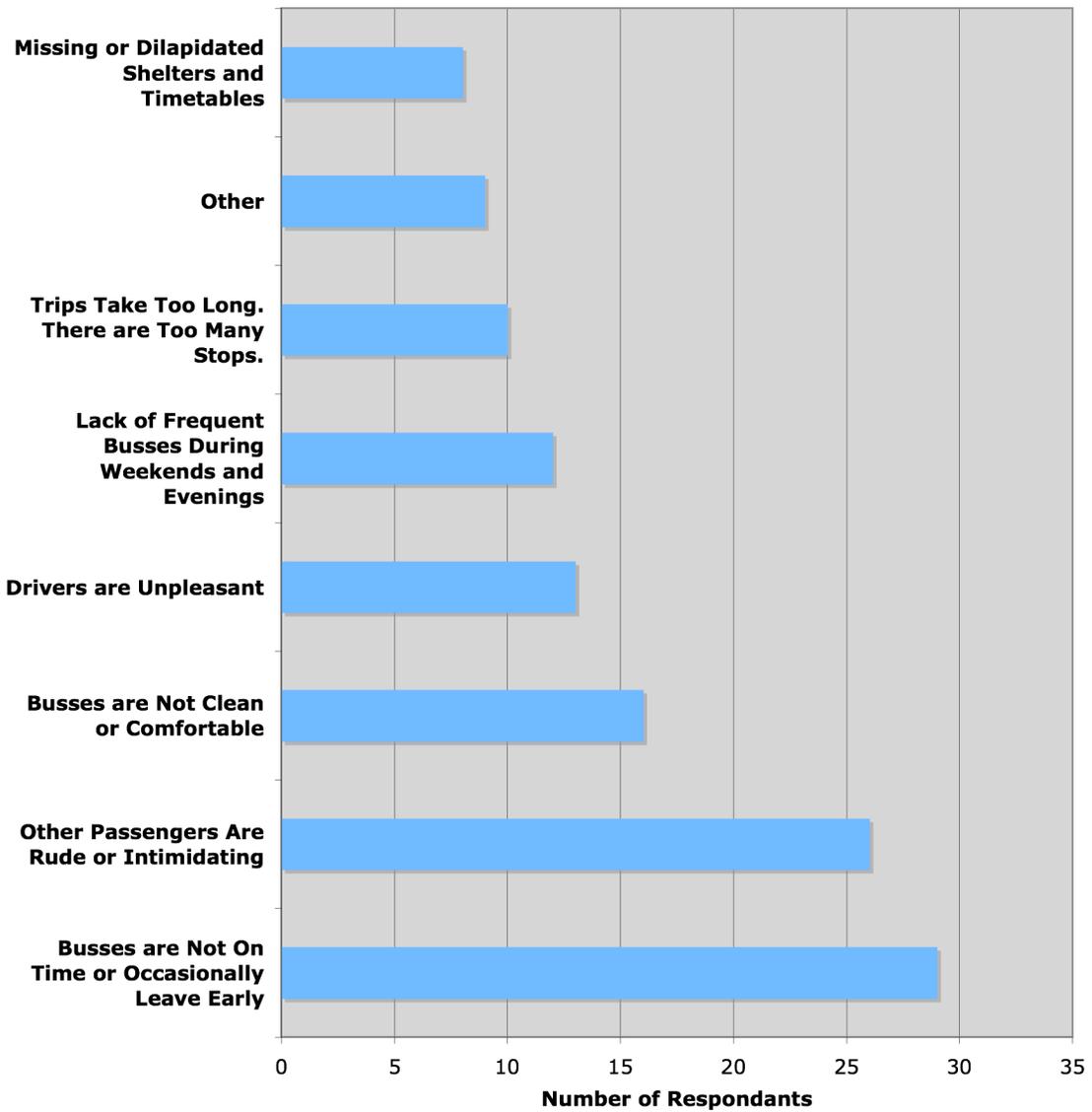
Conclusion

As Adam Smith explains in the Wealth of Nations, money is best represented by the labor it purchases²⁸. The dollars being spent by driving purchase the labor of foreigners and others outside of the region when area residents purchase an automobile, gasoline, spare parts, and in most cases auto insurance. By spending money in this manner, the region is trading its local labor potential for the labor of others and this leads to higher unemployment in Hartford.

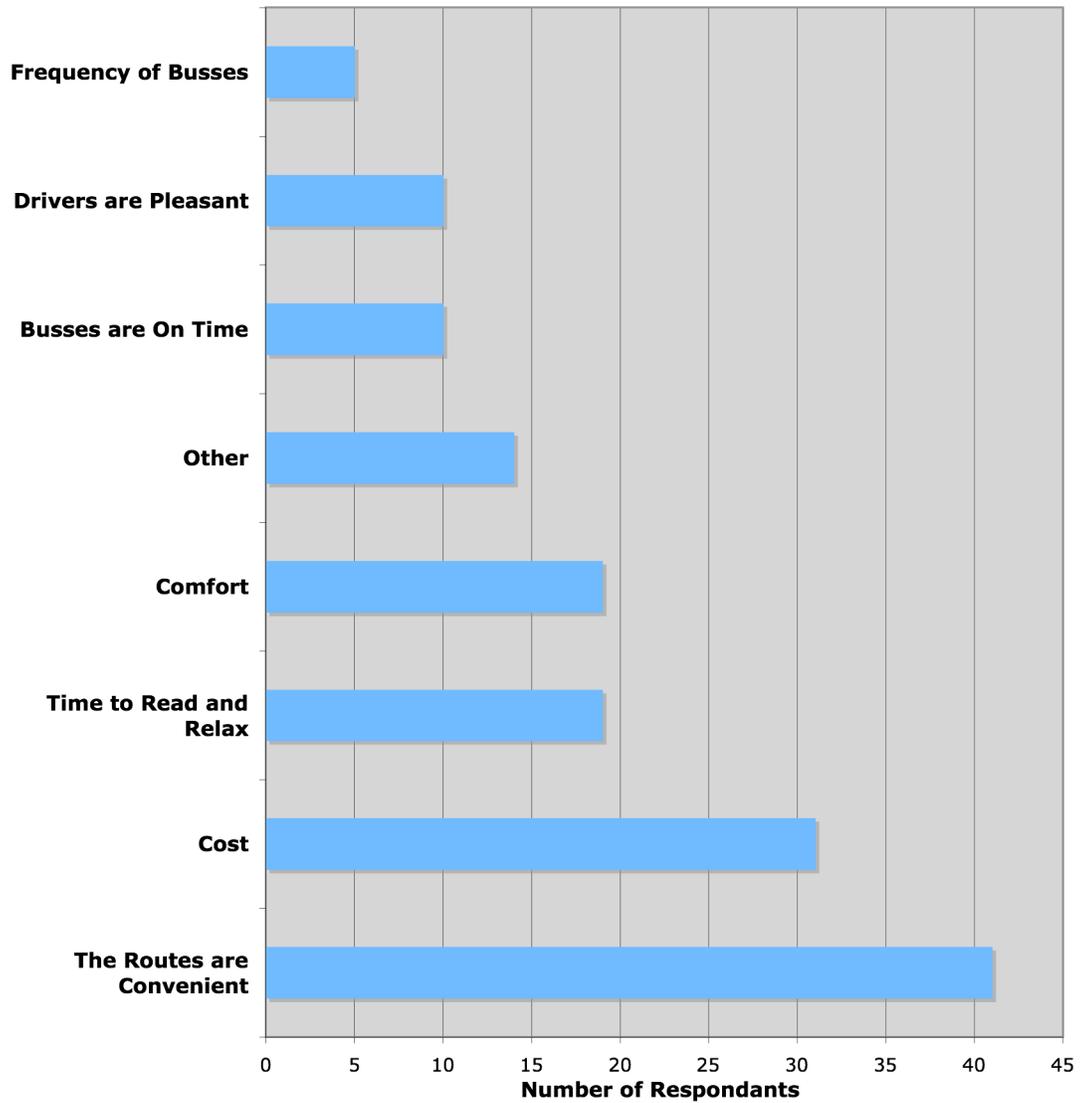
As Adam Smith also explains, one duty of government is "the erection and maintenance of those public works and institutions which are useful but not capable of bringing in a profit to individuals²⁹". The bus is certainly useful. Not all residents are able to afford a car. It is likely that without available bus service, more than 10% of city residents would be unemployed³⁰ and more than 44% of city children would grow up in poverty³¹. Therefore it is absolutely the duty of government to provide bus service, and if the government is to provide bus service then it should be provided such that maximum utility is achieved. This requires increasing the quality of service and increasing the number of citizens that use this service. In this manner, the region will reap economic and environmental benefits as fewer cars occupy the roads.

Yet, it is not just the economy and environment that will prosper. Communities will prosper as well. Through an improved bus system, the region will support smart growth, active lifestyles and the opportunity for unrelated citizens to interact more often in the course of the day. It is therefore obvious that for the environment, the economy and the community, the bus is Hartford's ticket to prosperity and vehicle for change.

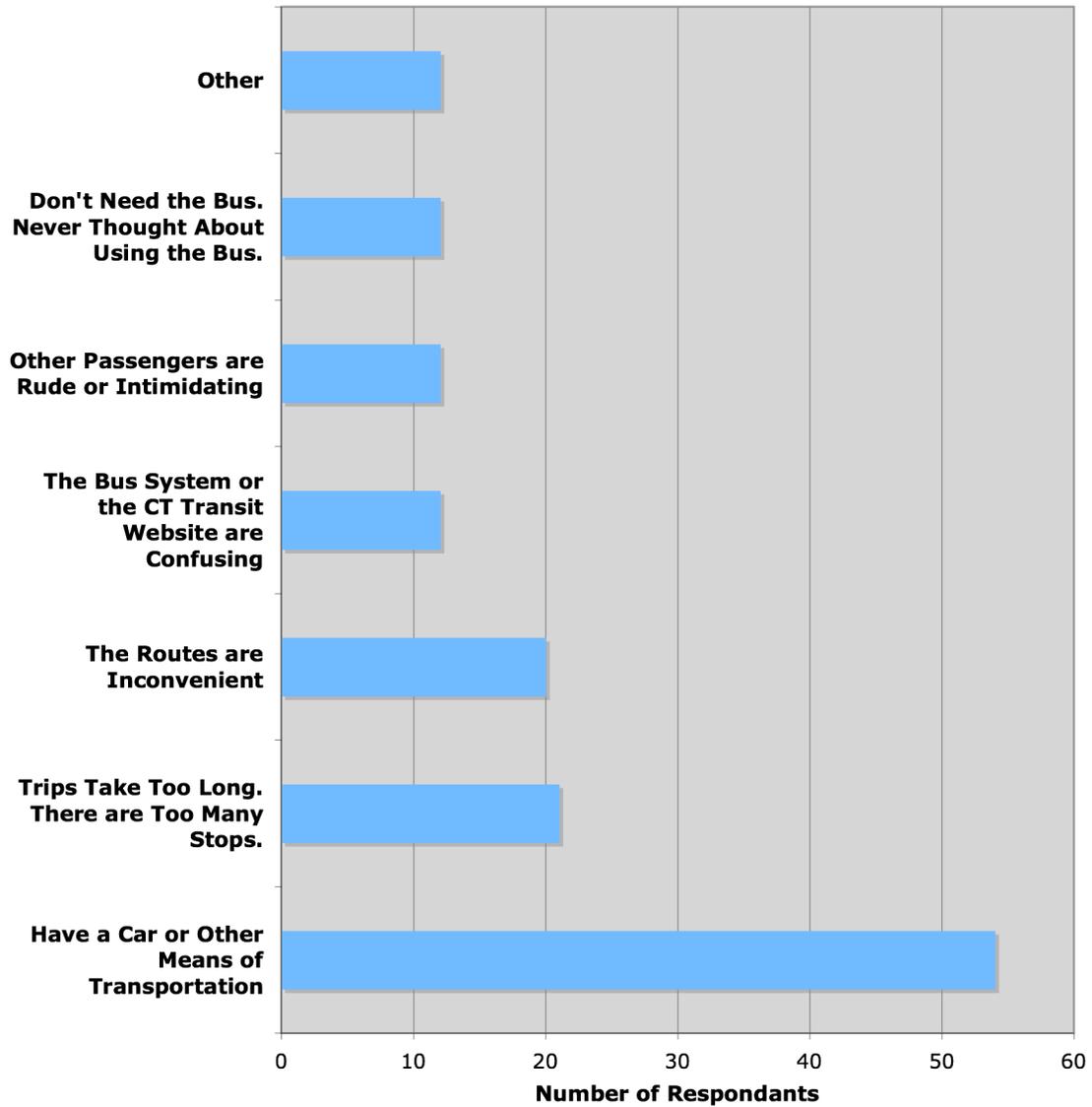
Appendix A – What People Dislike About the Hartford Bus System



Appendix B – What People Like About the Hartford Bus System



Appendix C – Why People Don't Use the Hartford Bus System



Appendix D – Map of the Hartford Bus System³²



Appendix E – Sample Bus Survey

- 1) Do you ride the bus? If your answer is no, proceed to Question 7.
- 2) On average, how many roundtrips do you make per week?
- 3) Which bus route do you ride the most?
- 4) How do you rate the bus on a scale of 1 to 7, 7 being the best?
- 5) Name two things you like about the bus.
- 6) Name two things you dislike about the bus.
- 7) If your answer to Question 1 was “No”, list two reasons why you do not ride the bus.

Appendix F – Statistics from Bus Survey

- Number of people surveyed – 158
- Number of people who ride the bus – 83
- Number of people who do not ride the bus – 75
- Number of people who ride express buses – 23
- Average rating of the Hartford bus system – 5.12 out of 7
- Average rating of the Hartford bus system by express commuters – 5.7 / 7
- Average rating of the Hartford bus system by non-express commuters – 4.8 / 7
- Percentage of bus riders at Capitol Community College – 73%
- Percentage of bus riders at Manchester Community College – 22%
- Percentage of bus riders that think bus drivers are rude – 16%
- Percentage of bus riders that think bus drivers are pleasant – 12%
- Percentage of express commuters that like the cost of the bus – 43%
- Average number of roundtrips per person per week – 5.3

Appendix G – Thoughts on Tourism

Hartford is uniquely situated between New York City and Boston, Massachusetts, two of America's most popular tourist destinations for overseas travelers³³. In order to capitalize on the regional tourist trade, the capitol region should focus on several minor changes to quickly upgrade its public transit system. These few changes would allow tourists to more easily, affordably and comfortably explore not just the City of Hartford but also the capitol region, from Newington to Manchester. By keeping tourists engaged in the entire region, we will keep them in the area longer and reap a more significant economic gain.

The region would be made more navigable by placing easy to read maps of the Hartford bus system at every existing shelter. This would give tourists a better idea of where they are and where they are going. How can one comfortably explore the region, if they don't even know where they are?

Timetables should be placed at every existing bus stop, whether there exists a shelter or not. This would give tourists a better sense of time and commitment. Rather than standing awkwardly on a street corner, they would be able to engage in local activities considerably longer, have a better time and most likely spend more money.

These sorts of amenities are commonplace around European cities. International tourists most likely have an intrinsic sense of bus systems and thus some of the amenities at our bus stations should be made suited to their natural assumptions.

By having a transit system that works for tourists, they will be able to travel cheaper in our area because they won't need to rent a car. This may also provide a higher level of comfort, as many people may not feel safe driving in a foreign country. If tourists are having a comfortable and affordable time they may stay longer and spend more of there money in the region. They may make a return visit. They may encourage others to visit Hartford.

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