



Transportation Research Forum

Book Review: [The Great Society Subway](#)

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Source: *Journal of the Transportation Research Forum*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Fall 2010), p. 157-158

Published by: Transportation Research Forum

Stable URL: <http://www.trforum.org/journal>

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Schrag, Zachary M. The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006. ISBN 9780801882463.

The Great Society Subway

by Joshua Schank

For transportation junkies in Washington, D.C.—and we are a small but devoted community—there probably could not be a more exciting topic for a book than the Washington Metro. It is the mobile laboratory many of us use every day while we think big transportation thoughts, and in many ways a defining characteristic of our region. It is one piece of transportation infrastructure that we cannot help thinking about and wondering about constantly, with constant questions about its history and operation.

Fortunately, Zachary Schrag has written a book that answers all of those questions and then some. Unfortunately, the book is a thorough documentation of the history of the Metro rather than a thoroughly compelling story line and thus will fail to hold the average reader. But for the true junkies, this book is a must-read.

The author demonstrates a clear affinity for not only Washington, a city where he grew up, but transportation issues as a whole. The book provides a clear, detailed, and relatively unbiased history of one of the largest post-war infrastructure projects in the nation (there is a bit of a pro mass transit, anti-highway undertone, but that should be expected in a book about Metro). It neatly summarizes many of the overall currents in U.S. policy (and in transportation specifically) that flow through the half-century covered by the text, in a way that is informative but not preachy. And it appears to be meticulously researched; it is obvious that the author devoted serious time and effort towards a book that became a labor of love.

The book begins slowly and carefully, providing the reader with much information that he or she needs to know in order to grasp many of the events depicted in later chapters. For example, the first chapter, which covers key historical events and trends in the city prior to 1955, is essential reading. But even the most detail-oriented Washingtonian may find the initial discussions of plans in Chapter 2 slow going. The maps provided offer interesting insights into what could have been, but far too much time is spent discussing the back and forth on various concepts and plans.

Things really start to pick up in what is the most fascinating part of the book from a political perspective – the discussion of the drama and maneuvering surrounding the Three Sisters Bridge. This bridge, which was to link Virginia and D.C. on a proposed spur from existing I-66, created a stir among residents concerned about the traffic it would funnel into Georgetown as well as the destruction of park land and views. The story of how a single Congressman—D.C. Appropriations Subcommittee Chair William H. Natcher—held up funding for what would become Metro in order to ensure this bridge was built is an extraordinarily compelling and untold story that alone makes this book worth reading.

From there, with the building of the Metro assured, the book really takes off and provides dozens of fascinating tidbits that denizens of D.C. will swallow with glee. Most everyone in D.C. and many tourists have heard of the myth that Georgetown fought to keep the Metro out of its neighborhood out of xenophobia; this book tells the real (and of course, more complicated) story. And what rider among us hasn't wondered about the naming of the stations, or the design of the Metro map? Schrag answers all of these questions and more.

The main drawback is that the book was clearly written as a history dissertation. This means that although it shows exceptional research and scholarship, it remains inaccessible to the average reader who just might have an interest in Metro. The book begins very slowly and gets enmeshed in arcane historical elements for a few chapters before finally beginning a compelling narrative. If it had been written in a more entertaining manner, it could have been an extremely popular and

informative read in this region and nationwide. But as it is written it will instead serve only as the definitive history of the Washington Metro. One wonders if it might have been possible to accomplish both of those things.

Nonetheless, if you are interested in transportation, and particularly if you live or work or even occasionally visit the Washington region, this book is probably worthy of the substantial time investment it will take to get through it. And if you make your living in transportation, particularly in transportation policy, this is an excellent case study about how things get done and an absolute must-read.

*Joshua Schank is director of transportation research at the Bipartisan Policy Center, Washington, D.C.. He previously worked as a consultant with Parsons Brinkerhoff and as the transportation policy advisor to then Senator Hillary Clinton, working on the most recent reauthorization of the surface transportation bill (SAFETEA-LU). He has also worked as an analyst at the U.S. Department of Transportation Office of the Inspector General and as a transportation planner at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York City. He has served as president of the Washington, D.C., Chapter of the Transportation Research Forum, and is now TRF's Public Relations V.P. Joshua has a Ph.D. in urban planning from Columbia University, a master of city planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a B.A. in urban studies from Columbia University. He has published numerous articles on transportation policy and planning, and his first book, *All Roads Lead to Congress: The \$300 Billion Fight over Highway Funding*, was published in October 2007.*