

Running out of gas: An opportunity for sustainability

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Observers of American life have long wondered what it would take to disrupt our love affair with cars. It turns out that \$4-a-gallon gasoline might do the trick. Last year for the first time in 28 years, Americans drove fewer miles than the year before. Automakers can no longer sell their highly profitable but gas-guzzling SUVs. And across the country, mass transit systems have seen an increase in ridership, in some cases a dramatic one: ridership is up 11 percent in San Antonio, 17 percent in Baltimore and 28 percent in Seattle, according to the Associated Press. Summer driving plans are being altered. “Park and ride” lots for commuters are full.

Ironically, just as Americans are ready to park their cars and climb on a bus or train, many mass transit systems are financially squeezed. They have to absorb the higher fuel prices while also dealing with aging tracks and vehicles. Mass transit is heavily subsidized by state and federal governments, and government funding has remained flat in recent years.

So here is an opportunity for creative public leadership. Now is the time to refurbish and expand bus routes, light rail lines and passenger train service. Investing in mass transit is investing in a major public good—something good for the environment and good for the quality of life. It will unclog highways and reduce the time people spend commuting. As urbanist and author James Kunstler comments, “There isn’t one thing we could do in this country that would have a greater impact on our oil use than restoring the American rail system to something like a European level of service.”

In light of such opportunities, the current political debate over expanding offshore drilling in the U.S. is mostly a distraction. Even drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would add only marginally to world oil production and do little to affect price. The days of cheap oil are gone: there is a limited amount of oil, it is expensive to find and extract, and the demand for it—notably in China and India—is enormous and growing.

Since a reliance on cheap oil permeates U.S. life, from the way our food is grown to how we transport goods to where we live and work, the end of cheap oil presents a crisis, one that Americans have for decades put off facing. The good news is that, as in the case of exchanging individual cars for public transit, the crisis is also an opportunity to create a society that is more sustainable, appealing and livable.