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GUEST COMMENTARY

## **Mass Transit: A Tale of Two Cities' Transportation**

**By Christian Gerondeau**

Christian Gerondeau is the author of the Paris Area Railway Master Plan, was a transportation adviser to the French government in the 1970s and wrote the 1997 book "Transport in Europe." The Journal invited Gerondeau to comment on his experience with mass transit in light of Atlanta's newly adopted transportation plan that heavily focuses on rail.

Paris --- Obviously, the capital of the American South --- Atlanta --- and the French capital are two very different cities. But that does not mean that their citizens behave so differently when it comes to their travel choices.

Similar to the distribution of population between Atlanta and its outlying communities, central Paris is home to only 2 million of the region's 11 million inhabitants. The rest live in Paris' suburbs or outlying areas.

The downtown Parisiens are lucky enough to have at their disposal the best possible "Metro" network with 14 lines and more than 250 stations, which means that almost no one lives more than 400 yards away from one. It is no surprise that central-city Parisiens use their Metro heavily.

Nevertheless, even in central Paris, the automobile plays a significant role. On the 20-mile-long inner belt freeway, called Boulevard Peripherique, traffic is extremely heavy, with almost 2 million motorists using it everyday, not counting vans and trucks. In central Paris, public and private transports are more or less balanced.

But in the outlying area, where the majority of the population resides, the automobile is the usual travel mode.

Two or three cars per household are becoming the rule. As in Atlanta, the car is used for dropping children at school, going to work, visiting friends, and going to the sport club, the supermarket, and so on. And these people rarely go into what Atlantans would call "downtown," or in our case, central Paris.

Transportation surveys from 1991 to 1997 show that the number of car trips in the Paris region increased from 14.4 million to 17 million. The number of transit trips (train, metro, and bus) has remained the same at 6.7 million.

Paris is the densest region in Europe, yet the automobile now accounts for 70 percent of daily trips, and public transportation accounts for less than 30 percent.

Another point that deserves to be underlined is that this strong increase in the volume of traffic has not created more congestion. The Paris region is criss-crossed by a freeway network of about 500 miles. It is adding a state-of-the-art underground highway. With this needed emphasis on roads, congestion has not gotten worse. In fact, daily average trip travel time by car has decreased from 22 to 19 minutes between 1991 and 1997.

Because of its ability to bring you from your starting point to your destination without having to walk, wait, or change vehicles, the car saves time. In the Paris suburbs, it usually saves you more than half an hour per trip, compared with public transport, despite the existence of perhaps the best public transport network in the world.

In central Paris, movement by car also saves time, but not as significantly as in other parts of the region. Central city residents often choose public transport because parking is difficult to find and too costly.

In French provincial cities and the Paris suburbs, the only ones who use public transport are those who don't have another option.

As in many European countries, the official public policy in France is to reduce the use of car. The car is considered as a nuisance, even if almost every one chooses it whenever possible.

Residents of the European countries rightly consider their leaders to be clueless about the population's preferences, which certainly includes the automobile. Planners here and abroad need to get in touch with the real world and the free choices of citizens, and stop focusing public policy on unrealistic dreams.