

**Embracing a Legacy, Exploring Trends, and Planning for the Future:  
Connecting Spokane through Public Transit**

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A Report for the Citizens of Spokane and the STA Board of Directors

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## Connecting Spokane

Spokane Transit Authority (STA) attempts to provide accessible, safe, and convenient public transportation to the residents of Spokane. By improving connectivity between the people and places that define the city, STA supports the social fabric, quality of life, and local economy. Public transit played an important role in the development of Spokane and its land use patterns. The current transit system continues to provide numerous benefits to the city. Proposed enhancements to the transit network will continue connecting people to the places that matter most to them. As the city, region, and country change, proactive planning and investment in public transit will allow Spokane to remain an important economic and cultural hub in the Inland Northwest.

## Roots in Public Transit

Spokane has a rich history of public transportation dating back before the age of the car. This history influenced land use patterns and established a foundation for its modern transit system. Although Spokane was founded in 1871,<sup>1</sup> the city grew large enough to warrant public transportation by the late 1880s.<sup>2</sup> In 1886, the Spokane Street Railway Company ignited public transportation in Spokane. In 1888, it first operated as a horsecar route that stretched from Browne's Addition to downtown, ending at the corner of Howard Street and Riverside Avenue, near the current STA Plaza. This was the second street railroad in Washington Territory, after



*Spokane Street Railway Company, 1888. Courtesy of Spokane Public Library, Northwest Room.*

Seattle's. The company started by making an average of \$30 a day, and quickly turned a profit.<sup>3</sup>

The year 1888 was significant for the development of public transit in Spokane. In addition to the Spokane Street Railway Company, more transit companies were incorporated,<sup>4</sup> including the Ross Park Street Railway Company<sup>5</sup> and the Spokane Cable Railway Company. The Spokane Street Railway



*Streetcar, 1893. Courtesy of Spokane Public Library, Northwest Room.*

Company started operating in 1890<sup>6</sup> and focused on housing development. This company ran Spokane's first electric streetcar line, powered by hydroelectricity, and its streetcars traveled up to 30 miles per hour with 15-minute frequencies.<sup>7</sup>

The Spokane Cable Railway Company ran across two bridges to Twickenham Addition, located across the river from West Central.<sup>8</sup> Like many streetcar companies around the nation, this one invested heavily in real estate. The Spokane Cable Railway Company sold lots at Twickenham and also influenced housing developments in Cable Addition on the South Hill.<sup>9</sup> Streetcar companies also invested in amusement parks to increase ridership. The Spokane Street Railway Company adopted this strategy. It owned Twickenham Park, which eventually saw the addition of an amusement park, baseball field, and natatorium. This led to its well-known name, Natatorium Park.<sup>10</sup>

The Washington Water Power Company (WWP; now Avista Corp.) was incorporated in 1889. It purchased stock in other companies; and because utility companies had more customers than streetcar companies, WWP could afford to invest more in transit than smaller rail companies. WWP purchased part of the City Park Transit Company, the Spokane Cable Railway,

the Spokane Street Railway, and the assets of the Spokane Electric Railway Company.<sup>11</sup> In 1892, the Spokane Street Railway Company purchased 70 percent of the Ross Park Street Railway Company's stock, effectively giving WWP control over the rail company. By 1899, WWP had merged all but one of Spokane's streetcar companies into a unified system.<sup>12</sup>

### **Transit in the 20th Century: Shifts in Mode**

Transit remained popular into the 20th century. In 1900, a new car barn was constructed on Boone Avenue<sup>13</sup> which is the same location of STA's current bus facilities.<sup>14</sup> In 1901, "owl cars"—streetcars that departed at midnight from the corner of Howard Street and Riverside Avenue—accommodated people out late at night.<sup>15</sup> In 1905, WWP began an interurban route from downtown Spokane to Medical Lake resorts.<sup>16</sup> This service proved popular, and on Independence Day trains ran 22 times in each direction. In 1907, interurban service to Cheney began, which helped to serve students at Cheney Normal School.<sup>17</sup> Theatergoers in Spokane took advantage of a nighttime train that left Cheney at 10:55 p.m. and arrived at 11:50 p.m. This service made daytrips to Spokane for rural residents possible.<sup>18</sup>

In 1910 WWP's ridership peaked at over 24 million;<sup>19</sup> however, by 1915 streetcars began to struggle due to competition from jitneys.<sup>20</sup> As the automobile became more common, people started charging small fees to carry people in their cars, usually for less than it cost to ride a streetcar.<sup>21</sup> WWP's ridership increased during World War I, but decreased during the 1918 flu epidemic, and in 1919, the company increased the fare from 5 cents to 6 cents. The city banned jitneys in 1919 after complaints from Spokane Traction Company and WWP regarding policies for street paving.<sup>22</sup> WWP ridership initially increased but the transit company still faced financial problems.<sup>23</sup>

In 1922 the Spokane Traction Company and WWP formed Spokane United Railways, the sole operator for the remainder of Spokane’s streetcar history.<sup>24</sup> WWP acquired sole ownership of Spokane United Railways in 1925, and raised fares to 10 cents. The automobile continued to hurt streetcar revenues, and by 1931, ridership decreased 33 percent from that



*Last day of streetcars in Spokane in 1936. Courtesy of Spokane Public Library, Northwest Room.*

of 1922.<sup>25</sup> Spokane United Railways began to dismantle its streetcar system, and in 1932 the Spokane City Council allowed six routes to be converted to buses.<sup>26</sup> The company soon began to convert all of its lines to buses and the last day of streetcar service was on August 31, 1936.<sup>27</sup> This marked the first city on the West Coast to totally “motorize” its transit fleet.<sup>28</sup>

National City Lines acquired Spokane United Railways in 1945, and for the next two decades buses operated under a company known as Spokane City Lines.<sup>29</sup> Bus ridership reached 26 million in 1946, the highest ever in Spokane.<sup>30</sup> Financial problems persisted throughout the 1950s as more people chose automobiles over transit. From 1951 to 1956, annual bus ridership decreased from nearly 16.5 million to 10.6 million passengers.<sup>31</sup> Despite the decreases in ridership, transit remained important for many people, and strikes throughout the 1950s affected the daily lives of many local residents.

The year 1968 represented a turning point for public transportation in Spokane. On January 16, bus drivers and mechanics went on strike, resulting in a lack of transit service for months. On May 7, residents passed an emergency vote to craft a “city transit commission” to better manage public transportation in Spokane and to hopefully end the transit strike.<sup>32</sup> The city would lease service from Spokane City Lines through a 73-cent monthly household tax.<sup>33</sup> On

June 13, after nearly five months without public transportation, buses again served the streets of Spokane. This was the beginning of the Spokane Transit System.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Origins of a New System**

The 1970s brought changes that still exist today. Buses were repainted with the familiar blue and green motif to match the logo of Expo '74.<sup>35</sup> The massive influx of visitors to Spokane during Expo '74 caused a spike in ridership—nearly a 50 percent increase over the previous year.<sup>36</sup> In 1981, voters approved a measure by 71 percent to replace the monthly household tax with a slight sales tax increase and a new organization: the Spokane Transit Authority for Regional Transportation (START).<sup>37</sup> The following year, the name was shortened to Spokane Transit Authority.<sup>38</sup>

By the 1990s public transportation in Spokane began to experience major physical changes. The Plaza, STA's central bus terminal, opened in 1995.<sup>39</sup> A few years later, STA standardized the route numbers to match geographic areas.<sup>40</sup> The beginning of the 21st century brought new successes as well as challenges to the transit system. After the elimination of Washington State's motor vehicle excise tax, transit agencies across Washington faced immediate budget issues. In 2004, Spokane voters overwhelmingly approved a modest sales tax increase to prevent a 40 percent reduction in STA's service.<sup>41</sup> In 2008, another vote made this source of funding permanent.<sup>42</sup> That same year, STA introduced hybrid diesel-electric buses to the streets of Spokane.<sup>43</sup>

Transit has gone through many changes over the years. From the dawn of the city's first horse-drawn streetcar over a century ago to today's familiar hybrid buses, STA is now looking to the future. Public transportation in Spokane started as a way to attract people to newly built

subdivisions. Today, as people try to save money on transportation costs and reduce their impact on the environment, transit will continue to be an increasingly attractive mode of transportation. If current trends continue, public transportation in Spokane has the opportunity to exceed historic ridership levels and will again play a major part in shaping the future of Spokane and its built environment.

### **Spokane Transit: A Glimpse at the Current System**

As the previous section indicates, Spokane Transit has played an integral part in the development and history of Spokane. At present, STA serves as a backbone for two major infill developments currently underway: Kendall Yards, which advertises itself as a “transit oriented community,”<sup>44</sup> and the addition of a medical school in the University District. STA is actively planning to serve these areas as part of its Central City project and has identified a Modern Electric Trolley as the preferred method of transporting people between Browne’s Addition and into the University District via Downtown Spokane.<sup>45</sup> A later project may connect the Hospital District and Kendall Yards, intersecting downtown with the planned Browne’s Addition-University District line for quick transfers.<sup>46</sup> Consistent with other local planning efforts, including the *City of Spokane’s Comprehensive Plan, Fast Forward Spokane: Downtown Plan Update, Riverpoint Campus Master Plan*, as well as Spokane Transit’s own comprehensive plan *Connect Spokane*, these present-day planning efforts are crucial to improving the overall vitality of Spokane.

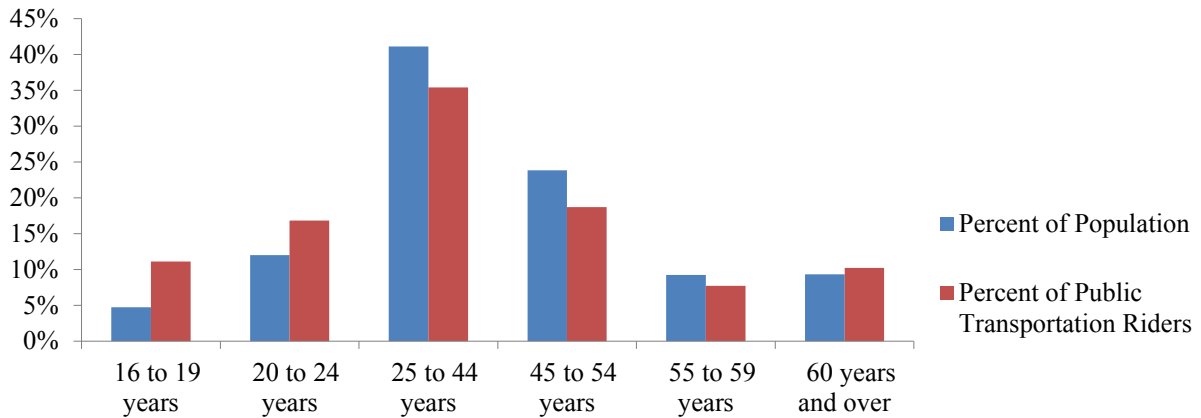
Both the Riverpoint medical school and Kendall Yards are poised to attract more young professionals or professionals-in-training into the central core of the city. Emerging trends of the younger demographic show that our culture is undergoing an interesting shift in its transportation

patterns. If these trends continue, we can expect that STA will assume even greater importance in the near future.

### Emerging Trends: Shifting Away from Driving

The first trend regards the fact that Americans are driving less overall, and this is most pronounced among the youngest demographic of drivers: those under age 34. For example, 45 percent of people 18- to 34-years-old reported to a KRC Research and Zipcar survey that they have consciously made an effort to replace driving with a transportation alternative, whereas the number for older demographic groups is 32 percent.<sup>47</sup>

*Figure 1. Population and Transit Ridership: Spokane County<sup>48</sup>*



Furthermore, the age group of 16- to 34-year-olds actually decreased by 2 percent from 2001 to 2009, but their passenger miles traveled on public transit increased by 40 percent.<sup>49</sup>



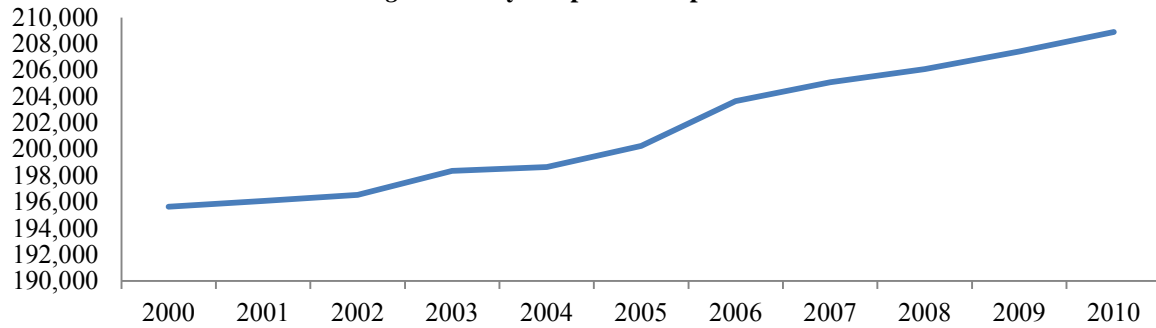
For local age groups under age 25, the percentage of public transportation riders is higher than the percentage of population, meaning that a greater proportion of young people is using public transit compared to the older age groups, except for those over age 60 (see Figure 1). The trend away from driving is also illustrated by comparing the increasing population in Spokane against traffic volumes, which is consistent with national trends (see Figure 2). We tracked three high volume spots in the City of Spokane and found that traffic decreased even as population as increased:

**Figure 2. Traffic Volumes at Select Points in Spokane<sup>50, 51, 52, 53</sup>**



*Note: no traffic counts for these points exist in 2006-2007, due to “time constraints.”*

**Figure 3. City of Spokane Population<sup>54</sup>**



The cultural shift resulting in a decrease in vehicle miles traveled and a shift toward using more alternative forms of transportation among the younger population is also reflected in their preferences for where to live. The 2011 Community Preference Survey conducted by the National Association of Realtors found that young professionals indicate a strong preference for walkable cities that provide good transit service,<sup>55</sup> a market that Kendall Yards is designed to serve. Kendall Yards, though, is a long way from completion, so who is riding Spokane Transit now?

### **A Short Profile of Spokane Transit Riders**

Those who ride Spokane Transit ride it often. Fully 75 percent of respondents to an on-board survey conducted in 2010 reported riding Spokane Transit five or more times a week. In fact, 76 percent of respondents reported that the bus is their primary form of transportation. Just half of Spokane Transit riders reported having a valid license, only 32 percent have a car to use when needed, and 26 percent have both. Perhaps most notable is that 59

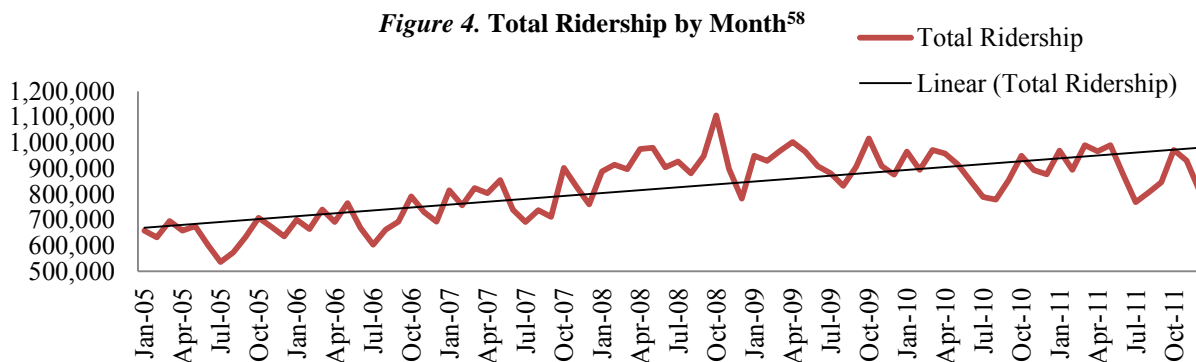
59% of riders reported have only been riding the bus for the last three years!

percent of Spokane Transit riders reported riding the bus for just the last three years. This certainly indicates that Spokane Transit is attracting new riders.<sup>56</sup>

The majority of riders, 67 percent, reported having walked to the bus stop, and 24 percent of respondents had transferred from another bus route to the stop. Those who walked to the bus stop walked an average of 2.2 blocks. Only 8 percent of Spokane Transit riders begin their journeys from a park and ride lot.<sup>57</sup> Given that people do not walk long distances to ride the bus, transit routes need to be planned through densely populated areas in order to capture the highest ridership possible. Both the Central City Line, which will originate in Browne’s Addition, Spokane’s densest neighborhood, and the future service for Kendall Yards planned as a potential future expansion to the Central City Line are consistent with that objective.

### A Brief Survey of Ridership

Despite sustaining a service reduction in 2010 of 3 percent and another 7 percent reduction in 2011, ridership, as measured by boardings, remains fairly steady and has shown a slight upward trend in the last five years:



Ridership fluctuates seasonally, showing a general uptick every year around September as students return to school. What is most notable though is that the 2010 and 2011 service reductions also occurred in September of those years, and boardings still increased at that time despite the service reductions.

In 2010, total boardings were more than 10.7 million system-wide. Fully 1.2 million boardings were on Route 90, which was STA's most popular route that year. Route 90 serves the Sprague Avenue corridor, stretching from Division Street in Downtown Spokane to the Valley Transit Center at University Road in Spokane Valley. In 2010, service extended every fifteen minutes during most of the day and every 30 minutes on nights and weekends. This carried those passengers more than 5.7 million miles. On average about 2,600 people cross Division Street on Sprague Avenue in a bus as they head east or west along that corridor.

On school days during the first four months of 2012, between 3,750 and 3,900 people travel through the Cheney/Four Lakes exit on I-90 in a STA bus. Additionally, in 2011, nearly 5,500 people crossed the Monroe Street Bridge each weekday in a STA bus. Annually that adds up to over 1.4 million crossings of the Monroe Street Bridge in STA buses in 2011 on weekdays alone.

## **Conclusion**

Despite service reductions, Spokane Transit is still moving a lot of people around our region. It is the backbone that keeps much of our city going, and its importance is expected to increase in the near future, given some of the emerging trends discussed so far. Perhaps most

important though is the expected rise in oil prices and its potential effect on transit usage, a discussion of which follows.

## **Building for the Future**

Understanding the past and present is vital for making informed decisions; however, proactively planning to create a better community is equally important. The dynamic nature of global markets and rapid changes in our society create challenges for making long-term decisions, but simply reacting to these changes limits Spokane's ability to remain an important economic and cultural hub in the Inland Northwest. Analysis of future opportunities paired with careful planning will allow Spokane to maximize limited resources while building a better future. Trends and projections regarding oil prices, energy consumption, the local economy, and population, suggest that investing in transit will improve Spokane for current and future generations.

## **Energy and Oil Trends**

The trends in oil consumption and energy use provide some of the strongest arguments for expanding investments in Spokane's transit system. Additionally, ridership projections associated with the impending increase in gas prices indicates that cities providing a variety of transportation choices will better meet the needs of the public.<sup>59</sup> Projections tend to lose reliability as they extend into the future and lack certainty due to the precarious nature of global affairs. Projections ultimately rely on assumptions; however, trends related to both energy

consumption and transit ridership provide a compelling case that oil prices will increase and people will want transportation options that extend beyond the single occupancy vehicle.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted a doubling of oil prices over the next decade between 2012 and 2022.<sup>60</sup> Researchers looked at the availability of oil, new technology, and potential oil demand. Their analysis concluded that “...our prediction of small further increases in world oil production comes at the expense of a near doubling, permanently, of real oil prices over the coming decade. This is uncharted territory for the world economy, which has never experienced such prices for more than a few months.”<sup>61</sup> This analysis should cause U.S. cities to seriously reevaluate their land use and transportation options. As oil prices increase, other basic costs such as food rise and families may rely on alternative transportation options, particularly in an area where the median household income is consistently lower than state and national income levels.<sup>63</sup>

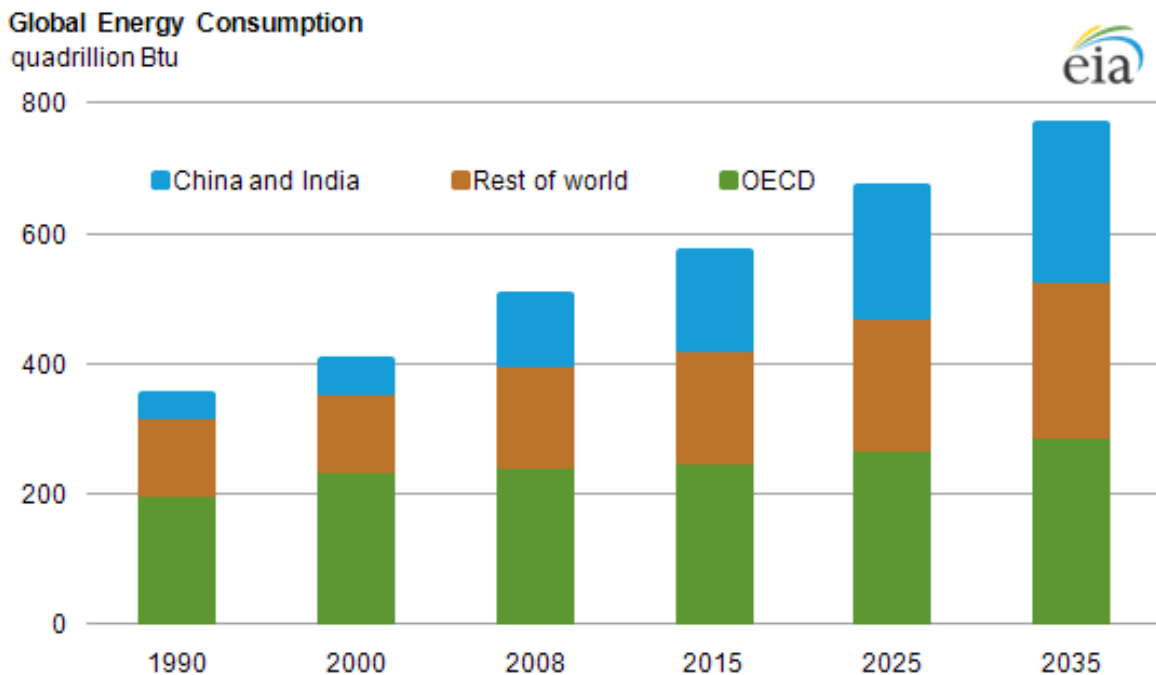
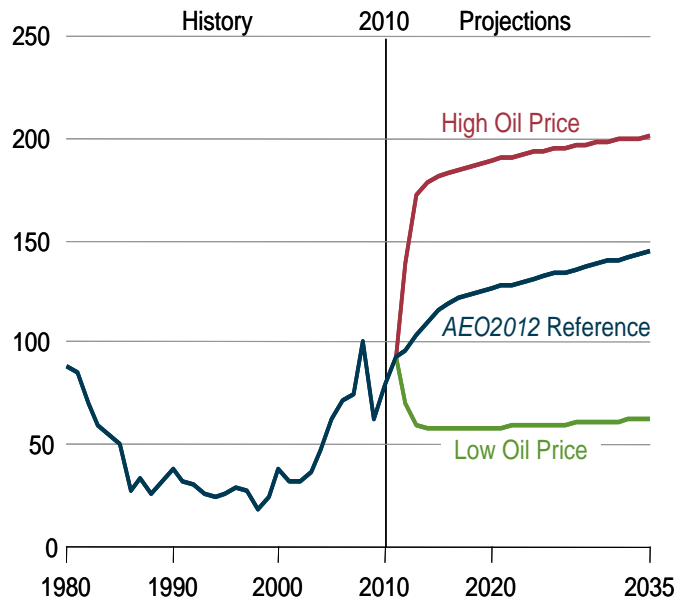


Figure 6. China and India Account for Half of Global Energy Growth through 2035<sup>62</sup>

Data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) explains some of the large increases in oil prices predicted by the IMF. Countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which are highly industrialized, traditionally consumed larger amounts of energy and oil than non-OECD countries, which are less industrialized. As other economies industrialize they require greater amounts of global energy. For instance, within the next twenty years China, India, and the rest of the world will consume a much larger portion of



**Figure 7. Average Annual World Oil Prices in Three Cases: 1980-2035 (Real 2010 Dollars per Barrel)<sup>64</sup>**

available resources (see Figure 6).<sup>65</sup> Consumption patterns will also expand in non-OECD countries in terms of oil. The combination of economic activity and oil price generally drives the demand for global oil.<sup>66</sup> While projected oil prices in 2035 range from roughly \$60 per barrel to \$200 per barrel (see Figure 7), prudent planning should not rely on the best-case scenario. The 2008 spike in gas prices provoked interest in the relationship between ridership and gas prices. The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) concluded that transit ridership responded to price fluctuations throughout 2008.<sup>67</sup> The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) also tracked responses to spiking oil prices in 2008, and found that commuters made a number of changes, including walking, cycling, riding public transit, telecommuting, looking for other employment options, and ridesharing.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, APTA determined that transit agencies will experience capacity issues as gasoline rises above \$4 per gallon.<sup>69</sup> Communities that invest in

infrastructure supporting alternative modes of transportation will be better prepared for the economic and social consequences of high gas prices.

### Strengthening the Local Economy

Economic benefits associated with transit improvements, including urban circulators and fixed guideway transit support additional investments in Spokane’s transit system. Streetcars promote local economic development by increasing pedestrian activity along particular

corridors,<sup>70</sup> revitalizing the urban center,<sup>71</sup> and reducing congestion.<sup>72</sup>

APTA states that “Urban circulator systems such as streetcars and rubber tire trolley lines provide a transportation option that connects urban destinations and foster the redevelopment of urban spaces into walkable mixed use, high density environments.”<sup>73</sup>

The initial proposal for Modern Electric Trolley Line by STA will circulate people through

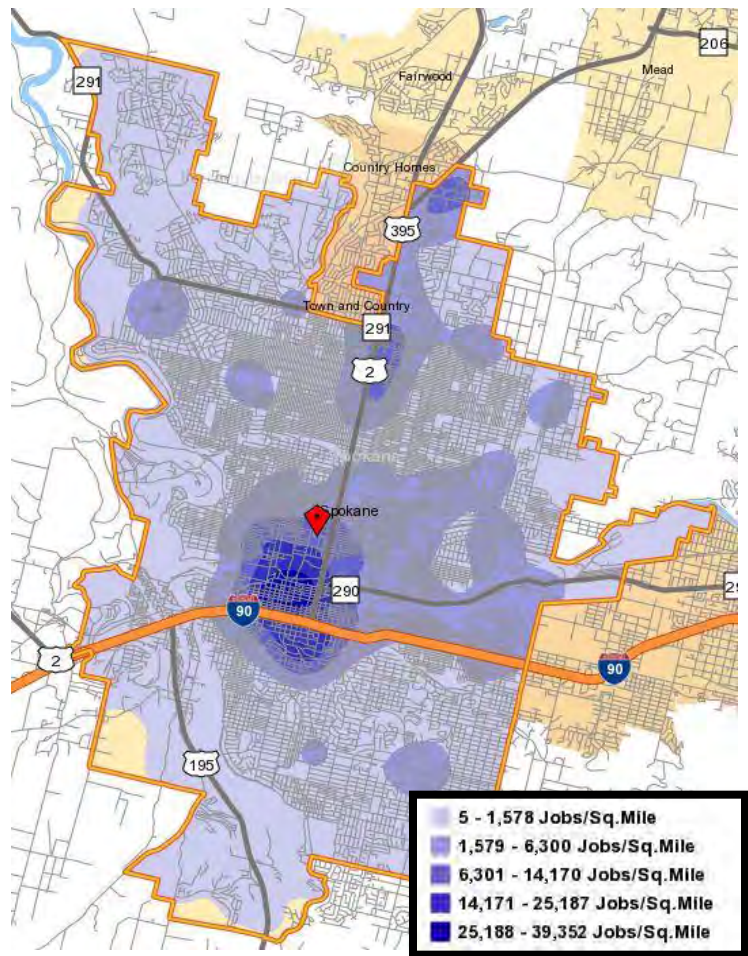


Figure 8. Spokane Work Area Profile Analysis: Jobs/Sq. Mile<sup>74</sup>



some of the busiest employment and retail areas in the city. Economists generally hesitate to offer projections regarding local economies beyond a few years; however, the downtown center and specific corridors support more jobs per square mile than other areas in the city (see Figure 8). Assuming that downtown revitalization remains an important priority for the City of Spokane, improving connections with downtown, the University District, the City of Spokane Valley, and the Division Street corridor will circulate consumers and improve connectivity among Spokane's most densely employed areas. Additionally, retail trade and healthcare represent two of Spokane County's largest employment sectors, collectively employing 29.1 percent of the county in 2011.<sup>75</sup> The Modern Electric Trolley line proposed by STA will improve access to healthcare and retail services located downtown and in North Spokane. Ultimately, it will promote connectivity to the expanding University District, which will likely play an important role in the regional economy.

### **Population Projections, Generational Changes, and Expanding the Transportation System**

Washington State's Office of Financial Management (OFM) recently released population projections for Spokane County. The medium provisional projection, based on 2010 Census data, projects that the population for Spokane County will reach 576,763 by 2035 and 592,969 by 2040.<sup>76</sup> As the region continues to grow, infrastructure will experience more stress and congestion may increase. Supplementing transportation infrastructure with additional options may alleviate problems associated with rising regional population.

In addition, research indicates a generational change in preferences for housing. Younger generations are prolonging the purchase of houses, and often prefer to live near the city center or in densely populated inner suburbs.<sup>77</sup> Cities that invest in alternative transportation may attract

talented individuals into their urban centers and provide aging populations with increased mobility and access to cultural and economic assets located downtown. While Spokane will undoubtedly grow, investing in transit may continue to revitalize the heart of the city, save money associated with sprawl and infrastructure costs, and alleviate increased congestion.

### **Final Thoughts**

The history of transit influenced the culture, environment, economy, and land use patterns of Spokane. The transition from horse-drawn streetcars to modernized buses created a historic legacy of connecting the people to significant places in innovative ways. Spokane Transit currently serves an increasing number of riders and acts as an important partner for projects in the cities it serves. Commuting patterns are particularly high among younger portions of the population. Younger generations who prefer walkable neighborhoods near the urban center will rely on public transit to supplement their transportation needs.

Increases in gas and energy prices should reinforce generational preferences for alternate modes of transportation. Heightened connectivity among important centers and corridors will positively affect local businesses. As downtown remains the center of the transit network, residents will have access to the commercial and cultural center of the city; and downtown revitalization should continue. By proactively planning to improve connectivity, STA and the City of Spokane are taking an important step to keep Spokane a dynamic place to live.

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