



Ho Chi Minh City Scrambling to Put Transit in Place Before People Start Buying Cars

ERIC JAFFE 10:26 AM ET COMMENTS



The Latitude blog of the *New York Times* [recently tracked](#) the efforts of Ho Chi Minh City, the most populous city in Vietnam, to get its metro system in place before residents catch the car bug. Cities in developing nations often put themselves behind the traffic curve, if you will, by encouraging people to drive [before public transit](#) has been established. As one transport expert told Latitude reporter Lien Hoang: "Once people get into a car, it's hard to get them out."

At the moment, mobility in Ho Chi Minh City generally means motorbikes. They account for [60 to 65 percent](#) of all city trips and create what Ethan Arpi at *The City Fix* [once called](#) "a traffic nightmare and a miasma of smog." Between 800 and 900 road deaths occur each a year in Ho Chi Minh City, the majority of them bikers, and the two-wheel culture has also contributed to a disconnected form of sprawl known as "leap-frog development," according to a recent World Bank report [\[PDF\]](#).

Many transport experts agree that once residents swap their motorbikes for cars, the situation only stands to get worse. That day is rapidly approaching. Auto sales grew 8 percent across Vietnam this year, and in Ho Chi Minh City per capita income surpassed the \$3,000 threshold above which car sales tend to spike in 2011, reports Hoang. Right now cars account for only 5 percent of city trips, [according to World Bank](#), but if private ownership meets current expectations, the city will face "serious congestion problems."

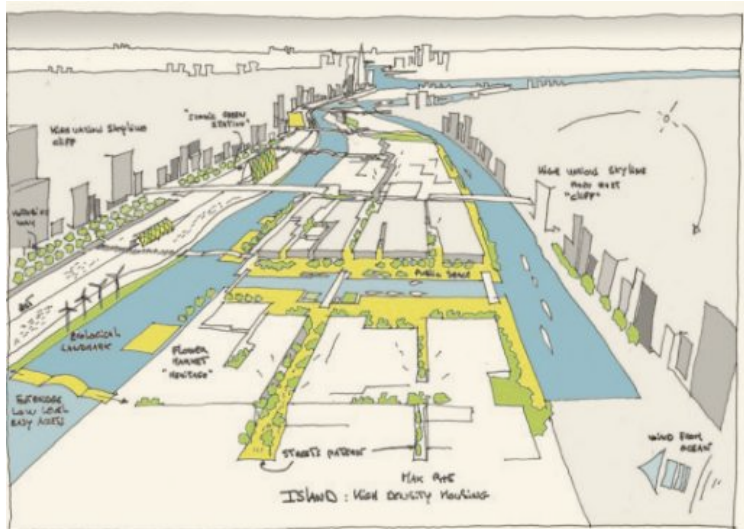
Making matters worse is the fact that what little public transportation does exist in Ho Chi Minh City has been, to date, quite unpopular. Transit makes up roughly 5 percent of city travel, with buses "stigmatized as a service for low-income commuters," writes Hoang. That problem certainly isn't unique to the developing world, but officials will have their hands full to reach the [40 percent transit share](#) target they've set by 2025.

Still there are signs of hope. After [years of planning and consideration](#), the metro is finally emerging. The system will cover some 66 miles of metro Ho Chi Minh City with six lines; construction began on Line 2 in [August of 2010](#) and on Line 1 [two years later](#). Initial service isn't

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supposed to begin until 2017, however, which means several years in which less sustainable transport habits will be reinforced.

To address this service gap, [World Bank recently helped](#) Ho Chi Minh City implement a BRT system. City officials toured Curitiba and Bogota, home to some of the world's most established rapid buses, as well as cities in China and Indonesia, home to similar emerging congestion problems. Afterwards officials mapped out a bus corridor designed to serve as a transit stop-gap, encourage high-density development, draw on solar energy, and ultimately enhance the metro system.



"Transforming Cities with Transit," by the World Bank



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Last fall the city officially announced plans for its **\$152 million, 15-mile BRT system** — reportedly a fleet of 30 buses that will charge lower fares for students and the poor. There are [caveats to copying](#) a BRT system from other parts of the world, but then again there are precedents for using BRT as a [transit band-aid](#) while awaiting a subway system. Whatever happens, no one can say Ho Chi Minh City is just idling on its motorbikes until the cars arrive.

Top image: [Stephen Bures/Shutterstock](#)

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Eric Jaffe is a contributing writer to The Atlantic Cities and the author of *The King's Best Highway: The Lost History of the Boston Post Road, the Route That Made America*. He lives in New York. [All posts »](#)

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