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## Break Up the Car Culture Club



**The Catch-22 of Catching The train: Is there so little late-night service because there's so little demand or so little demand because there's so little service?**

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

### Philly would be better off if mass transit were a priority.

by [Daniel Brook](#)

In November, "Happy and Car-Free," an essay by urban planner Robert Ravelli, ran in this space. The author argued that the city's "extensive transit system" makes it easy to live without a car in Philadelphia.

The next week, *City Paper* ran a letter to the editor in response that began with the question, "Is Robert Ravelli on crack?" The letter went on to say that the SEPTA system is "an embarrassment to the very concept of public transportation. I gladly pay outrageous auto insurance rates in Center City simply to avoid the necessity of ever taking SEPTA, and I feel sorry for those who have to."

The truth is somewhere in between Ravelli's views and those of his feisty critic. Ravelli is not on crack, but who could blame him if he was on Zoloft.

As a car-free Philadelphian, I can attest to the fact that it is possible to have a reasonably happy car-free existence in this city, but it means occasionally reaching for the antidepressants.

The transit system seems configured for those who have cars but don't want to pay the exorbitant parking rates downtown -- people who take SEPTA to and from work and drive everywhere else. That means the 30 percent of Philadelphians who choose not to have a car or flat out can't afford one are stuck after-hours with bus routes that are served twice an hour (when they're on schedule at all). Is it any wonder that so many people drive home drunk in this town when the bars let out or that inebriated late-night cycling is the unofficial municipal pastime?

Weekends are even worse. That's when SEPTA construction projects shut down parts of the El and the Center City regional rail tunnel. SEPTA officials say this work needs to be done and weekends affect the fewest riders, but it's hard to imagine, say, the Chicago Transit Authority shutting down the El's every weekend except in an extreme emergency.

According to SEPTA, service trails off precipitously after-hours and on weekends because demand drops off. Tight budget constraints only make matters worse. But there's always the chance there's a chicken-and-egg problem. Is the service low after-hours because there are so few riders or are there so few riders because there is such inadequate service? If there were decent after-hours service would some Philadelphia residents who ride SEPTA 9 to 5 ditch their cars?

Ostensibly, turning Philadelphia from a 9-to-5 town where people come to work to a 24-hour city where people come to live has been a goal since the Rendell days. But 24-hour cities require 24-hour transit. To the extent that the city is attracting new residents, it is attracting people who want the walkable city lifestyle that transit must complement. At a South Philly neighborhood meeting, one longtime resident observed that new Bella Vista residents were less likely to own cars than natives. These are the people who actually move to Philadelphia by choice -- the people the city needs to



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space contributor wrote, "we' ll never woo anyone to Philadelphia who

at the funding it needs to expand evening and weekend service. But can be made. One change that won't cost the government any money is car snaring, which is now up and running in Center City and West Philadelphia. According to statistics provided by PhillyCarShare, car-share members increase their transit ridership by about 30 percent. And since car-share members generally live in the inner-ring neighborhoods where car-free living is most viable, this should boost transit ridership on the routes that serve these neighborhoods. SEPTA officials say they are following the developments at PhillyCarShare and are thinking of ways to increase ridership among its members.

City officials can also help build demand by fighting this walkable city's irrational car culture. But this would take leadership from the top a la the Mayor's fitness campaign. In New York City, to encourage residents to use mass transit, Mayor Bloomberg decided to take the subway to work every day. This from a man who could afford to commute by limo or helicopter or submarine. Meanwhile here in Philly, our mayor (who lives three blocks from the Broad Street subway and works directly above it) is chauffeured to work. If Robert Ravelli's on crack, I don't want to know what the mayor's smoking.



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