



REPORT CARD: METRO ORLANDO'S TRANSPORTATION NETWORK

First-Tier Cities Need First-Tier Transportation



INTRODUCTION

Metro Orlando is hooked on increasingly dangerous and congested roads – with the designation of having the nation’s most dangerous section of highway and among the highest number of pedestrian fatalities per capita. This trend is unacceptable for one of the nation’s fastest-growing metro areas as well as one of the world’s most popular tourist and family destinations. If Central Florida intends to thrive and compete for corporate headquarters and better-paying jobs in coming years, it must get serious about helping residents and visitors connect cost-effectively and seamlessly to their destinations.

WHAT’S GOING ON HERE?

Metro Orlando’s transportation network **relies largely on roads**, despite investment in the SunRail commuter train and a push to facilitate bicycling and walking. For decades, the bulk of Central Florida’s transportation dollars have gone to roads, including \$2.3 billion now being spent to widen a 21-mile section of Interstate 4. Scheduled for completion in 2021, the project known as the I-4 Ultimate will add two tolled lanes in either direction down the middle of the highway, with the outer lanes remaining free of charge. However, that project is currently behind schedule by 245 days and over budget by \$100 million.

Our region’s roads aren’t just **congested**. Interstate 4 was rated in 2016 by Teltrac Navman as the **most dangerous** highway in the United States. They’re also third deadliest in the country for pedestrians and, by extension, cyclists, according to a 2016 report by Smart Growth America.

Metro Orlando has two mass transit systems: the LYNX regional bus company and the SunRail commuter train. Unlike major cities of similar size, **neither has a source of dedicated funding**. In addition to normal routes, LYNX provides east-west connections to expand SunRail’s reach. While many may complain transit is too expensive, **roads are among the most subsidized**, according to the

Tax Foundation, which reported that nationwide in 2010, highway-user taxes and fees made up just 32% of state and local expenses on roads. The rest was financed out of general revenues, including federal aid. Since gas-tax collections are dwindling due to high gasoline prices and more fuel-efficient cars, underwriting of roads is likely even greater today.



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Currently SunRail runs only every 30 minutes during commuter peak hours and never on weekends. Connections between SunRail and the regional LYNX bus system are challenging. LYNX CEO Edward Johnson told the *Orlando Sentinel* there’s enough ridership demand to easily double the size of the 300-bus fleet. Roughly 50% of LYNX ridership can be found on just eleven popular routes.

Ridership has fallen on both SunRail and LYNX systems in recent years, in part because of a strong economy making driving more affordable for so-called choice riders, but also because patrons complain that service is too sporadic. In other words, bus and train riders say it takes **too long to get to their final destinations**.

Florida is paying to operate SunRail until 2021. Then the train system becomes the sole financial responsibility of local governments, which are escrowing funds to start making the required payments. Meanwhile, LYNX



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is supported by funding from federal, state and local governments. Two systems that are fairly comparable to LYNX – Capitol Metro in Austin, Texas, and CATS in Charlotte, N.C. – have budgets that rely in part on sales-tax revenue. Charlotte receives a half-penny, while Austin has a full penny. Both Austin and Charlotte operate trains and buses.

Budget and ridership comparisons show Metro Orlando carrying about the same number of passengers, but with about half the budget of comparable metro areas.

One bright spot is the Orlando International Airport (OIA), which has built a **major regional transit hub** a mile south of the main terminal. **Now empty**, the state-of-the-art station can accommodate up to three rail systems, including a proposed but unfunded link with SunRail; the planned Brightline train, a private high-speed system run by All Aboard Florida connecting Orlando with South

Florida; and a potential rail system that would run to the International Drive tourist corridor. The station also is equipped to handle buses, taxis and shuttles.

Make no mistake, the region's transportation system hurts families. The current H+T Affordability Index found that households in the Orlando region pay 53% of their income toward housing and transportation. That's **significantly higher than the 45% benchmark** set by the index and higher than comparable cities like Austin, Texas (47%) and Charlotte, N.C. (51%). **In other words, inefficient transportation for Orlando means less money for families.**

The challenges are daunting, but the League of Women Voters of Orange County believes transportation must become a top priority because it has a profound impact on the livability of our region. If we want to continue growing in a responsible manner, we must plan for speedy and cost-effective ways to connect.

ARE THERE SOLUTIONS?

Yes! If Central Florida intends to thrive in coming years, its elected leaders must ensure a **community-based vision supported by a dedicated funding source** – with options including a percentage of sales, gas or tourist taxes, rental car surtaxes, or tolls — to accommodate a diversified portfolio of transportation options.

1. Develop a community-based and supported vision that results in a dedicated funding source for bus, rail, walking and biking.
2. Hold transit agencies jointly responsible for increasing ridership.
3. Add frequency on popular routes and add night and weekend service for SunRail.
4. Explore Bus Rapid Transit for LYNX East-West connections.
5. Fast track connection of SunRail and Brightline to the recently completed transit hub at OIA.
6. Pass legislation to enable spending some tourist taxes on transportation, improving mobility for residents and tourists.
7. Expand intelligent traffic light systems, utilizing sensors, so lights are guided by traffic not time, speeding traffic on major arteries.
8. Measure carbon emissions in the region to enable accountability and improvement in all transit sectors.

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HOW DO WE MEASURE UP?

To get the conversation moving, the League has reviewed transportation plans and evaluated our transportation network, assigning grades based on analysis of five categories—Effectiveness and Safety, Funding, Environmental Impact, Connectivity and Political Leadership.



EFFECTIVENESS AND SAFETY

Central Florida commuters annually waste an average of 46 hours in their cars thanks to congestion, spending an extra \$1,044 annually. The average driving time is just under 29 minutes, an increase of several minutes since 2009. I-4 is the most dangerous interstate in the country and our road network is also among the most deadly for pedestrians and, by extension, cyclists. SunRail, our region's commuter-rail line, does not run often enough nor on weekends. While SunRail Phase II has recently opened in Osceola, the last leg to Volusia/Deland remains unfunded, as does a link to the Orlando International Airport (OIA). LYNX bus routes do not satisfy the current consumer demand for efficient schedules. While the trend to construct "complete streets" to accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians is building, we have a long way to go.



FUNDING

Unlike similar sized cities with dedicated funding for transit, both LYNX and SunRail do not. The majority of transportation dollars allocated in the region goes to roads, including, but hardly limited to, \$2.3 billion to widen I-4 (managed by FDOT) with four toll lanes and \$1.6 billion to complete the Wekiva Parkway toll road (managed by Central Florida Expressway Authority - CFX). Future funding for SunRail is still uncertain with transfer of the SunRail system to local governments scheduled for 2021. Money for biking and walking improvements typically compete for money from local governments' general funds or special grants. One area of opportunity is that CFX is now permitted by statute to allocate up to 10% of its resources to transit opportunities within its system right-of-way.



ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

As of 2016, transportation became the leading cause of carbon emissions in the United States. We now see rapid growth of roads in Central Florida infringing on protected areas, despite some government protections. CFX is considering toll roads that could go through environmentally sensitive and constitutionally protected lands like Split Oak in Osceola County. On the positive side, LYNX has nearly a third of its 313 buses running on compressed natural gas or on a biodiesel-electricity hybrid basis. OIA has instituted a number of practices, including recycling, to help reduce its environmental impact. The City of Orlando, to its credit, has shown leadership in the recent passage of a scientific carbon monitoring system. Surrounding counties, including Orange, should take note, and pass similar plans to ensure accountability and thus improvement.



CONNECTIVITY

If Central Florida intends to thrive in coming years, it must get serious about accommodating a diversity of transportation options, including buses, trains, cars, pedestrians and bicyclists. Currently about **half of LYNX buses have a one-hour frequency**, with the other half having a 30-minute frequency.

Aside from I-4, toll roads currently provide the fastest options for efficient travel within the region. I-4 Ultimate, once operational, will also offer high-speed toll lanes. SunRail, the region's sole fixed-rail transit system, runs along a north-south spine. Its connections with LYNX remain troubled. LYNX provides east-west connections, but needs to substantially increase its east-west frequency on high demand routes and

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explore bus rapid transit. Any type of transit service to OIA remains limited. The only transit option to OIA is infrequent service provided by LYNX. The airport is prepared to receive commuter rail (SunRail), Brightline high-speed rail as well as future light rail with its recently opened new OIA South Terminal Transit Hub. However, that station currently sits idle.



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Leadership has been uneven. Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer has played a significant leadership role in delivering bi-partisan consensus and funding for SunRail. He has delivered free bus service in downtown Orlando

and a pilot program at OIA to encourage visitors to rent electric and hybrid cars. While surrounding counties like Seminole and Osceola have shown political courage by securing dedicated funding using gas and sales taxes to support transportation, Orange County to date has shown no such leadership. OIA has shown vision and leadership in their construction of a multi-modal transit terminal to connect Central Florida to future transit options. Now area leaders must rise to the challenge to secure a seamless connection.

However, the biggest failure has been the absence of progress toward a regional transportation vision and dedicated source of funding. Orange County because of its size should be a leader in developing this community vision.



OVERALL TRANSPORTATION NETWORK GRADE

The League of Women Voters of Orange County gives the Central Florida regional transportation network a D grade because our mobility options are both lagging and out of balance and due to our low national ranking in highway and pedestrian safety. To date, we have not seen evidence of the regional political leadership required to develop a community vision and plan or for the requisite dedicated funding.

We know Central Florida will only continue to grow, and efficient transportation choices will play a key role in whether we will be able to attract the high-paying jobs and quality of life we want and deserve. Today, Central Florida is falling short. It is our hope that this on-going and annual report will spur our leaders to greater focus and results in this key area.



The MISSION of the League of Women Voters is: Empowering Voters. Defending Democracy. We envision a democracy where every person has the desire, the right, the knowledge and the confidence to participate. We believe in the power of women to create a more perfect democracy.