C40 - CITIES CLIMATE LEADERSHIP GROUP

Topic 2: The question of how to promote and incentivise efficient public transportation infrastructure in Cities despite hinderances

Chairs:Victoria Cai, Francesco Semeraro

Committee overview

The C40 committee (Cities Climate Leadership Group) is an elite network of 97 of the world's most influential "megacities", representing 920 million people and committed to addressing the climate crisis. Unlike traditional intergovernmental organizations, the C40 is mayoral-led. Its primary purpose is to facilitate the sharing of data, technical expertise, and policy frameworks between cities to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement at a local level. The committee focuses on "urban-scale" solutions—such as zero-emission buildings, waste management, and, most critically, sustainable mobility.

In the landscape of global governance, the C40 represents a shift toward sub-national diplomacy. While national governments often move slowly due to legislative gridlock, cities are the "first responders" to climate change. For instance:

- **Economic Weight:** C40 cities represent 23% of the global economy and one-twelfth of the world's population.
- **Action-Oriented:** Because mayors have direct control over local transit, zoning, and infrastructure, the C40 serves as a "laboratory" for policies that eventually scale up to national and international levels.
- **Implementation:** In a world where 70% of CO2 emissions come from cities, the C40 is the primary vehicle for ensuring that global climate targets are translated into measurable, street-level reality.

Background on the topic

The committee is addressing the "Public Transport Paradox": while efficient public transportation is the most effective tool for urban decarbonization, cities are currently facing a "fiscal cliff" and significant structural hinderances that prevent its expansion. Public transit has the potential to reduce urban transport emissions by over 50%, yet many C40 cities remain trapped in cycles of "car-dependency."

The core of the issue is not merely the construction of infrastructure, but the incentivization of its use and the removal of systemic barriers. Delegates must examine how to make public transit the most attractive option through "modal shifts" (switching from cars to transit) while simultaneously solving the crisis of funding gaps, aging infrastructure, and political resistance. In 2026, the challenge is intensified by a post-pandemic reality where ridership patterns have permanently shifted, requiring a move from "predict and provide" planning to more flexible "decide and provide" models.

Significant Historical Events:

- **The Post-War "Car Boom" (1950s–1970s):** Following WWII, many cities (particularly in North America and Europe) shifted to "vehicle-oriented" planning. This led to the demolition of extensive tram networks and the construction of massive highway systems that cut through urban cores, creating the suburban sprawl that makes modern transit connectivity difficult.

• **The Rise of BRT in Curitiba (1974):** The launch of the first Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in Brazil proved that high-capacity transit could be built at a fraction of the cost of underground metros. This remains a primary case study for “bankable” infrastructure in C40 cities today.

• **The COVID-19 Revenue Collapse (2020–2022):** The pandemic caused a catastrophic drop in ridership (up to 90% in some cities), leading to a global “fiscal cliff.” This forced cities to realize that relying solely on “farebox revenue” (ticket sales) is unsustainable, sparking the current move toward diversified green subsidies and public-private partnerships.

Current Global Stance:

The global community, led by the UN and C40, views public transport as a fundamental human right and a climate necessity.

• **The 1.5°C Target:** To keep global warming below 1.5°C, C40 research dictates that the share of trips made by public transport in major cities must double by 2030.

• **UN Decade of Sustainable Transport (2026–2035):** We have entered a critical decade focused on “Just Transition.” This means transit is now seen through an equity lens; it must be affordable and accessible for low-income populations to ensure they are not left behind in the green transition.

• **Zero-Emission Mandates:** Over 30 major cities have committed to the Green and Healthy Streets Accelerator, pledging to procure only zero-emission buses from 2025 onwards and to establish major zero-emission areas by 2030.

Key Data, Statistics, and Case Studies:

• **The Emission Gap:** Transport accounts for roughly one-third of total CO2 emissions in C40 cities, with road transport contributing 70% of that total.

• **Economic Impact:** Every $1 billion invested in public transport can create approximately 50,000 jobs and generate $5 billion in local economic returns.

• **Workforce Hinderances:** In 2026, 49% of transit agencies report that driver recruitment and retention is their biggest challenge, directly leading to service cuts and reduced reliability.

• **Shenzhen's Electric Fleet:** Shenzhen, China, was the first to electrify 100% of its bus fleet (16,000+ buses). This case shows that rapid infrastructure overhaul is possible but requires massive initial “up-front” capital and a complete rethinking of depot charging infrastructure.

• **Tallinn's Free Public Transport:** Tallinn, Estonia, implemented free transit for residents. While it increased ridership, it did not significantly reduce car usage, teaching delegates that price incentives alone are not enough; the service must also be more convenient and faster than driving.

• **The “Fiscal Cliff”:** On average, ticket sales only cover 30–40% of total operating costs, meaning cities must find “non-farebox” revenue, such as congestion pricing or land-value capture (taxing the increase in property value near new stations).

Key terms and definitions

Farebox Recovery Ratio: A measure of the proportion of a transit system's operating expenses that are covered by the fares paid by passengers. Since most systems have a low ratio (often below 40%), understanding this term is crucial for discussing the “fiscal cliff” and the need for alternative funding models like subsidies or congestion pricing.

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD): An urban planning strategy that creates high-density, mixed-use communities (housing, jobs, and retail) within walking distance of high-quality public transport. TOD aims to reduce the need for car ownership by ensuring that residents have everything they need centered around a transit hub.

First-Mile/Last-Mile Problem: The challenge of getting a commuter from their starting point to a transit station, and from the final station to their destination. This “gap” is a major hindrance to transit adoption; if the walk is too long or unsafe, the user will likely choose a car instead. Solutions often involve “micromobility” like e-scooters or bike-share programs.

Fiscal cliff: A severe and sudden financial crisis where a transit agency's operating expenses far exceed its available revenue, leading to a massive budget deficit that threatens its ability to function.

Relevant UN bodies and resolutions

- **United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)** - The lead agency responsible for the Secretariat of the UN Decade of Sustainable Transport. They coordinate the implementation plan and ensure transport goals align with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- **United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)** - The primary body focusing on the urban aspect of transit. UN-Habitat works with cities to integrate land-use planning with public transport, helping to solve the “first-mile/last-mile” problem and promoting Transit-Oriented Development (TOD).
- **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** - Focuses on the “Decarbonization” and “Electrification” aspects of the topic. UNEP leads global initiatives to shift city bus fleets from diesel to electric and hydrogen power.
- **United Nations Regional Commissions (e.g., UNECE, ESCAP, ECLAC)** - These bodies handle the technical regulations. For example, UNECE (Economic Commission for Europe) manages the international legal instruments for inland transport, including safety standards for vehicles and infrastructure.

International Treaties and Conventions

- **The Paris Agreement (2015)** - While not specific to transport, Article 4 requires countries to submit Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Delegates should look for NDCs that specifically mention “Urban Transport” as a key sector for meeting their emissions targets.
- **The New Urban Agenda (Habitat III, 2016)** - A landmark document that sets global standards for sustainable urban development. It explicitly commits member states to prioritize public transport, walking, and cycling over private motorized vehicles in city planning.

• **Inland Transport Conventions (Multiple)** - Managed by UNECE, these include over 50 legal instruments that harmonize traffic rules, road signs, and vehicle regulations across borders, which are essential for cities involved in cross-border regional transit.

Current Initiatives and Action Plans

• **UN Decade of Sustainable Transport (2026–2035)** - Officially commenced on January 1, 2026. Its Implementation Plan focuses on six priority areas, including "People-Centered Urban Mobility" and "Accelerating the Shift to Low-Carbon Systems." This is a significant document for your research!

• **The Greener Cities Partnership (UNEP & UN-Habitat)** - A joint initiative revitalized in 2025 that helps C40-style cities integrate environmental policy with infrastructure. It specifically targets the roll-out of electric two- and three-wheelers in developing regions to provide "low-cost mobility."

• **World Sustainable Transport Day (November 26)** - Established by UNGA, this day serves as an annual global checkpoint for cities to announce new commitments to "Modal Shifts" and public transit expansion.

• **Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11.2)** - The specific UN target that aims to "provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all" by 2030, notably by expanding public transport.

Major actors and their relevance

• **Paris, France** - Paris is the global champion of hyper-proximity. Under its "15-minute city" model, the city's stance is that the best transport policy is reducing the need for transport by ensuring all services are within a short walk or bike ride. In 2026, Paris is actively removing thousands of parking spaces to create "green social hubs." They represent the "radical shift" position—prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists over cars at all costs.

• **London, United Kingdom** - London's position focuses on Sustainable Funding. Having been hit hard by the post-pandemic "fiscal cliff," Transport for London argues that public transit must be funded through diversified "non-farebox" revenue, such as congestion charges and property levies. In 2026, London is balancing a massive fare freeze for buses (to help with the cost of living) with the need for billions in infrastructure investment. They are the key actors for discussions on "how to pay for it."

• **Tokyo, Japan** - Tokyo's stance is built on Efficiency and Integration. Unlike many C40 cities where transit is 100% government-run, Tokyo's network is a hybrid of private and public operators that are world-renowned for punctuality and "Transit-Oriented Development" (TOD). Tokyo shows how density and private investment can create a self-sustaining system. They are the relevant actors for delegates looking into "Public-Private Partnerships" (PPPs) as a solution to infrastructure hinderances.

NGOs and Advocacy Groups

• **UITP (International Association of Public Transport)** - The only worldwide network to bring together all public transport stakeholders. In 2026, they are launching the first World Public Transport Day (April 17) to advocate for the social and economic benefits of transit. They argue that public transport is a “public good” that requires stable, long-term government funding rather than just ticket sales.

• **ITDP (Institute for Transportation and Development Policy)** - The “gold standard” setter for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and Transit-Oriented Development (TOD). For the 2026–2035 UN Decade, ITDP is pushing for a “Mass Transit First” approach, focusing on electrifying bus fleets as a cornerstone of national energy security.

• **WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities** - They provide the technical knowledge for cities. Their 2026 “Prize for Cities” highlights projects like the Move As One Coalition in Manila, which organizes local citizens to advocate for better transit. They advocate for “Integrated Urban Mobility,” where walking, cycling, and transit are designed as a single, seamless system.

Private Sector and Corporations

• **Proterra / BYD / Volvo Buses** - These are the primary manufacturers of the electric bus fleets C40 cities need. Their role is to lower the “up-front cost” hindrance through innovative leasing models, allowing cities to pay for buses over time using the money saved on fuel.

• **Institutional Investors & Green Bond Issuers** - Groups like the C40 Cities Finance Facility (CFF) work with private banks to make urban projects “bankable.” They focus on risk-mitigation, ensuring that a city’s transport project is stable enough to attract private investment despite political changes.

• **European Investment Bank (EIB)** - In 2026, the EIB is a massive financier of transit across Europe. For example, they are currently funding the modernization of the Bucharest Metro and urban mobility in the Jiu Valley. They prioritize “Cohesion” and “Just Transition,” ensuring that transit investments reach underserved or former industrial regions.

Guiding questions

• 1. Research statistics of your city and evaluate the magnitude of the situation.

• 2. What are your cities current approaches to try and solve the issue?

• 3. What are some of your cities sustainable goals for the future?

• 4. Does your city strictly forbid the implementation of certain measures?

• 5. How can your city physically reconfigure existing infrastructure to prioritize high-capacity transit while maintaining public and political support?

• 6. How can the C40 facilitate regional programs to train and retain the workforce necessary to operate expanded, high-tech transit systems?

Bibliography

"11.2 Transport System | UN-Habitat." Unhabitat.org, unhabitat.org/11-2-transport-system.

"C40 Knowledge Community." Www.c40knowledgehub.org, www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/How-to-implement-transit-oriented-development.

Firth, Daniel, et al. The Future of Public Transport Investing in a Frontline Service for Frontline Workers Contributions and Acknowledgements Contents C40.

"Green & Healthy Streets Accelerator." C40 Cities, www.c40.org/accelerators/green-healthy-streets/.

Keeping Tokyo on the Move. 7 Feb. 2026.

"Mayor Announces Plans for 2026 TfL Fares Package, Including a Further Freeze, for the Seventh Time, to Bus and Tram Fares until July Funded by City Hall." London City Hall, 11 Dec. 2025, www.london.gov.uk/.

Modeshift. "Article Headline." Modeshift, 8 Jan. 2026, www.modeshift.com/10-trends-shaping-public-transportation-in-2026/. Accessed 10 Feb. 2026.

Power, Maeve. "TOD Standard." Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, 23 June 2017, itdp.org/2017/06/23/tod-standard/. Accessed 9 Feb. 2026.

"Public Transportation: The Challenges and Priorities." Smart Cities World, 2026, www.smartcitiesworld.net. Accessed 11 Feb. 2026.

"Safe and Sustainable Urban Mobility: Infrastructure, Innovation, and Resilience." SpringerLink, Springer Nature, 31 May 2026. Accessed 8 Feb. 2026.

"UN Decade of Sustainable Transport 2026–2035 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs." Un.org, 2023, sdgs.un.org/un-decade-sustainable-transport-2026-2035.

"UN-Habitat Sets 2025 Climate Milestones and Renews Greener Cities Partnership with UNEP | UN-Habitat." Unhabitat.org, 2025. Accessed 11 Feb. 2026.