

Walt Disney World's Impact on Regional Transportation Connectivity

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I. Introduction

Transportation infrastructure has long been a key driver of regional economic development, influencing factors such as travel time, economic linkages, and urban growth. The relationship between major transportation projects and regional connectivity has been firmly established in the context of highways, railroads, airports, urban mass transit, and other public infrastructure projects. However, there has been less attention to the equally significant role of privately initiated infrastructure projects, such as those found in Walt Disney World, in regional connectivity.

This literature review examines the extent to which Walt Disney World has influenced transportation innovations in Central Florida and their impact on regional connectivity. The research question that informs this review is not just a theoretical exercise, but a practical one: “To what extent has Walt Disney World's transportation system influenced regional connectivity in Central Florida, as measured through travel time reductions, infrastructure development, and economic linkages?” Based on contemporary literature on both transportation and economic development, this review will integrate Disney’s role in shaping Central Florida’s transportation infrastructure, including highway construction, public transportation projects, and private infrastructure investments.

It will also propose research gaps and directions for future study on the long-term effects of private-sector involvement in regional transit planning. By 'long-term effects', I mean the lasting impact of private infrastructure investments on the efficiency and sustainability of

regional transit systems. It is well understood that transportation infrastructure is not just a crucial driver of economic development but a profound and transformative force, reshaping urbanization, trade, and connectivity across regions. In the United States' case, significant and ambitious transportation investments, from the interstate highway system to transit extensions, have dramatically transformed regional economies throughout the country.

One of the most unique, yet underrated examples of transportation-driven regional transformation is the development of Walt Disney World in Central Florida. As a global tourist attraction, Disney World has had a practical impact on shaping the region's infrastructure, including highway expansions and commuter rail projects. While a vast literature has investigated the link between transportation investment and economic growth, this review takes a distinct perspective by focusing on the role of theme parks or tourist attractions as catalysts for regional connectivity.

This literature review analyzes existing literature on transportation infrastructure and regional connectivity with a focus narrowed to Walt Disney World's particular impact on Central Florida's infrastructure system. The conclusion identifies research gaps, providing a fundamental foundation for further investigation into the long-term effects of private infrastructure investments on regional connectivity and economic growth.

II. General Literature on Transportation and Economic Connectivity

Transportation investments have varying impacts on labor mobility, business productivity, and urban growth. Alstadt, Weisbrod, and Cutler (2012) emphasize that access to transportation significantly enhances local economic performance through improved market access and reduced transportation inefficiencies. Their study categorizes the benefits of transportation into direct economic contributions, such as employment growth, and indirect impacts, including labor market growth and trade efficiency.

The decline in transport costs has been a principal propellant of regional economies. Glaeser and Kohlhase (2004) investigate the decreasing importance of transportation costs over time and argue that ongoing investment in transportation infrastructure improvements is crucial to enable industries to relocate farther from existing urban agglomerations without a loss in economic efficiency. Their discussion underscores the importance of ongoing investment in transportation networks to promote regional economic integration.

Beyond economic matters, transport systems are also crucial to urban development. Duranton and Turner (2012) consider induced demand effects, which suggest that highway expansion consistently leads to increased vehicle utilization and congestion, rather than providing long-term traffic relief. Their analysis recommends that policymakers should consider incorporating alternative transportation modes, such as expanded rail networks or multimodal transit consolidation, to achieve sustainable regional connectivity.

Another important strand of research is the contribution of highway systems to suburban growth. For instance, Baum-Snow (2007) provides significant evidence of the interstate highway system's impact on suburbanization, estimating that highway expansion accounted for a substantial reduction in urban population densities. Their research highlights the effects of transportation policy on settlement patterns and economic dispersal, laying the groundwork for examining how major transportation infrastructure projects, such as those associated with Walt Disney World, influence regional connectivity.

All of these studies provide a firm foundation for analyzing how transportation investments form economic development, urbanization patterns, and regional connectivity. The following section will narrow this interest in the role of theme parks and mega-tourism complexes in shaping transportation infrastructure systems.

Aside from their impact on economic productivity, transport investments have a substantial effect on urbanization. Baum-Snow (2007) establishes the causal relationship between highway construction and suburbanization, demonstrating the role of highway expansions in population movement from urban areas to suburbs. These studies provide a baseline understanding of the impact of transportation networks on economic activity, urban development, and regional connectivity.

III. Theme Parks as Regional Connectivity Drivers

While traditional economic development literature underlines transportation investments associated with commercial and industrial development, theme parks are a unique form of infrastructure-driven regional development. Mega tourist attractions and entertainment complexes require massive transportation networks to manage millions of annual visitors, necessitating significant public and private transportation investment. Salvagio (2014) explicitly observes Orlando, Florida's tourism economy as an infrastructural shaper, underscoring how transportation investments, such as highway expansion and airport development, for example, were monumental in Central Florida's evolution as a global tourist destination that attracts tens of millions of annual visitors.

Comparative analyses of theme parks also illustrate their influence on transportation systems. For example, Johnson and Lee (2013) compare and contrast the regional economic and transit impacts of Walt Disney World and Universal Studios, concluding that Disney's expansion yielded significantly greater results for infrastructure development. These studies reflect theme parks serving as pillars of urban development, transforming transportation policy, and fostering public-private partnerships in transportation infrastructure. Despite these observations, a significant understanding gap remains regarding the long-term transit implications of theme parks, extending beyond merely tourism-related infrastructure.

IV. Walt Disney World and Regional Infrastructure Development

1. Disney's Influence on Central Florida's Transportation System

Since Walt Disney World's opening in 1971, it has been at the forefront of Central Florida's transportation development. Disney's presence significantly influenced the development of Interstate 4 (I-4), with the resort quickly becoming one of the world's most popular tourist destinations and theme parks. Due to heightened tourism demand and increasing highway congestion, Interstate 4 (I-4) has undergone numerous expansions over the decades. The Florida Department of Transportation's (2023) project reports document the I-4 Ultimate and I-4 Beyond the Ultimate projects, which are ongoing to improve traffic flow, add express lanes, and enhance regional connectivity between key locations, including Orlando International Airport (MCO), downtown Orlando, and Walt Disney World.

Moreover, Walt Disney World has also fostered the development of transportation infrastructure beyond highways and roads. The resort has continually worked with area planners to develop alternative transportation options, such as, for example, smart traffic management systems, highway interchange widening, and transit centers accessible by pedestrians to facilitate improved guest movement in and out of Walt Disney World properties, such as theme parks, resorts, and a shopping complex.

2. Public Transit and High-Speed Rail Connections

Besides highways, Walt Disney World has played a key role in ushering public transportation expansions such as SunRail and the upcoming Brightline high-speed rail system. MetroPlan Orlando (2023) outlines regional transit proposals for more effectively linking major tourist attractions, housing, and commercial centers. SunRail, a commuter rail line serving the Greater Orlando area, was partially established to meet the enhanced accessibility demands of hospitality and theme park workers commuting from the surrounding counties. While regional transit projects are expanding, concerns have arisen that limited scheduling and station access may hinder their effectiveness for Disney's working-class employees, who rely heavily on the transit system.

The planned Brightline rail expansion, a proposal that would link Orlando International Airport (MCO) to Tampa with a stop near Walt Disney World, is yet another example of the resort's impact on regional transportation infrastructure development. The Greater Orlando Aviation Authority (2023) highlights how high-speed rail is expected to reduce traffic on major highway systems and provide a more sustainable transportation option for both tourists and locals. While previous Florida high-speed rail proposals have stalled, Disney's continued support for integrated rail systems underscores its broader commitment to shaping the region's transportation infrastructure.

3. Economic Impacts of Disney's Infrastructure Investments

Economic analysis has confirmed that Walt Disney World has a significant impact on local economic activity and transportation revenue. Oxford Economics (2023) estimates Walt Disney World's yearly contribution to Florida's economy to be well over \$40 billion, with much

of it being channeled toward local industrial development. The resort itself supports the jobs of over 70,000 people, making it one of the state's largest private employers. It is also the originator of substantial tax revenues underpinning local highway maintenance and mass transit programs. Similarly, The Walt Disney Company (2023) has made notable direct investments in regional transport projects, ranging from new roads and pedestrian bridges to transit-oriented developments. These investments represent the influence a private company by itself has on public infrastructure decisions at the regional level, emphasizing the theme parks' leadership role in transportation systems across Central Florida. Although Disney contributes to tax revenue and job growth, it remains unclear whether transportation infrastructure improvements predominantly support local commuters or even prioritize visitor convenience.

V. Methodologies in Existing Research

Empirical research on transportation infrastructure and regional economic development explicitly relies on econometric modeling, spatial analysis, and case studies. Michaels (2008) employs econometric analysis to assess the impacts of highway expansion on trade and labor markets, while Fernald (1999) utilizes productivity growth models to investigate the relationship between road investments and industrial performance.

Additionally, Chandra and Thompson (2000) examine the economic effects of the rural interstate highway system using a difference-in-differences approach to compare economic development before and after the expansion of highways. Duranton, Morrow, and Turner (2014) analyze the effects of road infrastructure on trade flows by using transportation modeling techniques to estimate the approximate economic impact of road networks on regional connectivity. Fernald (1999) measures the productivity effects of infrastructure investments on industrial output, while Chandra and Thompson (2000) narrow the scope to rural regions, investigating how interstate access affects economic growth in less urbanized areas.

In theme park studies, Kaplan (1995) employs historical policy analysis to examine the impact of entertainment-driven developments on urban planning. These methods provide a foundation for analyzing the implications of Walt Disney World's transportation infrastructure.

While Kaplan (1995) employs a historical lens to analyze Disney's role in urban transformation, Johnson and Lee (2013) take a more comparative and data-driven approach, quantifying the differential impact of Disney and Universal on regional transit systems.

VI. Identifying Gaps in the Literature

Although transportation and economic development analyses have been conducted, theme parks remain a relatively unexamined, transformative factor in regional transit planning. The majority of the literature on the topic focuses on tourism-inspired infrastructure enhancements; however, there are numerous gaps regarding the more extensive, long-term role of tourism attractions and entertainment centers, such as Walt Disney World, on regional connectivity.

One of the main gaps is that there are long-term effects beyond tourism. While existing studies cover short-term investments in the context of Walt Disney World's tourism economy, fewer studies concentrate on the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of these projects in meeting broader regional transportation infrastructure needs.

Another gap would be a comparative analysis of public-private partnerships. While the primary beneficiaries of transportation investments are tourists, these improvements can also support regional travel mobility for local commuters and employees, although further study is needed on this topic.

Private transportation systems and regional mobility are another area of research that has been overlooked in the literature. Since Disney operates one of the world's most advanced private transportation systems, comprising monorails, buses, boats, gondolas, and trams, there has been a lack of research analyzing how these transportation systems interact with or relieve pressure on regional public transportation networks.

Lastly, there has been a primary gap in covering equity and accessibility in transportation infrastructure planning. Although Disney's investment in transportation infrastructure has enhanced regional connectivity, particularly tourist connectivity between its properties, there has been minimal examination of the effects of these developments on transit accessibility for Central Florida residents, especially for low-income and transit-dependent populations.

Addressing these literature gaps will provide a more detailed comprehension of the far-reaching implications of Walt Disney World's transportation investments and their role in shaping long-term connectivity in the region.

VII. Hypothesis

While the existing literature confirms that transportation infrastructure plays a significant role in shaping regional economic development, few studies specifically investigate how private companies influence public transportation networks at the regional level. Walt Disney World represents a unique and distinctive case where a private entity has actively contributed to the expansion and development of transportation infrastructure in Central Florida.

This literature review assesses the extent to which Walt Disney World has enhanced regional transportation connectivity through investments and partnerships that improve travel efficiency, promote growth in transportation infrastructure, and link key locations in the region, focusing on metrics such as travel time, intermodal integration, and convenient access to surrounding areas.

Hypothesis: Walt Disney World has significantly contributed to Central Florida's transportation infrastructure investments by prompting travel efficiency, supporting public transit initiatives, and catalyzing broader regional transportation development through its investments and partnerships.

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