

# Indy Transit Plan: A Tale of Two Cities



**Robert Sharpe**, Indianapolis Sustainable Living Examiner  
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Empty Cap Metro Train, downtown Austin  
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Video: [16th Street Mall Denver](#)

Local officials unveiled a [transit plan](#) this week that they promise will help alleviate the area's traffic woes while allowing Indianapolis to "remain competitive" with other "peer" cities. [Government and the business community is all in](#) on this plan. Should you be? Before deciding, let's take a quick glance at transit in two of the peer cities that, according to local officials, threaten our long term viability.

## Denver

Denver is a transit success story. In 2007, the area's [Regional Transportation District \(RTD\)](#) trains and buses boarded over 150,000 people per day in a metro area with a population of 2.3 million. That means that approximately 6% percent of all the people in metro Denver board a bus or train each day. That makes RTD the most successful transit system in a city that could reasonably be considered a peer to Indianapolis.

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It didn't happen overnight. In fact, Denver has had a reliable, convenient bus system for decades. In the late 1970s, the system was rebranded "The Ride" in an effort to raise exposure. It worked. For years, The Ride was nothing more than a fleet of city buses for local routes, articulated buses on the more popular routes and regional luxury buses that drove in from far-flung suburban park and ride lots. I was a bus rider in Denver in the early 1980s. It was more convenient and less expensive to ride the bus than to drive into the city center every day.

In the early 1980's, downtown Denver streets were so clogged with buses that local leaders built the [16th Street transit mall](#).

The mall is approximately twelve blocks long and is served by free shuttle buses. It is anchored at each end by a bus terminal. All the buses that used to ply the downtown streets now stop at one of the two terminals, allowing passengers to disembark and catch the shuttle to work.

Denver began to add light rail only after the community had embraced transit. As a result, there was little chance that rail would not be accepted by the community. The first rail line was a short, test line built in 1994. Now, light rail extends to all corners of metro Denver with more on the way.

### **Austin**

Austin is the state capital of Texas and the home of the University of Texas. UT's sprawling 45,000 student campus is located directly north of downtown. The city is young, progressive and growing rapidly. If planners were to model a place where transit should succeed, that place would be Austin.

Like Denver, Austin has had a bus system for decades. It is the most successful bus system in Texas, with approximately [70,000 daily trips](#) in a city of 1.5 million people. Coverage is lower than in Denver, with only 4.6% of Austinites boarding each day. Unlike Denver, buses are almost invisible on Austin streets, with most ridership concentrated between the center city, UT campus and surrounding neighborhoods.

Austin's CapMetro transit organization built its first light rail line in 2009. The Red Line came in late and well over budget at \$105 million (vs. \$60 million originally estimated). Like the proposed Indy line, it extends far north of downtown, connecting commuter suburbs with downtown Austin. It has been, for the most part, ignored. In fact, during the first year, less than 500 people per day used the line. By the first anniversary of service, ridership had risen to 1,600 people per day, or roughly one-tenth of one percent of metro Austin's population.

Because the Red Line operates at a loss, it drains much needed revenue from Austin's bus service. Proposed solutions include [cutting bus service](#), perhaps to force people onto the train. The Red Line has also been a black eye for CapMetro with Texans. It is largely perceived as wasteful and unnecessary. It's future remains very much in doubt, particularly if hard times continue and budgets are slashed.

### **Whither Indy?**

Indy's IndyGo bus system [boards approximately 10,000 people per day](#). To put this in perspective, that's 14% of the people who ride the bus in Austin, a city with virtually the same population base. Ridership has shrunk from 15 million daily boardings in 1980 to only eight million today. IndyGo rightly points out that Indianapolis has less bus service than any major city in America.

Will the IndyConnect plan change this? Will it result in a transit solution more akin to Denver or will our system be more like Austin's? City officials and transit boosters hope Denver, but Denver has a transit culture that Indianapolis never had. In fact, Austin has a transit culture that Indianapolis doesn't have and rail transit is an abject failure there by any reasonable measure.

Does Indianapolis, as boosters repeatedly chirp, need transit

to remain competitive to peer cities? Austin's experience suggests otherwise. There is no "hotter" city in America these days and it has nothing to do with transit. It has to do with cost of living and job prospects, as well as the fact that Austin is perceived as a fun and exciting place to be. Austin is now more expensive and less attractive precisely because of missteps like the Red Line. It has made the city less, rather than more, competitive with Indianapolis.

Denver's experience suggests that transit can succeed here, but only by building the foundation first. That's hard work and a hard sell. Nobody wants tax revenue going to buses, but the fact of the matter is that Denver's bus system served the city well for decades and built the transit culture necessary for the general population to embrace rail. Austin, on the other hand, has likely built its last rail line.

Indianapolis has a wonderful opportunity to get this right. Local leaders should tread carefully. If they saddle the taxpaying public with massive debt for a shiny rail line that nobody uses, they will drive a silver stake through the heart of transit in this area for many years to come.

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By **Robert Sharpe**  
Indianapolis Sustainable Living Examiner

Bob Sharpe is a sustainable living advocate who believes in a revised version of the American Dream. He believes that by consuming consciously,...

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