

ECONOMIC ENGINES

Seoul's Transit System Serves as a Model for America

The South Korean capital shows what happens when transit is reorganized to serve the people.

BY ALEX MARSHALL | DECEMBER 2012

It's a quote that keeps on giving. I was standing inside a Seoul, South Korea, subway station waiting for a train with Kim Gyeng Chul, when he said something that's stuck with me ever since. Kim is the former head of the Seoul Metropolitan Government, current president of the Korea Transport Institute, and one of the principal architects of the city's subway and overall transit system reorganization that occurred in the mid-2000s.

Before I tell you what he said, let me first tell you about the Seoul subway system. It is quite simply the best I have ever seen. The first line opened in 1974. Now, it has more than 10 lines and more than 350 stations. The subway has helped Seoul develop into a world-class city of 8 million and a metropolis of 20 million. Almost anywhere you want to go, it seems, you can go by subway. The total passenger ridership ranks second in the world, above New York City's.

The system is clean, well laid out and easy to negotiate, even for a non-Korean-speaking foreigner such as myself. To enter the system, you can simply hold your smartphone over the turnstile "card reader" and the gates open, while automatically deducting approximately \$1 from your account. You can also hold a credit card or a little medallion that you put transit money on over the turnstile. This works on the hundreds of different bus lines and on the train to the airport too.

Most of Seoul's subway lines have "platform screening doors," or vertical glass walls that separate the platforms from the tracks and protect the waiting passengers from the screeching, potentially deadly trains. There's Wi-Fi everywhere, even in the trains.

Given how smoothly the system runs, it would be natural to conclude that it is the product of a streamlined, hierarchical government. But this is not the case. Two private, for-profit companies and two nonprofit state companies run most of the subway lines. Hundreds of different private, for-profit operators, that are subsidized at different levels by the state, run the bus lines.

These institutions are products of different moments in Korea's messy political history, which includes a shift from a dictatorship to a democracy in the past four decades. Despite the different institutions, the lines mesh seamlessly. The system is a product of rebuilding, re-management and readjusting. The city certainly didn't get it perfect the first time, but it kept tinkering.

What Kim and colleagues did in the mid-2000s, under the leadership of Mayor Lee Myung-bak, is put all these organizations under a common fare system, as well as integrate them in

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other ways. The reorganization of the bus system was particularly impressive. Kim and others reorganized the routes, putting into place a more comprehensible system of trunk, feeder, commuter and express lines, identifiable by color. In addition, they unified the fare system, the system of public subsidies and how fares were charged.

Imagine a similar reorganization here. It would be like establishing a common fare system for the state of California's Caltrain, the Bay Area's BART and the San Francisco bus system. In Seoul, you travel between trains and buses -- some run by the city, some by the state; some by private organizations and some public; some by for profit and some not-for-profit -- and scarcely notice the difference.

Now, let's come back to the quote. I complimented Kim on all this and told him the reorganization must have been quite a job. His response: "But you have to decide, are the organizations going to serve the people, or the people the organizations?"

What he said resonated and percolated. Were the people (i.e., the passengers) going to exist for the benefit of the four different transit companies and multiple bus companies and so on; or were those organizations going to exist -- and thus change -- to serve its users, the citizens of the country? In South Korea, that choice was made.

Back here in the U.S., citizens have to navigate through multiple bureaucracies when doing one task because the systems were set up that way and no one has bothered to change them. It's not just transportation. It's all sorts of government services and missions.

Thankfully, there is at least some talk of change. In the New York City region, heads of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, New Jersey Transit and Amtrak have been discussing ways to trade and share trains, tracks and drivers at peak periods. This would be a revolution.

Who is to be tasked with leading such change? It's the job of the elected leaders. After all, city and state agencies and public authorities are accountable to someone.

In Seoul, reorganization of the transit system was part of a broader urban design overhaul that included tearing down a highway and replacing it with a delightful linear park. The city, recognizing that cars were too dominant, has narrowed its streets and widened sidewalks, something New York City and other American cities are just starting to do. The success of these projects helped get Kim's boss, Lee, elected president of the country. Imagine if that were to happen here, if the mayor of Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles or New York did such a good job that they had the political capital to run for president?



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