

# The future of transportation – after COVID-19

By Scott H.Z. Sumner



When I agreed to guest-edit by helping find authors and articles for this Transportation edition (and contributing one myself), the editors, I and the world were blissfully ignorant of COVID-19 and the profound impacts the novel Coronavirus would have for our practices, our lives, and the lives of everyone around us and around the world.

The impact on transportation already has been immense, but I believe the full ramifications of the pandemic on transportation are as yet unknown and will play out in significant ways over the coming years. While the parameters of those changes will seem obvious once they occur, they will be a substantial divergence from our pre-COVID concepts of where transportation was headed.

So much of life, especially American life, disproportionately relies on motor vehicle transportation, that many assume (or maybe just hope) that things post-COVID will revert to the expected course of change. Yet the real post-COVID world will not – at least for those alive today – be a world free of COVID-19, but rather a world after COVID and emerging infectious disease became a reality in the daily lives of modern humans.

While the regular stories of autonomous vehicles slaying pedestrians or crashing into freeway barriers provided some assurance that true autonomous vehicles were some ways off yet, for many years, the sense of inevitability of autonomous vehicles has been viewed as a looming threat to auto cases, both from the anticipated decline in collisions, and from the threats of immunities that tech giants might coerce out of state legislatures.

The crushing impact of the coronavirus on state budgets will render legislatures more susceptible to financial enticements of tech companies' entreaties for immunities.

On the other hand, learning how fragile our societies are and how susceptible we all are to pathogen-borne diseases can reasonably be expected to delay the advent of autonomous passenger transport, just as it is devastating the rideshare and public transit industries.

Lyft and Uber drivers have experienced huge drop-offs in business, and traffic is light in even the worst traffic corridors around the State. BART trains, light rail, buses and trains have been hit hard – BART experienced an 89% drop in July compared with its pre-COVID budget predictions.<sup>1</sup> Uber announced a cut of 3,000 more jobs due to the drop in business due to the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

As companies and individuals have learned that technology permits much work to be accomplished without a centralized office, declining commercial real estate costs will not be the only fallout, as fewer commuters means less traffic, and less need for mass transit, rideshares, etc.

For autonomous passenger transport, I think people's unease with the notion of sharing a space recently occupied by who knows who or how many other passengers in who-knows-what state of health will make it difficult to entice riders into the interior of any vehicles other than their own. But perhaps driverless cars will have non-porous seating and touch surfaces, and come equipped with UV or other disinfectant methods that will automatically clean the interiors between uses, and such innovations, along with the overall decline

in vehicle traffic, will combine to push society to adopt autonomous vehicles far more rapidly than society was willing to do pre-COVID.

Airplane travel requires spending time standing in line for security, and waiting in airports, brining travelers into close contact and proximity to countless people and frequently-touched surfaces. To address these issues, airlines and airports (and thus government) will need to develop ways to circumvent security lines and provide socially distanced means of waiting to board.

While “[m]ost viruses and other germs do not spread easily on flights because of how air circulates and is filtered on airplanes,”<sup>3</sup> it is unreasonable to think that people will regain comfort in enduring the discomfort of cramped airplane seating placing people into hours-long non-socially-distanced proximity with numerous other travelers.

E-scooter sharing and use has plummeted due to COVID (See, “Electric scooter-sharing grinds to a halt in response to the COVID-19 pandemic,”<sup>4</sup> and while bike share ridership is down,<sup>5</sup> bicycle sales and use have risen dramatically.

While automobile sales have declined, like bicycle sales and use (see my article), sales and use of motorsport vehicles like

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## Editor's Message

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ATVs and motorcycles have increased dramatically. With more and newer riders, accidents involving such vehicles are on the rise.

So the novel coronavirus has already worked huge changes in transportation and how our practices interact with and intersect with transportation concerns. Yet I can't help but think that there are other changes not yet recognized that will have even more far-reaching impacts on human society, and with it, our practices. ■

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bart.gov/news/articles/2020/news20200225#:~:text=BART%20ridership%20for%20Thursday%2C%20July,Berryessa%20stations%20was%20348%20exits.&text=BART%20ridership%20for%20Wednesday%2C%20July,compared%20to%20July%20budget%20projections>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/05/18/coronavirus-uber-to-cut-3000-more-jobs-as-pandemic-hits-ride-hailing-business/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-during-covid19.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Ftravelers%2Ftravel-in-the-us.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-during-covid19.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Ftravelers%2Ftravel-in-the-us.html)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/20/21188119/electric-scooter-coronavirus-bird-lime-spin-suspend-bikes>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bts.gov/newsroom/bikeshare-ridership-down-44-during-covid-19>