

Cape Town has reached Transport Day Zero. This is why

By [Steve Kretzmann](#) and [Peter Luhanga](#)

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While unrest crippled KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng last month, Cape Town has been gripped by an economically crippling public transport crisis.



Commuters wait for a bus at the Cape Town central station. Archive photo: Ashraf Hendricks - Photojournalist and Contributor to [GroundUp](#).

The city's teetering public transport system fell apart on the evening of 19 July. Tens of thousands of commuters, desperate to get home after a day of work, were left stranded as ongoing taxi violence, in which 24 people were murdered in July alone, brought the minibus taxi industry to a halt.

The Golden Arrow bus company was running a skeleton service after buses were attacked and a driver shot in the face on the morning of 19 July. Metrorail, already running at less than a quarter of its capacity, announced at 3.08pm the temporary suspension of its southern and Cape Flats lines. This was Cape Town's public transport day zero.

Although Golden Arrow and Metrorail subsequently significantly increased their services, minibus taxi services remain disrupted, affecting people's ability to get to work, to clinics, and to schools.

Speaking on Thursday, Cape Town High school deputy principal Liesl van Egeren said absenteeism was at 40% due to pupils from Cape Flats suburbs not being able to commute to school. The Matric class was particularly hard hit, said Van Egeren. Contracted or arranged taxi transport to the school was also affected by the continued fear of violence.

Sea Point High school secretary Jessica Fassie said they had an absenteeism rate of about 25% due to continued disruption of the minibus taxi industry, as many pupils travelled in from areas such as Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, and Philippi. "Even if they get here, they are late," said Fassie.

This is despite provincial transport MEC Daylin Mitchell having closed the contested Bellville – Paarl minibus taxi route which sparked the most recent violent conflict between the Cata and Codeta taxi organisations.

"The situation is dire," said Khayelitsha Development Forum chairperson Ndithini Tyhido. He said workers are in danger of being fired for being continuously late to work, or having hourly wages docked despite their ability to get to work being beyond their control.

"Without a shred of doubt there are people who have lost their jobs," said Thyido. "They are heads of households: Hawkers at taxi ranks losing income, taxi drivers, even taxi owners, the entire value chain. The only people benefiting are the hitmen."

Warning bells

The almost complete public transport breakdown on 19 July and the continued vulnerability of the system was not just due to a series of unfortunate events. There is strong evidence of a lack of political leadership at all spheres of government, and failure to implement progressive public transport planning policy developed within the City of Cape Town.

Warnings of a pending disaster have been aired for at least a decade.

A diversity of safe and reliable public transport options are needed if reliance on private taxi operators to perform a public service underpinning the city's economy, is to be decreased.

The City and provincial government recognise that rail is a key factor in achieving this. In a press conference on 27 July, Premier Alan Winde stated rail "is the backbone of a transport system". This has also been stated by Mayor Dan Plato. Research consultant Gail Jennings points out that rail is not subject to congestion on the roads during peak hours, can carry large numbers of people at once, is safe if managed properly, and has lower carbon emissions than buses, taxis, and cars.

However, Cape Town's rail backbone is broken.

Former provincial transport minister Robin Carlisle penned an opinion piece in the Cape Argus almost exactly 11 years ago (27 July 2010) warning that lack of investment in Metrorail would lead to its collapse. This, said Carlisle, would "take the whole public transport system down with it". At the time, he stated Metrorail was carrying almost half of Cape Town's commuters on less than 60% of the train sets it requires. "We need at least 40 additional trainsets to provide decent passenger rail service," he wrote.

Metrorail spokesperson Riana Scott says it currently operates 20, half the number of additional train sets Carlisle deemed necessary 11 years ago.

Attempts to fix the City's public transport

In late 2012, the City's newly formed transport authority, Transport Cape Town (TCT) initiated an agreement with Prasa CEO Lucky Montana to jointly invest in Cape Town's rail infrastructure. Plans included a new line to Blue Downs, a line to Atlantis, a rail link to the Cape Town International Airport, and transfer of Prasa-owned land along rail reserves to enable the City to create housing and hard boundaries to prevent land encroachment. But then Prasa was looted and left for scrap

under Montana and very little came of this agreement.

The Metrorail Central line beyond Langa, which would service Nyanga, Philippi, Mitchell's Plain, and Khayelitsha, has not operated since 2019 due to vandalism, theft and crime. Informal settlements have since been established on the line and reinstating the service will cost R1.2 billion, said Scott. She said the rail service to Eerste Rivier and Strand has also been closed after infrastructure was stripped during the hard lockdown.

But beyond Prasa's failures, Cape Town's public transport vulnerability is linked to its failure to overcome its apartheid spatial planning legacy, and its MyCiti N2 Express service to Khayelitsha and Mitchells Plain has not operated since April 2019 despite its commitments that year to have it reinstated by September 2019. Operations ceased following disputes by N2 Express shareholders, which include Codeta.

Former City mayco member for transport Brett Herron, who in November 2018 resigned and then joined former mayor Patricia de Lille's Good party, said the national Land Transport Act allows for devolution of public transport management to municipalities.

Herron said when the TCT was established, the City started working on the transfer of Golden Arrow, which is regulated by province, to City management in order to integrate it with MyCiti to avoid parallel or duplicate public transport services.

When the TCT became the Transport and Urban Development Authority in January 2017, discussions were initiated with Metrorail's mother body, Prasa, for the City to manage the rail and signalling infrastructure. He said Metrorail would provide a train service, in much the same way as the MyCiti where the City owns the roads and contracts vehicle operating companies to operate the buses.

Herron said after negotiations stalled and an intergovernmental dispute with former transport minister Dipuo Peters was declared. Shortly before his resignation, she agreed to the City taking over-regulation and contracting of the Golden Arrow service. Rail, he said, was still under discussion.

But there have been six national transport ministers in eight years and four provincial transport MECs since 2011. Each time the conversation had to restart with a new minister, although there was an agreement.

Despite previous work, Mayor Dan Plato says that in 2019 the City began "the lengthy process of understanding the impact of devolving the rail function from Prasa in a phased and financially responsible manner to the City of Cape Town".

But unlike the earlier model, where the City would take care of the rail infrastructure and contract Metrorail to run the trains, Plato said the City would operate the service through a concession company.

He said funding for a "high-level business plan" for this was turned down by National Treasury, which deemed it wasteful expenditure. This, he said, forced the City "to abandon the very critical exercise". The City has petitioned the national ministers of transport and finance, and the President, for permission to relaunch the study, but "to date, we have not received a response".

Transport problem is a housing problem

Jennings and Kirsten Wilkins (of Open Streets Cape Town), both state that Cape Town's public transport problem is inextricably linked to its failure to break apartheid spatial planning barriers. If poor and working class people were not confined to the city's margins and forced to travel tens of kilometres to work close to the city centre, there would be less reliance on minibus taxis, buses, and rail.

Wilkins suggests if people were housed closer to work, they could cycle or even walk to work or school if public transport ground to a halt.

Jennings said the City's inability to overcome apartheid planning means a mass of people move from peripheries to the inner city in the morning, and back again in the evening, with very little movement in between. This "tidal movement" required a large public transport fleet which then runs largely empty during the middle of the day, which makes it commercially unviable.

This, said Jennings, was part of why the continued rollout of the MyCiti bus service had stalled. This was where minibus taxis, because they were privately owned and relatively unrestricted, had the flexibility to move to where there was high demand; the needs of passengers were not their priority.

The TDA was established precisely to incorporate housing, transport, and spatial planning into one authority. Despite progressive integrated policy development and catalytic spatial planning interventions, the TDA lasted just two years. The TDA was supported by former executive mayor Patricia de Lille, but when she clashed with the DA and resigned as mayor in October 2018, the TDA was disbanded by incoming Mayor Dan Plato at his first council meeting of November 2018.

The transport authority was returned to being a directorate. It is a department without political leadership. It has not had a mayoral committee member since Felicity Purchase was appointed Speaker in March this year. Plato is acting Mayco Member for Transport until a new appointment is made. Reasons for not having appointed a new mayco member for transport were not given.

Solutions to Cape Town's public transport crisis have been developed for decades, but unless there is political leadership and implementation, Carlisle's words penned in 2010 will remain prophetic: "Greater Cape Town will become an urban sprawl, its transport arteries clogged and congested; its atmosphere even more polluted; its economy stagnating and its apartheid configuration forever institutionalised."

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Correction on 2021-07-29 16:21 | The article originally said Minister Peters had agreed to the devolution of the rail infrastructure. It was in fact still under discussion.

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