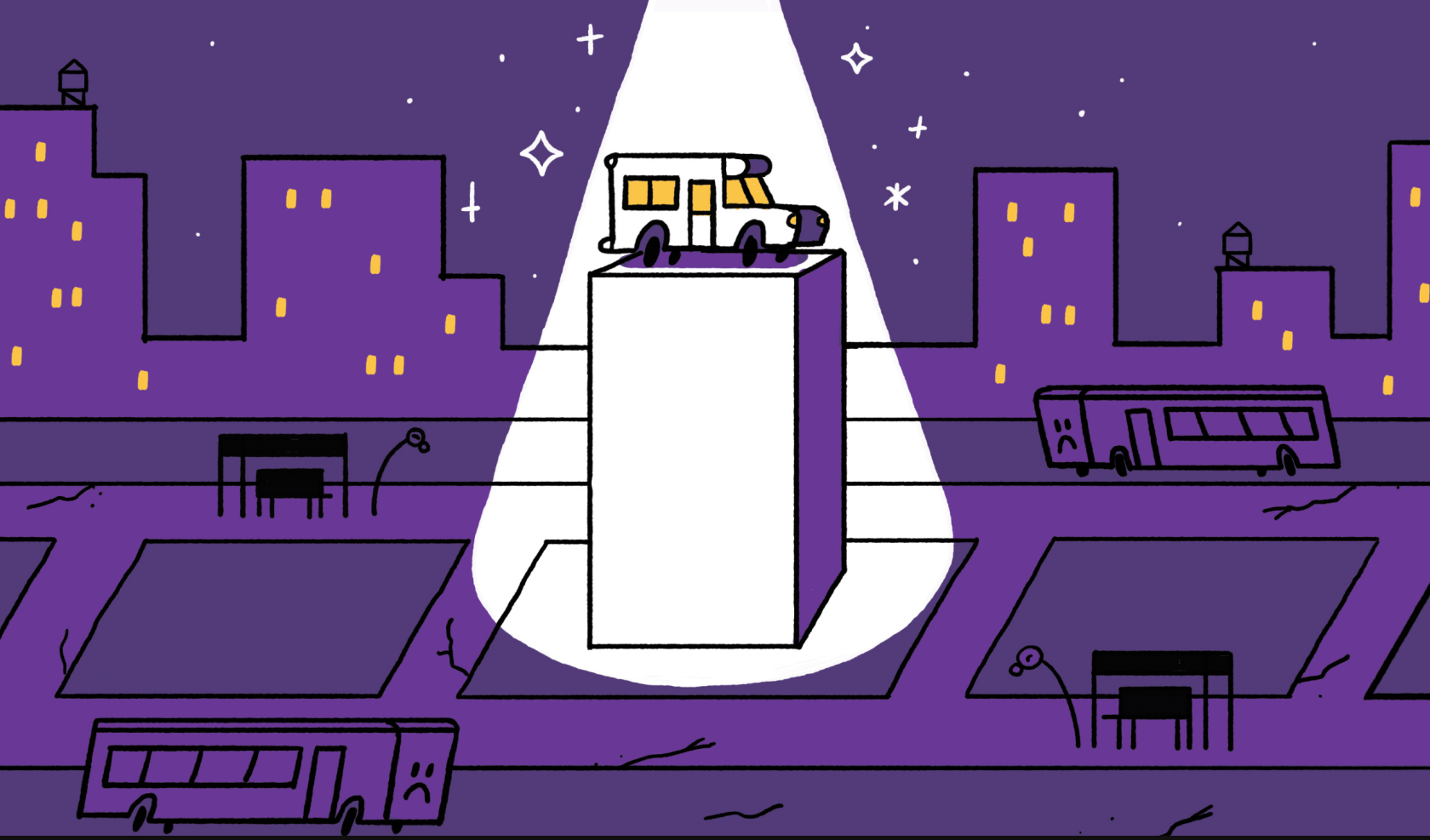

TransitCenter | TransitTools no.13

MICROTRANSIT + TRANSIT

You can't throw a dart at a map of the U.S. without hitting a "microtransit" pilot. Microtransit is the latest spin on an old idea – running on-demand service with smaller vehicles that people can summon without walking to a fixed location like a bus stop. Transit agencies in cities including Austin, Sacramento, Kansas City, and Los Angeles are currently running various trials of microtransit service, often touting it as a cure for declining ridership.

The results don't justify the hype: Microtransit is incapable of serving the same scale of ridership as fixed-route buses and trains. Nevertheless, transit agencies just can't seem to shake the notion that "this time will be different." With its flexible routing, microtransit can seem like the solution to longstanding first-mile/last-mile challenges. But microtransit has inherent limitations.

Picking people up at their doorstep involves traveling greater distances than operating service along a fixed route, and a microtransit driver in a van or car can carry far fewer people than the operator of a bus or train. For these reasons, microtransit typically costs agencies much, much more to run than an average bus route. And while subsidies for bus and train service fall as more people ride, microtransit is locked into a high-cost format that consumes more subsidies as usage increases. Each dollar spent on microtransit is a dollar agencies can't spend on more cost-effective strategies to increase ridership, like adding frequency on major routes or improving bus stops.

For agencies struggling with declining ridership, it's time to stop thinking of microtransit as the way to turn things around. U.S. transit agencies seeing sustained ridership growth, like Seattle and Houston, aren't doing it with microtransit - they're increasing service, giving transit priority on the street, and making network-wide improvements.

3 things to consider when it comes to microtransit

In the 1970s, the Federal Transit Administration funded a variety of microtransit projects. All of them failed.

1. The productivity problem

The inefficiency of providing door-to-door service means that microtransit is generally more expensive to run than fixed routes. Agencies need to be scrupulous about budgeting for this kind of "coverage" service. High subsidies for low ridership microtransit may lead to inequitable allocation of service.

- Ridership on LA Metro's much-heralded microtransit partnership with VIA has been dismal, maxing out at 1,675 rides per week. LA Metro is spending $14.50 per VIA trip, which is twice what it spends on the average bus trip.
- Ridership on microtransit in Sacramento peaked at a measly six trips per revenue hour compared to the 10-15 trips per hour the transit industry considers to be a "low-performing" bus route.
- In its first year, AC Flex, a microtransit service in Oakland, served three riders per revenue hour, half that of the bus service it replaced.

2. Opportunity cost

Transit agencies have finite resources. In most cases, money spent on microtransit would benefit more people if spent on fixed-route service or improving pedestrian access to stops and stations.

- **Build better bus stops.** San Antonio's VIA recently installed sidewalk improvements and shelters at more than 1,000 bus stops in three years for $12 million. Research from the University of Utah shows that improvements to bus stops can result in ridership increases.
- **Work with cities to improve walking connections to transit.** The more people can safely walk to transit, the more likely they are to use it. TriMet in Portland has taken an active role in improving pedestrian conditions near bus stops. After conducting an analysis which found that 32% of stops were unsafe for pedestrians, TriMet has partnered with the Portland Bureau of Transportation to fund improvements like flashing beacons and striped crosswalks.

3. Microtransit can't replace bus service, but it can serve other roles

Agencies should abandon the notion that microtransit will propel ridership growth and recognize that its strengths lie elsewhere. Microtransit dispatching, for instance, can improve the responsiveness and reliability of paratransit services, which notoriously require customers to book long in advance and often send them on circuitous trips that can eat up an entire day.

- When Austin's Capital Metro redesigned its bus network, it replaced some of its coverage service with wheelchair accessible on-demand shuttles. Six months into the program, agency leadership is now emphasizing the service's value as a replacement to traditional paratransit.
- In areas with irregular street networks, hilly topography, and other traits that make fixed-route service difficult to operate, microtransit may make sense as a means to provide coverage service. In Seattle, King County Metro has contracted with Via to extend some coverage to areas with scant bus service.
- Contracting with microtransit providers for paratransit service shouldn't be a race to the bottom with regard to driver pay. Transit agencies should commit to contracting with companies that pay a living wage.