

# Rural Utahns Want More Transportation Options Like Transit

Transit in rural areas and small towns is an underrecognized lifeline for communities nationwide. For the over 100 million people living in such areas, transit means mobility, independence, and inclusion. Across the nation, around 30 percent of the population are not licensed to drive; many of those who are licensed do not drive for a number of other reasons (Zivarts 2024). While rural areas and small towns have long been associated with driving along open roads, they are far from immune from the impacts of lacking transportation options. Often, these issues are even more acute in rural areas, where a scarcity of public transit and large geographic distances can leave people without any option besides car transport.

Rural areas have specific demographic characteristics that increase the number of nondrivers living within them. For instance, rural areas have higher percentages of people over the age of 65, 18 percent of whom do not drive (Affordability and Accessibility 2022). While 13 percent of people in the United States report having a disability, according to the American Community Survey, people living in rural areas are 17 percent more likely to experience disability than their urban counterparts, and around 25 percent of people with disabilities in rural areas have given up on driving (Crankshaw 2023; Myers, Ipsen, and Standley 2022). People living in rural areas are also more likely to have lower incomes or live in poverty, which is especially severe for rural communities of color (Farrigan 2021). Yet transportation cost burden in rural areas is higher than in urban areas due to longer travel distances to reach the same destinations (BTS, n.d.). In addition, approximately 6 percent of households in rural counties do not have access to a car compared to 9 percent of households in urban counties (Bellis 2020; Laska and Bellis 2021).

All these circumstances culminate in barriers to much-needed health care visits, community participation, and employment and

economic opportunity (Arcury et al. 2005; Myers, Ipsen, and Standley 2022; Myers and Standley 2024; Rural Health Information Hub 2019). Whether people are nondrivers for most of their lives or for shorter moments, such as with a car breakdown, the availability of more transportation options helps lift these barriers.

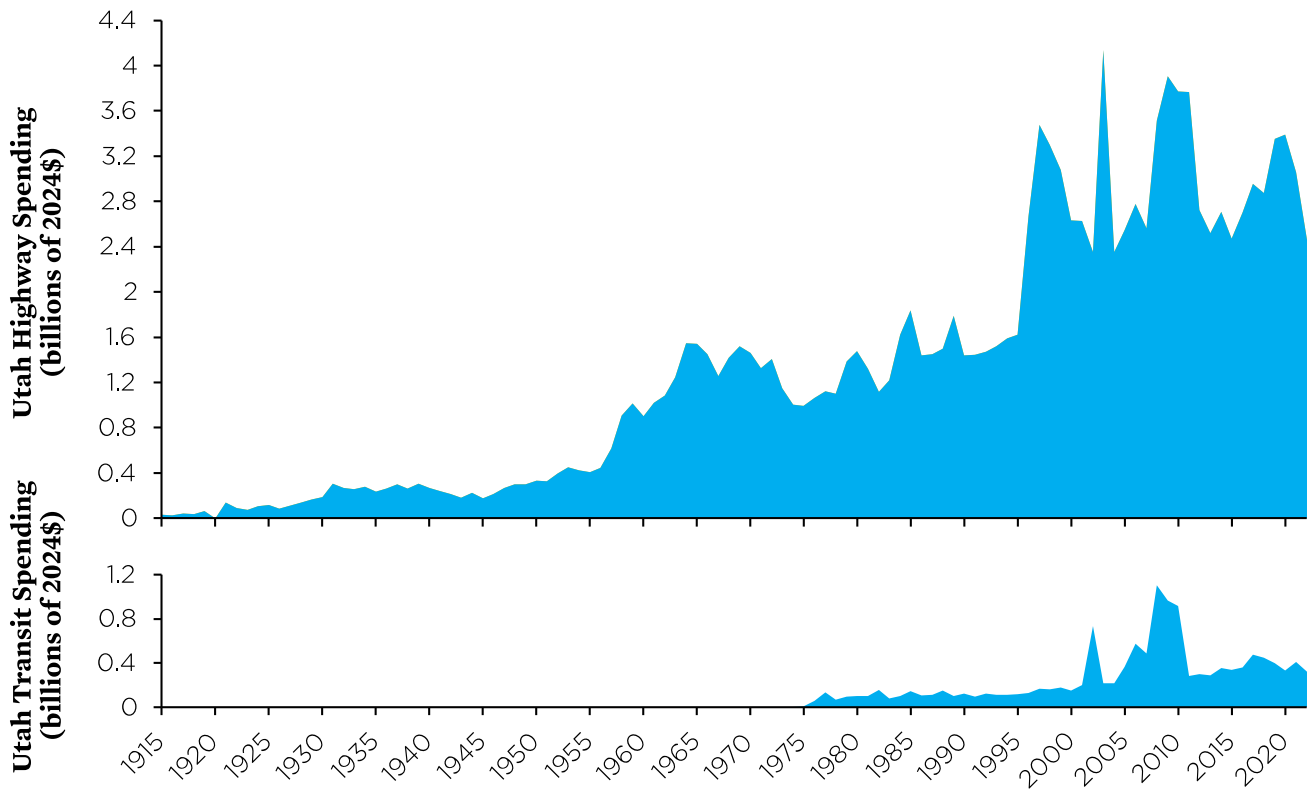
## Utah Has Not Invested Much in Transit outside of the Wasatch Front

Utah's development was drastically shaped by railroads, such as the transcontinental railroad completed in 1869. Until around 1920, the state's rail network had developed to touch all corners of the state, from Salt Lake City north to Butte, Montana, southwest past Cedar City to Las Vegas, and east through Carbon County to Grand Junction, Colorado (Haymond 1994). The railroads spurred mining industries, commerce, and banking.

Most passenger rail routes were discontinued in the latter half of the twentieth century because of the "subsidized highway widening" that started around 1909 with Utah's first State Road Commission and then accelerated by the time the Interstate Highway System was authorized in 1956 (Figure 1, p. 2).

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FIGURE 1. Utah Largely Funded Expanding Roadways throughout the 1900s



Prior to the establishment of the Utah Transit Authority in Salt Lake City, Utah’s transportation spending was focused almost entirely on highways. The state invested substantial resources to transportation in the lead up to hosting the Winter Olympics in 2002, but the bulk of transit spending occurred in the build out of light rail prior to 2011. Cumulatively over the past 50 years, Utah has spent 8.5 times more money on highways than transit, a disparity that well exceeds the national average (5.5 times).

SOURCE: REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION FROM GEWIRTH 2021.

Since 1956, Utah has added over 17,500 miles (a 56 percent increase) in new roads, along with steady expansion of lane-miles averaging 400 miles a year, around the length of I-15 across the state. As a result, Utahns now drive 42 percent more per person than they did in 1981. Meanwhile, less than 3 percent of Utahns live within walking distance to frequent transit,\* and over 39,000 Utah households do not have access to a car (US Census Bureau 2022a). In addition, 51 percent of Utahns have unaffordable housing and transportation cost burdens (CNT 2024). Most transit service in Utah is concentrated in the Wasatch Front, whereas rural transit services outside of this region are scarce but essential lifelines.

For example, Moab Area Transit is a new fixed-route and on-demand fare-free transit service in Moab, serving its small town of less than 10,000 people. Before this, Moab had no transit for its community members and visitors. Circumstances started to change with state bill S.B.277 in 2017 that allotted \$10 million to Moab as an area with significant economic development impact associated with its recreation and tourism and a need to alleviate congestion. After scrapping plans for a parking structure, the Arches Hotspot Region Coordinating Committee facilitated a public process, where alternatives such as a transit/shuttle pilot program rose to the top as a priority, and around

\* UCS analysis for block groups whose borders are within ½ mile of transit service that runs on average of 15 minutes or more, using 2024 GTFS feeds from transit agencies and American Community Survey 2022 5-year estimates (US Census Bureau 2022c). Draws upon methodology from CNT 2019.



Moab Area Transit serves community members and visitors alike, and is a strong example of rural transit solutions that help people get around.

half of the survey respondents said they would use public transit if it were provided (Arches Hotspot Committee 2020, 26).

As a result, Moab served over 30,000 people in 2023, the first year of its five-year pilot program (McMurdo 2023). Through 2027, the service will be funded by a combination of Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) funding, federal rural grant funding, COVID-19 relief funding, and a match by the City of Moab. Although primarily addressing congestion, the program has significantly improved the lives of older adults, youth, and people with disabilities in the area who have been able to gain more independence.

In many more rural areas and small towns in Utah, over 800,000 people have no access to transit whatsoever (USDOT 2023b). Many more people's access might look like an intercity bus stop in their town with routes once per day (Richfield), a transportation system for older adults (Price), or a train station mainly serving freight trains (Helper). Some intercity services, such as UDOT-supported Elevated Transit, have been cut due to lack of funding. In comparison, the Colorado legislature recently allocated \$30 million for a three-year pilot program to drastically increase service and \$100 million more in 10 years of funding for the Colorado Department of Transportation's intercity bus network called Bustang, which was launched in 2015 and connects rural towns via its Outrider routes (CDOT 2024b, 8).

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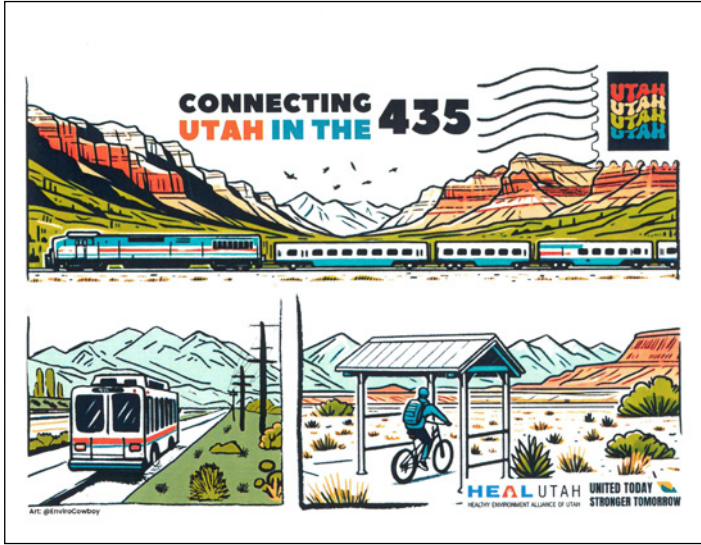
## **A Future Transportation System That Serves Everyone, including Nondrivers**

Nondrivers in rural Utah deserve more. Outside of the Wasatch Front, which runs in the central northern part of Utah and encompasses the biggest metro areas of Salt Lake City, Ogden, and Provo, the state mainly consists of small towns and rural areas. The over 900,000 rural Utahns comprise around 28 percent of the state's population. Further, rural Utahns support transit in these areas. In a 2023 survey of over 20,000 Utahns as a part of the Guiding Our Growth initiative led by the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, over 50 percent of rural Utahns wanted state and local leaders to explore investments in statewide passenger rail, public transit in tourism areas, and transit services to connect smaller towns to larger cities, which was the largest category (Utah Governor's Office of Planning and Budget 2023b, 19).

So who are the nondrivers in Utah? Around one-third (33 percent) of people in Utah do not have a driver's license (FHWA 2024b). This is mostly the case because Utah has long been the state with the youngest population, but recent studies have shown that Utah will grow older due to declining fertility rates and the aging of the adult population (Bateman et al. 2024, 5).

***Rural Utahns want state and local leaders to explore investments in statewide passenger rail and transit services to connect smaller towns to larger cities.***

For immigrants, who make up over 10 percent of Utah's population growth and move to both rural and urban areas (American Immigration Council 2022), many obstacles hinder their ability to drive. Utah has removed some barriers to accessing a driver's license by establishing a driver's privilege card for people who need to drive but do not meet the requirements for a driver's license. However, federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers can utilize state databases to run facial recognition technology on millions of people without consent and target detainment (Romboy 2019), so these initiatives still pose risks to undocumented immigrants, who respond by walking or taking transit. Even for immigrants with documentation and the ability to drive, the cost burdens of car ownership are particularly acute as they face other economic barriers (Zivarts 2024).



**WHAT TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS ARE NEEDED TO IMPROVE MOBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY IN YOUR COMMUNITY?**  
Share your stories and concerns to decision makers.

STAMP HERE

**TO: HEAL UTAH: 824 S 400 W, Ste B111 | Salt Lake City, Utah, 84101**

**What would you like to see in the 435?**

- Increased bus frequency & reliability
- Expanded service
- Safe pedestrian and cycling infrastructure
- \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Zip Code/ City \_\_\_\_\_

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Your privacy is our priority. We never sell your personal information. We take it seriously.

GET UPDATES

These post cards will be sent to lawmakers, city officials and important decision makers

Campaign for Transit in the 435 distributed postcards filled out with community stories and concerns to policymakers to advocate for rural transit funding.

A growing coalition called the Campaign for Transit in the 435, formed in late 2023, has been advocating for decisionmakers to prioritize rural transit in the 435 area code—most of the state outside of the Wasatch Front. Working with organizations such as United Today, Stronger Tomorrow and the Utah Rail Passengers Association, the group of roughly 60 people has been meeting virtually and visited the Capitol in February 2024, in the heat of budget negotiations, to connect with lawmakers on its perspectives (Condos 2024).

The Campaign for Transit in the 435 called for the legislature to follow Governor Spencer Cox’s budget recommendations to allocate roughly \$45 million in sales tax revenues to transit, roughly doubling ongoing funding for statewide projects as well as funding a \$2.5 million transit pilot innovation program for

locally operated transportation systems (Utah Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget 2023a, 34). If the legislature had approved, this funding would have allowed different communities to design locally tailored transit solutions.

Rural communities deserve abundant, high-quality transit just as urban communities do. Though transit may take different forms, its core purpose remains the same—to provide people with additional, affordable, and accessible options to get where they need to go.

*This feature is excerpted from Freedom to Move: Investing in Transportation Choices for a Clean, Prosperous, and Just Future. Read the fully referenced report at [www.ucsusa.org/resources/freedom-move](http://www.ucsusa.org/resources/freedom-move).*

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*The Utah Rail Passengers Association works to promote the broader diversity of transportation options for residents of and visitors to Utah by educating citizens and policy makers about available transportation options. Our organization seeks funders, volunteers, and others interested parties to help us connect Utahns across miles and geographies in a more cohesive and sustainable way.*

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*The Union of Concerned Scientists puts rigorous, independent science into action, developing solutions and advocating for a healthy, safe, and just future.*

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