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A year into the Silver Line era there have been some failings, but that doesn't make the great planning experiment a failure.

Tysons, Virginia, has become a [national case study](#) for whether or not car-first suburbs can become more walkable urban areas. (Walkability scholar Christopher Leinberger told our Future of Transportation series that if Tysons can pull off the conversion, “then you can do this anywhere in the world.”) At the center of the social experiment was the [D.C. Metro's Silver Line expansion](#)—catalyst for all the livable, transit-oriented development to come.

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Last week marked the Silver Line’s first birthday, and with so much riding on it, so to speak, attention naturally turned to the lower-than-expected ridership numbers. *The Washington Post* reported that the Silver Line is serving about 17,000 daily riders during the work week, well off the pace of 25,000 riders that planners had set by this time. The “bulk” of this ridership aren’t even new users, according to the *Post*, but rather people who used to take the Orange Line instead.

There are many reasons to believe that a walkable, transit-friendly Tysons will emerge in time. For these early Silver Line disappointments there are also signs of success: car traffic in Tysons is down, shoppers are taking the train to the area’s famous malls, and reverse commuting has emerged ahead of schedule. But while it’s far, *far* too soon to declare the great Tysons shift a failure, it’s not too early to point out some of the little failings that still need to be addressed.

Poor walkability is one. Citing an internal analysis, Martin Di Caro at *WAMU* reports that Metro officials believe a lack of “sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike lanes” is a key reason behind the low ridership numbers:

“The Tysons Corner area grew up around the automobile: parking is abundant, and good pedestrian facilities are lacking in many places,” Metro planners said in the analysis.

Take, for instance, the Silver Line’s Greensboro Station. Metro documents show that poor pedestrian infrastructure cuts off thousands of jobs from the station—accounting for as many as 500 boardings a day and \$800,000 in fares a year. Look no further than the map below, showing the poor street connectivity (let alone sidewalk access) within a half-mile of the station, to see the problem. It’s hard to take transit if you can’t reach it.

It's still hard to get to the Greensboro Metro Station on foot. (Via [FreeMapTools](#))

As I wrote after visiting Tysons last year, developers are ultimately on the hook for building a walkable street grid. If they fail to do so they'll struggle to meet the ambitious goals required of them in terms of shifting commutes from driving to alternative modes. The county plan calls for commercial and residential developers to reduce car trips up to 45 percent by 2020 and up to 65 percent by 2050, depending on their distance from a transit station.

These new patterns aren't expected to unfold for many years. But the neuroscience of driving habits clearly shows that mode choice is most susceptible to change in the early stages of a major life event, such as moving homes or starting a new job. Insofar as Tysons developers have been slow out of the gate when it comes to encouraging transit, walking, and biking, they might be missing a critical opportunity to change commuter behavior.

Car trip-reduction goals for residential and commercial development in Tysons. ([Fairfax County](#))

A third setback might fall more on Metro itself. The *Post's* Dr. Gridlock reports that the biggest problem facing Silver Line ridership isn't the stations—it's the service. A delay on new rail cars forced Metro to stretch the existing fleet thin. The proposed fix involves running fewer eight-car trains during rush-hour twice a week so the older cars can get maintenance; given the strong ties between transit service and transit ridership, that's not an encouraging proposition. Here's the Doc's take:

The transit staff is hoping that the arrival of hundreds more new rail cars and the additional rebuilding of Metro's infrastructure will eventually have a big impact on the train system's reliability. But meanwhile, the riders will likely be spitting out the candles on any more Silver Line birthday cakes.

Shifting car-first Tysons onto public transit was never going to be easy. The presence of massive Route 123 will always hinder walkability; the area's best hope might be to become what Yonah Freemark has called "islands of pedestrian orientation surrounded by highways." Commuting behavior changes slowly and often at the margins. And reliable Metro service isn't exactly something than Tysons can control.

These challenges are what draw so many eyes in the urban planning world to Tysons in the first place. As Christopher Leinberger told *WAMU's* Di Caro, Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was Tysons. A year into the Silver Line era that's certainly true. What's important to keep in mind, though, is that Tysons doesn't have to become Rome—in a day or a year or an eternity—to become a more livable place.

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