Episode Book

EPISODE #6260

Why Free Transit Fails to Clear the Roads

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SYNOPSIS

Making trains and buses fare-free reliably boosts passenger counts, but global evidence shows it rarely persuades drivers to abandon their cars. Real-world transit experiments across Hasselt, Tallinn, Germany, and the United States reveal that eliminating fares primarily generates new mobility rather than replacing existing car trips. Research suggests that frequency, reliability, and route capacity play a far larger role than ticket prices in shaping commuter choices, while agency fareboxes often cover only a tiny fraction of operating costs.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Hannah spotted the election-day train announcement, and the tempting part wasn't just the free ticket. It was the train you wouldn't have to wait half an hour for. Jerusalem to Tel Aviv gets an extra departure each hour, and suddenly a very familiar railway looks rather more useful.



Herman

The same stations, the same journey, but a missed departure costs you less of your day. That changes whether you risk taking the train in the first place.



Corn

Her prompt asks what happens if we make that combination permanent. Frequent service, no fares, funded as infrastructure, like roads. Would people leave their cars behind, would businesses benefit, and would the wider economy recover enough to justify the spending? I like the distinction she's making. Public transport here can be affordable and still charge you heavily in waiting.



Herman

Time is the payment you don't get a receipt for. Although the global experiments give us a rather uneven answer about what removing the money payment achieves.



Corn

The platform still accepts entire afternoons.



Herman

Fare-free service reliably brings more passengers. Whether those passengers previously drove is a different matter, and that's where the economic claims need much closer inspection.



Herman

Tuesday's arrangement covers nationwide Israel Railways services and intercity bus routes longer than fifteen kilometres. Free travel starts at eight on Monday evening and continues through the end of service on election day. It helps people reach their registered polling places, including people who now live somewhere else.



Corn

Worth distinguishing that from every local bus automatically becoming free. The announcement has boundaries, even if the headline doesn't.



Herman

The Jerusalem to Tel Aviv line also gets three trains per hour in each direction between noon and eight in the evening. The added service starts or finishes at HaHagana. That's an important destination detail for anybody imagining an identical extra train all the way through the existing service pattern.



Corn

You're about to call this a perfect natural experiment, Herman. I can hear the spreadsheet opening.



Herman

Useful natural experiment. Not perfect.



Corn

I saved us one adjective.



Herman

You did. Election day changes work patterns, destinations and reasons for travel. Price and frequency change together, so a busy platform won't tell us how much each contributed. Still, we can observe whether the extra departure attracts passengers, and whether crowding shifts between departures.



Corn

Also whether people trust it enough to leave home without planning their entire morning around it. A special timetable can fill a train without changing anyone's ordinary commuting decision.



Herman

Permanent policies give us a longer view. Luxembourg made public transport free nationally in twenty twenty, apart from first class on trains. Tallinn introduced free travel for residents in twenty thirteen. Hasselt started much earlier, in nineteen ninety-seven.



Corn

Very different propositions already. A national network, a residents' benefit and a city experiment shouldn't produce one universal promise.



Herman

Malta made most routes free for residents in twenty twenty-two. Kharkiv introduced free transit that year too, under exceptionally difficult wartime conditions. Belgrade followed in twenty twenty-five. American agencies supply another set of examples, often bus systems with relatively low fare revenue.



Corn

My guess is the cheap, already popular system barely changes, while the expensive system with empty seats changes considerably.



Herman

That's broadly the pattern, although service changes alongside the fare policy can make the headline spectacular. Hasselt is the example where you really need to keep that in mind.



Herman

By two thousand six, Hasselt's ridership was reported as much as thirteen times its pre-policy level. That was nine years after fares disappeared. You cannot take the whole increase, attach it to the zero on the ticket and assume another city can reproduce it next month.



Corn

Thirteen times is a network story, not a coupon.



Herman

Routes, service provision, the starting level of use and the time people have to adapt all matter. Tallinn gives a more restrained result. Ridership rose fourteen percent after a year. It already had good service, high transit use and low fares, so eliminating the remaining price barrier had less room to work.



Corn

Fourteen percent still sounds substantial if those are people finally able to make ordinary trips. We should resist treating the smaller headline as a disappointment. If you've already made something useful and affordable, the final improvement ought to look smaller.



Herman

What would convince you the extra trips were valuable, Corn? Beyond counting bodies through a door.



Corn

I'd distinguish somebody replacing a walk they enjoyed from somebody taking a job interview they couldn't otherwise afford to reach. Both register as another boarding. Only one tells me we've removed a serious restriction. I'd also want to know whether existing passengers can still get aboard.



Herman

Capacity matters. Justin Tyndall's published comparison across sixteen American agencies puts the average ridership increase after fare elimination at forty-nine percent, with substantial variation. That's a large response, but it doesn't tell you whether the additional demand appears on an empty midday bus or an already packed morning departure.



Corn

Free standing room remains standing room.



Herman

A broader American comparison found gains around seventeen percent for partial-route fare-free policies and forty-five percent for full-system policies. Different methods, different agencies, broadly consistent direction. Removing fares attracts riders. We can stop being surprised by that and ask what those riders would otherwise have done.



Corn

Stayed home is the answer that gets unfairly dismissed. Someone takes an extra trip to visit a friend and the transport debate says, regrettably, no motorist was harmed.



Herman

New mobility has value. Santiago's randomized experiment found overall travel increased twelve percent, with off-peak trips up twenty-three percent. There was no evidence of substitution between modes or periods. People weren't simply shifting an existing car journey onto transit, or moving a peak trip into a cheaper period. They were making additional journeys.



Corn

That weakens the traffic claim without weakening the visit to the friend.



Herman

Germany's nine-euro monthly ticket points in a similar direction. Leisure train journeys increased strongly, but substitution between modes was limited. Cheap travel encouraged people to go somewhere, rather than reliably persuading drivers to abandon journeys they were already making.



Corn

A crowded Saturday train photograph cannot show you the cars that supposedly stayed home. It can barely show you the floor.



Herman

The evidence on reduced car use is mixed, often small or absent. European experience includes very large passenger increases without clear, corresponding reductions in driving. If the objective is congestion, you need to measure traffic and driving directly.



Corn

I'd go further. The person with a car may be paying for reliability, carrying things, making several stops, or getting home after the last train. Saving a modest fare doesn't fix any of those. For somebody already struggling to afford the bus, though, the same saving can be decisive.



Herman

That distinction explains why frequency is so powerful. King and Taylor's UCLA synthesis says riders tend to respond more to service improvements than fare reductions. At the margin, the revenue surrendered to make service free may attract fewer passengers than spending that money on better service.



Corn

Here's a voicemail from a listener about precisely that waiting problem.

A

Agnes

Hello there, it's Agnes from the Highlands, I'm listening on the wee portable radio in my kitchen in Inverness while I wait for my scones to come out the oven, and I wanted to say something about your free buses and trains, because back in two thousand and one my late husband and I took the bus to Oban every Tuesday when the fares were waived for the pensioners' week, and I'm sure we went more often than we would have otherwise, though we still took the car when the weather was dreich.

A

Agnes

So my question is, if you made the trains free but they still only came twice an hour, would folk like me actually bother, or would we just stay home with the kettle on?



Herman

Some would travel more, Agnes, but a free fare can't make an awkward departure convenient. Twice-hourly service can work for a planned outing. It is much less forgiving when the appointment finishes late or the connection slips.



Corn

My objection to half-hourly service is the return journey. I can arrange when I leave home. I can't arrange when the dentist releases me. A timetable can look perfectly manageable until a real person tries to complete a round trip.



Herman

With evenly spaced departures and random arrivals, half-hourly service means an average wait of fifteen minutes. Three trains an hour brings that to ten. That's a simplified calculation, though. Timetable-aware passengers don't arrive randomly, and three departures needn't be evenly spaced.



Corn

Five minutes sounds small until it happens at both ends, several days a week. The bigger difference may be confidence. You stop treating one missed train as an event requiring a phone call.



Herman

Would you pay a fare for that improvement rather than keep the current frequency free?



Corn

I would. Someone with very little money might reasonably choose differently. That's why I'd rather discuss a frequent network with targeted free travel than assume every passenger has my priorities. Universal free service saves administration, but universality also spends money on people who would cheerfully pay.



Herman

There's a complication to the fixed-budget argument. Tyndall found no evidence that fare elimination was followed by service cuts. Service levels and total investment tended to increase. External funding usually replaced the lost revenue.



Corn

Meaning the choice on the council table may be new funding for free buses or no new funding at all. Not free buses or my preferred timetable.



Herman

Economically, service may be the stronger purchase. Politically, a fare-free proposal may unlock money that a service proposal doesn't. We shouldn't confuse those claims, but both affect what passengers actually get.



Corn

The revenue side deserves the same care. People talk as though ticket sales pay for the railway and taxpayers occasionally help with the curtains.



Herman

American agency figures make that assumption look particularly strange. In twenty twenty-four, fares covered thirteen percent of operating expenditure for the average agency. For the median agency, it was six percent. Those measures exclude capital



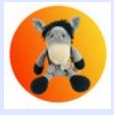
Herman (continued)

spending.



Corn

Six percent. Quite a small till to build the entire philosophy around.



Herman

Small can still matter, Corn. An agency that loses it without replacement has a real budget hole. The median also describes agencies, not the share paid by the typical passenger across the entire country. A large, heavily used system can depend much more on fares than a small local operator.



Corn

Agreed. I wouldn't take an American median to an Israeli railway budget and declare the tickets irrelevant. I would stop pretending fare recovery is the only respectable measure of a public service.



Herman

Fares commonly cover none of the capital cost and a varying share of operations and maintenance, roughly five to fifty percent across the range discussed in the synthesis. Building stations, buying vehicles and replacing infrastructure are already public funding decisions.



Corn

Roads make that easier to see. We don't ask each residential street to sell enough entry tickets to justify its existence. We ask whether people need access. Although roads aren't costless either. Fuel taxes, vehicle taxes, tolls and general taxation all sit somewhere behind the apparently free journey.



Herman

How far would you take the comparison? Would you remove fares even where a well-used service collects substantial revenue?



Corn

No automatic answer. I'd ask what collecting the money costs, who it prevents from travelling, and what replaces it. Infrastructure status doesn't exempt a service from arithmetic. It changes the benefit you're willing to count. Access to work matters even if the passenger never pays the full cost of providing it.



Herman

Fare collection itself consumes resources. Machines, payment systems, administration and enforcement all cost money. Removing fares can also permit boarding through every door, reducing time spent at stops. Though that requires the operator to allow it and organize the service accordingly.



Corn

A free bus with everyone still queuing at the front has retained the least attractive souvenir.



Herman

Some paid systems already use all-door boarding, so that benefit belongs partly to boarding design rather than the fare itself. I nearly bundled those together. Faster boarding can improve reliability, but savings don't magically replace the entire fare stream.



Corn

Your enthusiasm had reached the rear door before the evidence.



Herman

It was a very efficient boarding process.



Corn

I'll allow it. The lower-income passenger's benefit seems less slippery. Money not spent on getting to work stays available for something else. A teenager who can reach activities without requesting a lift gets independence, even if household car mileage barely changes.



Herman

Tallinn showed improved mobility among low-income residents. Across a recent review of forty-five peer-reviewed articles, the recurring benefits include increased access, greater transit use and more physical activity, especially for older adults. Transit journeys often involve walking to and from stops.



Corn

Which is a reason to care about where those stops are, rather than assume any extra boarding improves health. Someone swapping a long walk for a short bus trip is different from someone leaving the house instead of staying indoors.



Herman

Hm. The direction can differ by person. The access argument is stronger than a blanket claim about every health outcome. It also depends on practical usability. A free vehicle with an inaccessible entrance remains unavailable to somebody who can't board it.



Corn

You can predict Herman's station review from the doorway width.



Herman

You can predict yours from the nearest shaded bench.



Corn

Both are transport infrastructure.



Herman

Local businesses are harder to put a number on. More people reaching shops and services sounds beneficial, and saved fares leave some riders with more spending money. But I don't have a quantified retail-effect result that supports saying a fare-free policy raises local sales by some dependable amount.



Corn

Spending can move rather than multiply. A free train might bring customers to one shopping street while carrying customers away from another. A government shouldn't count every purchase at the destination as new economic activity.



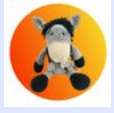
Herman

Nor should it count every passenger as a worker whose productivity just increased. Some journeys are errands, some leisure, some new access to employment. The benefits are different, and the government's cash return is different again.



Corn

That's where the phrase pays for itself gets ambitious. Better access can justify spending without sending an equal amount back to the Treasury. A visit to an elderly relative is valuable. It is not a tax receipt.



Herman

Tallinn did produce a municipal revenue gain, but through an unusual channel. People declared residency in the city to qualify for free travel. Estonia's tax arrangements then directed more revenue to the municipality.



Corn

The bus attracted taxpayers on paper.



Herman

A real fiscal result, but not evidence that congestion savings funded the service. It also doesn't guarantee a gain for the country overall if revenue moved between municipalities. Elsewhere, replacing fares with a government grant keeps the buses running, but that replacement itself is a cost.



Corn

Hannah's fuel, congestion and wasted-hours question therefore remains open. We can't add up benefits we haven't measured and announce the fare has disappeared from the public budget.



Herman

Especially when the strongest car-substitution results are limited. Less driving could save fuel and time, but the mechanism needs to occur before we book the saving. Meanwhile, a bus carrying new passengers may have strong access benefits with little measurable effect on road congestion.



Corn

There's a political temptation here too. Zero is wonderfully legible. Better evening connections and less bunching are harder to put on a poster.



Herman

Those service promises also require drivers, vehicles and operating capacity over years. Announcing fare removal can be simpler than delivering a reliable increase in departures. Yet the agencies that secured replacement funding show that free service and expanded service can coexist.



Corn

I'd want the promise written in operating terms. Which hours improve, where the connections work, and whether there's room when passengers need it. An extra departure at the wrong time is a very expensive way to improve a timetable's appearance.



Herman

The extra vehicle has to turn up when somebody actually wants to get...



Hilbert

Their mother to pay the mayor. Mine tried. Cardboard mayor, not the elected one. She said she was being polite. This was my cousin Len's depot in the early nineties. Mid-sized town. The council waived fares for a pilot, and the drivers liked not having to argue over change. Len said it was the first quiet week he'd had at the front of a bus.



Corn

Your mother maintained the previous tariff.



Hilbert

She offered forty pence. Len's depot had added a bus, but it ran after the factory shift had already started. Empty most of the day. The transport department's Mr. Selwyn Pike called it the ghost bus. I was checking ticket machines then, and Pike kept telling me the public needed to see an occupied vehicle. He put a cardboard cutout of the mayor in the driver's seat while it stood outside the library. Mum walked up and offered it the fare. Pike entered that as passenger interest.



Herman

A parked bus outside the library would at least be visible. It still wouldn't reach the factory before the shift.



Hilbert

Len told him that. Same conversation you've been having, Herman, except nobody said elastic. I appreciate that you eventually translated it. Pike commissioned another passenger count. Mum appeared in that too, although she'd only gone back for her glove. The cutout belongs to Len now. It's behind his freezer in Dunmore Road. Your point about the return journey has changed my view of Mum's second visit. Anyway, the pilot ended. They moved the extra run earlier. Len said he carried eleven people the first morning. Mum got the ordinary bus home at quarter past four.



Corn

I'd watch what happens to the journeys people need to complete, not just the departures we add. The evidence supports spending on access, with frequency often the stronger purchase than removing fares. Free travel can help substantially, but it hasn't earned a general promise to clear traffic or repay the Treasury. A permanent service that gets people there and home would give us something much firmer to judge.



Herman

Our thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing the show.



Corn

For more along these lines, there's episode four oh six, Policing Shekels, Losing Dollars; episode six fifteen, Beyond the Vibe; and episode thirty oh eight, Israel's Rail Network. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast.



Herman

If you enjoyed the conversation, leave us a rating and review. It helps other listeners find the show.



Corn

I'm Corn.



Herman

I'm Herman Poppleberry. See you tomorrow.

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