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How Metro Shapes D.C.

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Metro to Dulles! Metro to Tysons! Metro to BWI! Purple Line! Silver Line! Light rail for Arlington and the District! All over the region lately, officials have been making tracks to propose additions to Washington's popular rail transit system, promising that such expansion will spur carefully orchestrated, sparkling new development and offer a comfortable alternative to commuter-clogged roads.

At a time when local governments are struggling to maintain and operate the existing Metro, some of these schemes may seem rash. The grand promises that accompany calls for more rapid transit aren't always fulfilled, and the multibillion-dollar costs of realizing them can be prohibitive. Yet as Metro celebrates its 30th anniversary, it's clear that it has brought significant -- and mostly positive -- change to the Washington area. Since the first train pulled out of the station in 1976, the system has transformed places such as downtown Washington, U Street, Ballston and Bethesda, making them vibrant, thriving and walkable.

And under the right circumstances, rail could do the same for neighborhoods from Anacostia to Loudoun and from Columbia Pike to Columbia. If the creation and success of Metro have shown anything, it's that however difficult and expensive it may be to build, rail may in fact be the most powerful tool we have to guide growth far into the future and help create an optimum living environment.

A good transportation system doesn't simply move people from one place to another -- it also shapes the places it serves. In the 1960s, Warren Quenstedt, a major player in planning rail for Washington, was asked how the process worked. He replied, "You start by asking: What kind of city do you want?" Only once that question is answered can planners determine the proper roles for rails, roads, buses and other modes of transportation -- including cars -- in a city's design.

When the debate over creating Metro started half a century ago, during another boom time for Washington, rail was far from the obvious solution to guiding the region's development. The city had flourished during World War II, and the Cold War's emerging national security state ensured that the growth would continue. But where would Washington's new arrivals live and work?

Some planners thought that cities themselves were obsolete and that the best thing to do would be to spread people out as much as possible. In 1950, the National Capital Park and Planning Commission suggested locating new federal employment on suburban campuses from Suitland to Bethesda. Without a cluster of new government and private offices downtown, there would not be thousands of people all going to the same area to pack a train and make rapid transit efficient and affordable. Washingtonians would have to depend on buses and cars -- lots of cars.

Others hoped to keep the District at the center of the metropolitan area by building federally financed superhighways through the city to funnel people in and out. This plan would have carved up Washington to accommodate the car. It was the orthodox view, endorsed by most professional planners, the city's leading businesses and Congress. And planners made a start on it in the 1950s, bulldozing hundreds of acres in the District's Southwest quadrant to make room for the Southwest Freeway and blocks of garden apartments.

A third alternative -- building a broad rapid-transit system in place of most highways -- seemed quixotic. Since the popularization of the automobile in the 1910s, American cities had rejected plans for new subways. Tellingly, the loudest calls for transit came not from expert planners but from citizen activists, several of them elevated to power by the Kennedy administration. A Montgomery County anti-highway activist named Darwin Stolzenbach was tapped to lead federal transportation planning for Washington. He called for scaling back the destructive freeways, a position that won him condemnation from the American Automobile Association and its allies in Congress.

But Stolzenbach was able to draw on a new spirit in Washington, one that believed in the power of government and the social benefits of large-scale public investments. It was a spirit best articulated by President Lyndon B. Johnson. "We have the power to shape the civilization that we want," he told the nation in his 1964 "Great Society" speech. The Great Society would be, among other things, "a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community."

With support from the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations, the local activists won. The highways mapped in the 1950s and '60s were scaled back, and billions of dollars were diverted into the 106-mile rapid-transit system we know as Metro. Approved by local jurisdictions in 1968 and begun in 1969, the system was completed in 2001, then extended in 2004.

Metro today is half underground, but its effects are fully visible on the surface. Downtown, it has aided the revitalization of a historic, pedestrian-friendly office district east of the White House. Over the years, Metro access to the area has helped spur such civic improvements as the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, two convention centers and the Verizon Center. After years of disinvestment had left the downtown area to prostitutes and pornography shops, Metro brought back private money to build new, if boxy, office buildings. Most recently, the system is the lure for the tenants and condo buyers who are fulfilling the District government's longstanding goal of restoring a living downtown.

North of downtown, Metro allowed what the District's longtime congressional delegate Walter Fauntroy called "renewal with the people." He hoped that unlike in Southwest, where redevelopment had moved black residents out and white residents in, the historically black neighborhoods of U Street and Shaw could be improved, not gutted. In the mid-1960s, he persuaded planners to add what is now the Green Line, which has achieved Fauntroy's goals of physically preserving and upgrading the area.

Socially, the story is more complicated, exposing the downsides of the system's success. Metro construction destroyed many neighborhood businesses, and now Metro access threatens to make the areas so desirable that high rents will displace longtime residents as surely as bulldozers would have.

In the suburbs, Metro's achievements are also mixed. The Arlington and Montgomery county boards were particularly farsighted in seizing the opportunity to shape their communities. They carefully selected transit routes that would steer development to favored corridors, enacted zoning laws to encourage density near stations, and faced down opposition by not-in-my-back-yard opponents.

The results are mixed-use places such as Ballston and Bethesda, areas where cars, although not banned, are optional. Unfortunately, not all suburban counties were so attentive. Twice -- in the 1960s and again in the 1970s -- Fairfax County missed chances to route rail through Tysons Corner, and only now are such plans again being considered. Rail can transform a place, but only when combined with careful and insistent planning.

Even as it shapes the surface, Metro has itself become one of the region's grand public spaces, bringing together black and white, rich and poor, young and old, urban and suburban, local and tourist to mingle in the stations and on the trains. And to do so in not purely utilitarian surroundings, reflected in Harry Weese's grand vaults and the trains' carpeted interiors.

None of this was cheap; Metro cost about $20 billion in 2001 dollars. But its creators were not looking for the cheapest transportation solution. Rather, they hoped to use transit to build a better Washington. Nor was the process fast. The construction cranes just now appearing alongside some of Metro's first stations show that it can take decades for rail to bring the kind of development planners wish for.

Nonetheless, today's Washingtonians are the beneficiaries of a vision that was fought for and put into motion a generation ago. If they are grateful, they will repay the favor by laying more groundwork for the next generation.

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