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JEFF GERRITT: A Third World city that works

Curitiba, Brazil, shows world how to run a transit system

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BY JEFF GERRITT
FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

CURITIBA, BRAZIL -- From atop Curitiba's 40-story Panoramic Tower, the city of 1.7 million stretches out like pieces of a well-designed puzzle. If you want to see a city that works, this is as good a spot as any on Earth.

Rows of residential and commercial high-rises cluster around planned transportation corridors, where rapid transit buses zip down inside lanes and automobiles move along the outside. Down below, street-level entrances open to neighborhood stores and shops. The architects of Curitiba in the 1960s and 1970s wanted integrated neighborhoods that kept people close to where they shop and work.

Curitiba's population has tripled in the last 30 years. Still, with more than 50 square yards of parks and woods per person, the city is laced with green. Trees are everywhere, and cutting one down without a permit can land you in jail.

This isn't utopia. Rich and poor don't live side by side, but the large, segregated neighborhoods that plague U.S. urban areas aren't found in Curitiba. Simple bungalows sit on the same blocks as tony two-story homes. Unlike Detroit, Curitiba is the center of jobs and people for its metro region of 2.9 million. Unlike Detroit and most other American cities, the poorest

Local public hearings

The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments will conduct public hearings this week on a proposed rapid transit line between downtown Detroit and Ann Arbor that would also serve Detroit Metropolitan Airport. Among the options for the 50-mile line are light rail, rapid-transit buses and commuter rail along existing railroad tracks.

The SEMCOG hearings are scheduled for Tuesday, 5-8:30 p.m., at SEMCOG's offices in the Buhl Building, 535 Griswold, Suite 300, in downtown Detroit; Wednesday, 4 to 8 p.m., at Washtenaw Community College in the Morris Lawrence Building, Rooms 103-123, 4800 E. Huron River, Ann Arbor; and Thursday, 4-8 p.m., at Ford Community and Performing Arts Center, Studio A, 15801 Michigan Avenue, Dearborn.

For more information about the meetings, call Carmine Palombo, 313-324-3314 anytime.

Citizens can also make comments by calling 888-963-3362, or by sending them to Palombo at SEMCOG, 535 Griswold, Suite 300, Detroit, MI 48226,

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people live in the suburbs.

or by e-mail to [palombo @semcog.org](mailto:palombo@semcog.org).

This is a city where leaders talk about balance and integration in all things, including transportation. When I interviewed the internationally known urban expert Jamie Lerner, Curitiba's mayor in the 1970s and later governor of the Brazilian state of Parana, he compared the automobile to his mother-in-law. He wanted good relations with her, he said, but didn't want her to rule his life.

Project information is available online: www.ann-arbor-detroit-rapid-transit-study.com

The deadline for comments is Oct. 7.

Curitiba is one of Brazil's richest cities. Still, only about half of its population owns a car, usually a stripped-down economy model without power steering or air-conditioning. Gas prices are nearly \$4 a gallon (U.S.) -- this in a country in which the minimum wage is about \$130 a month. The government discourages automobile use by restricting parking and access. In the 1970s, Lerner closed part of the downtown commercial district to traffic and turned it into a bustling pedestrian mall that hosts weekly children's art fairs. On a sunny day, it's a joy to walk.

Cities worldwide, including Bogota and Seoul, have copied Curitiba's simple, inexpensive and effective rapid transit bus system, even if they couldn't copy Curitiba's urban planning. Los Angeles built two rapid transit lines after former Mayor Richard Riordan and other city officials visited. In Detroit, a SpeedLink proposal by the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition and the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments would eventually put rapid transit buses similar to Curitiba's on 12 main corridors.

A challenge for Detroit area

I came here to find out if Curitiba's rapid transit buses would work in Detroit. Technically, the answer is yes. Rapid transit buses move people as well as any light-rail or subway system I've used -- at a fraction of the cost. Detroit's challenge will be to do it right and get local politicians to stop beefing long enough to agree on a plan to operate the system.

I didn't rent a car in Curitiba and rarely took a cab. It wasn't necessary. The bus system is fast and reliable, dropping off and picking up riders within five blocks of any point in the city

Elevated clear tubes allow passengers to pay before boarding and enter the bus on the same level, without stepping up or down. It's similar to walking onto the People Mover in downtown Detroit or a subway in Washington, D.C. By my count, people got on and off the buses in less than 15 seconds. That's critical to making the system work. Some rapid bus lines have failed because they stuck with conventional boarding.

On major transit routes, bi-articulated buses -- really three vehicles tied together with accordion-like connectors -- carry up to 270 passengers on exclusive lanes with traffic signals that give buses priority. They pick passengers up as frequently as every 70 seconds. At tubes and terminals, riders can transfer from one line to another without additional tickets or fares.

All buses are color coded by routes and service, such as red for express, green for interdistrict, and yellow for shorter-hop conventional buses

Buses move 2 million passengers a day around Curitiba and 14 suburbs. (Buses in southeast Michigan, with nearly double the regional population,

carry about 160,000 riders a day.) Government manages the Curitiba system, but 22 private companies operate its 340 lines. It may be the only transit system in the world that operates without subsidies. People 65 and older ride free. Fares -- \$1.8 reais, or about 75 cents U.S. -- cover the system's operating costs of about \$250 million a year. By contrast, fares cover one-half or less of the cost of operating most U.S. urban bus systems.

Curitiba leaders are studying rail lines but have no plans to build them, mainly because of cost. "I don't think the age of the bus is done," Paulo Afonso Schmidt, president of URBS, Curitiba's transit agency, told me. "A bus system is flexible. If you want to change a route, you can do that."

Few complaints from riders

The few complaints I heard from passengers were about the fares -- high by Brazilian standards. Curitiba's annual income averages more than double that of Brazil's, but it's still less than \$8,000 U.S.

Curitiba's new 41-year-old mayor, Beto Richa, lowered the fares slightly this year and cut Sunday fares in half. He told me he wants to reduce fares further by persuading the federal government to lower its taxes on fuel and transportation services.

The city's bus system is generally safe, though Curitiba has a growing crime problem. Gangs fight over drug turf, and gang-related graffiti is common. Curitiba has few police officers on the street, and bus muggings, while infrequent, concern some riders. While riding a bus near downtown, I saw about two dozen young men bum-rush a boarding tube and enter without paying.

Even so, crime on buses is rare, and the system is good enough to make not owning a car a reasonable choice for people who could afford one.

Terezinha de Saturnino, 41, moved from Sao Paulo to Curitiba nine years ago. She now lives in Sao Jose dos Pinhais, a suburb of Curitiba, where her husband works in a factory making automobile engines. A masseuse, Saturnino visits six or seven clients a day at their homes or offices.

Saturnino's husband uses the family car. The couple could afford a second car, but Saturnino prefers the buses. They take her around the city almost as fast as an automobile -- about 20 minutes a trip -- for about 10 reais a day, a little more than \$4 U.S.

"It's easier," Saturnino told me in Portuguese through a translator. "The buses are reliable, and I don't have to worry about parking, driving or fuel."

Curitiba does not have official figures for how many bus riders own cars, but many do. Less than one in four of the city's car owners drive their vehicles daily.

Few choices in metro Detroit

Unlike Curitiba, metro Detroit doesn't give people a real choice about mass transportation. In southeast Michigan, few people who have cars use the transit system, outside of suburban park-and-ride buses. Only about 2 percent of the region's residents use mass transit to get to work, compared to more than 40 percent in Curitiba. Still, no one should forget that, in the Motor City,

one in four households don't have cars because they can't afford to buy, operate and insure them. So they're forced to use a system that is spotty, underfunded and unreliable.

Over the last decade, I've spent a lot of time riding these buses and talking to passengers. I've seen people fired for tardiness because they had to take four buses without reliable connections to go a few miles. I've seen single mothers, getting off public assistance, forced to turn down or quit jobs because buses didn't run there. And I've joined riders on three-hour bus commutes that might take 20 minutes by car. This is bad business, for sure, but it's also immoral to put people through this.

On the real, none of us will live to see a transit system in Detroit that's as good as the one in Curitiba. Southeast Michigan blew its best chance in the 1970s, when President Gerald Ford offered the region \$600 million -- big paper back then -- to build a light-rail system. Metro Detroit lost most of the money when politicians couldn't agree on a plan. But missteps in the past don't mean the region can't move forward now.

First, Detroit must secure a strong and permanent regional transportation authority. The current Detroit Area Regional Transportation Authority (DARTA) might not survive a legal challenge. The city and suburban bus systems are doing more on their own to cooperate, but a regional transportation system needs regional governance. That doesn't necessarily mean merger. The Curitiba system works well with 22 independent operators, but it has a strong public agency over it.

Second, transit advocates need to stop debating whether bus or rail is the best way to go and let the ridership numbers drive the decision. No doubt, everyone loves rail, but rapid buses may provide the most practical way to improve the system. It's cheap and flexible, and it won't take a lifetime to build. Third, improve the system for those who must rely on it -- the poor who don't own cars. As traffic congestion chokes our freeways and air, getting more people to park their cars should remain an important goal. For now, though, it's more important to give people who don't have a choice a decent and reliable way to get around.

Finally, the region must learn that a small step beats sitting in neutral. Forget about building an entire system. The region needs to start with one rapid transit route and make sure it succeeds with fast, frequent and reliable service.

No more excuses here

No doubt, Detroit has its own history, political culture and development patterns. From the air, sprawling southeast Michigan looks as different from Curitiba as it does on the ground. Metro Detroit might not have the population density to make mass transit work on a large scale.

But southeast Michigan's politicians can and must do more. Workers earning \$8 an hour who need reliable transportation to distant jobs deserve better. So do employers who need to get workers to their businesses and commuters who want a more relaxing way to the workplace.

Five thousand miles away, a Third World city with far fewer resources is showing how to get the job done with simplicity, creativity and common sense.

***JEFF GERRITT**, a member of the Free Press editorial board, traveled to*

Curitiba, Brazil, on a fellowship from the International Center for Journalists. Contact him at gerritt@freepress.com, 313-222-6585, or in care of the editorial page.

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