A few seconds more, and my bike would have gone beneath the wheels.

The Market-Frankford Nite Owl was hot, cramped and filled with dazed, quick-tempered passengers. Midway through Old City, our driver stopped, half-turned from his perch, and told me, wearily, "Your bike's about to fall off." I mumbled a few words of thanks and hurried outside. It took me a moment before I realized how to secure the damn thing to the rack.

That was my first time bringing a bike onto a SEPTA bus. I only did so because it was 1 a.m., I had gotten a flat tire near Market Street, and I needed to get back to my apartment in Kensington. Mounting my only set of wheels to the pull-down rack below the bus windshield was a daunting prospect to begin with. That I at first did so improperly, and nearly destroyed my bike in the process, only increased my unwillingness to ever try it again.

Compared to other U.S. cities, Philadelphia has a pretty great transit system. It is also, for all of the criticism we do here, a fine city for cycling. Yet those who rely on both bikes and transit to complete a given trip — the commuter who takes Regional Rail downtown but still has 10 blocks to cover, or the bus rider who still finds herself a mile from home when she disembarks — often see their needs go overlooked.

Intimidating as they can be, the bus racks are a small
issue. They work, after all, and once you get the hang of them they become easy to use. But consider these other factors: SEPTA's robust Regional Rail system only permits non-folding bikes during off-peak hours. Ditto for the Broad Street Line, Market-Frankford Line and Norristown High-Speed Line. When you can bring a bike onto subway or elevated trains, the turnstiles at certain stops make it difficult to get on or off the station platform. Meanwhile, you can't take bikes onto trolleys at all, except for folding bikes. And perhaps the most inhibiting detail: bike parking is hardly prevalent at transit stops.

"We don't have lots of parking at train stations and almost no parking at subway stations," says Charles Carmalt, Philadelphia's first official bicycle-pedestrian coordinator, who stepped down in April. "There are a lot of people who need to make trips, and bikes are a great way to bridge that gap. I would certainly hope to see more people doing it."

Philadelphia, then, has a problem integrating bikes (and the people who ride them) into its greater transit network. The geeky term for this concept is multimodalism, and the end game, as U.S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx wrote in an April blog post, is "a future where all forms of transportation — roads, rails, ports, airports — work together seamlessly." He left out bikes and buses, an indication of their secondary status even among transit wonks, but you get the picture.

Yet that could soon change. This past spring, SEPTA unveiled a "Cycle-Transit Plan" that takes on this very topic, outlining future projects that would improve bike connections to transit stops, install bike infrastructure at the stops themselves, and reform accommodations on board the trains, buses and trolleys that had previously made little room for cyclists. Can those of us who ride on two wheels, yet also keep our TransPasses close at hand, expect a new day ahead?

According to American Community Survey numbers, about 880,000 Americans — 0.6 percent of the working population — commuted to work via bicycle in 2013, the last year for which data is available. Here in Philadelphia, the share of commuter cyclists was higher: 2 percent, accounting for some 11,800 workers. When it comes to public transit, 5 percent of commuters nationwide used trains, buses or trolleys to get to work, while more than 26 percent of Philly commuters did the same.

The ACS doesn't have any data on commuters who rely on more than one transportation mode, however, and local numbers on the topic are also scarce. SEPTA doesn't count cyclists on its trains, buses or trolleys.

Nationally, the only data we really have come from the last two counts of the National Household Travel Survey, in 2001 and 2009. Analyzing NHTS numbers for a 2013 Journal of Public Transportation report, UCLA researchers found that the share of all American transit users who ride bikes to and from transit stops more than doubled over those nine years, rising from 0.2-0.3 percent to about 0.6 percent. The majority involved buses, which makes sense. Nationwide, buses account for up to three-quarters of all trips made via public transit.

"There is quite a ways to go," says Chrysti Kwan, programs and outreach director for the Alliance for Biking & Walking, an international advocacy group. "I think we're seeing a recognition of it in major cities, but other locations, especially suburban locations, struggle to change their land use patterns and better incorporate multimodalism."

In December 2012, Temple University researchers made some headway into uncovering hard numbers on how multimodalism affects Philadelphians. Posting up at transit stops throughout the city, they distributed questionnaires to those whom they call "cycle-transit users." They did similar fieldwork in San Francisco. Although the survey size was small — the researchers handed out 470 total forms but only used the data from 74 in each city — their subsequent report, published in the Transportation Research Record in 2014, shed some light on who uses bikes and transit to complete single trips, and what would happen if they didn't have this option.

About one-fifth of respondents in Philly said that they ride a bike to a transit stop, park it, and then proceed with their commutes. Almost a third said that they take their bike onto public transit and continue to ride it to their
Plan. Released in April, the 28-page document outlines where the agency can improve in terms of cycling infrastructure and what commuters can realistically expect. The aim is to update the plan every year as needs, and possibilities, expand.

The bulk of the plan centers on bike parking, and for good reason: it’s the most important problem that’s also the easiest to fix. (From the Alliance for Biking & Walking’s 2014 benchmarking report: “Bicycle parking is the most common cycling-transit integration strategy globally, and costs less than a tenth as much as park-and-ride facilities for automobiles on a per-passenger basis.”) In its capital plan, SEPTA allocated $3 million over the next three fiscal years for bike infrastructure improvements alone.

What will that net Philly commuters, in concrete terms? For one thing, the SEPTA concourse — that 3.5-mile pedestrian tunnel beneath Center City linking up key stops on the Broad Street and Market-Frankford lines — will see the addition of secure bike parking in its ongoing redesign. Think of a floor-to-ceiling cage, filled with bike racks, that you can enter using your SEPTA Key. Secure parking structures will also go in at two stops on each of the subway-elevated lines.

At 14 of the busiest Regional Rail stops, the plan calls for sheltered bike parking like the structure now in place at the Temple University stop, which shields bikes from the elements (and often fills up to capacity). Jefferson and Suburban stations will get sheltered parking as well.

“Planning for a new railcar, even if we started today, could be something that happens years down the line.”

Overall, Collins says, SEPTA expects to add bike parking at up to 15 transit stops per year. Also at Suburban Station: pilot ramps (called “runners”) that will help cyclists get their rides up and down staircases.

Earlier this year, SEPTA embarked on a pilot program to remove two seats toward the rear of six cars on the Market-Frankford Line. The idea was to make space for cyclists during the off-peak hours when bikes are allowed on trains. The agency found that the extra room was needed — not only for bikes, but also for strollers, people with disabilities, and riders who stand.

“What started out as a purely bicycle issue morphed into a capacity issue,” Collins says. After all, one bike takes up the space for about three or four passengers on a train. Finding the capacity for cyclists might mean a future where SEPTA eases restrictions on bikes during peak hours (although that policy change remains in the theoretical stage). Can we expect something similar to happen on Regional Rail lines?

“On Regional Rail, it’s a harder sell to remove seats,” Collins says. “And right now, that’s really the only way to accommodate bicycles in the footprint of the vehicle.” She adds that “it’s something there’s demand for.” As the agency procures a new fleet of Silverliner V railcars, she says, it will consider ways of making space for bikes.

Beyond the flashy Silverliners, new SEPTA trolleys — ones that might include bike racks similar to those on buses — could be rolling throughout West Philly within a decade. The timeline for procuring new transit vehicles, however, always runs long.

“We’ve got a legacy system, and we’ve got to renew it,” says Manny Smith, a public information manager at SEPTA. “Planning for a new railcar, even if we started today, could be something that happens years down the line.” He adds that during the interim, “we’re looking at making it as easy as possible to access the station, to have a secure place to park (your bike), and then you use it as part of a multimodal trip.” In other words, you’re “not necessarily getting on with it. That might be something we look at in the future.”

Finally, those pesky bike racks. SEPTA has a video on its website that explains how to use them, but Collins wants to take it a step further. “I’m now working on ways to install practice racks at some of our bigger bus routes,” she says. “People could practice doing it before actually doing it for real.”

*SEPTA wants the new locomotives to be multi-level railcars, which should come as good news for cyclists. “They tend to work much better for people with bicycles by creating a small vestibule area by the split-level entrances,” Carmalt says, “while all the seating is either upstairs or downstairs.”
workplace when they exit at a stop. A smattering said that they “ride to transit, travel with bike, but do not ride from transit.”

But get this: When asked how they would make the trip if they couldn’t lock their bike safely at a transit stop, two-thirds of Philadelphia respondents said that they would combine transit with another transportation mode. Sixteen percent said they would use another mode for the full trip — a car, in almost all cases.

Planning types call it the “first and last mile” problem: You’ve woken up, made your way to a train or bus, and taken it to the stop nearest to your job. Yet you’re still a mile away, give or take, from the office. Research has found that people are generally willing to walk about half a mile to and from transit before they would consider driving instead. (This is in a pedestrian-friendly environment, of course.) Put them on a bike, however, and that distance increases to three miles or more.

Bikes, in other words, can mean the difference between a trip on public transit and a trip made entirely by car. The launch of Indego certainly ameliorates this problem to some extent. Now, commuters willing to try their hand at bike share can exit at a stop downtown, take out a set of wheels, and ride it to a docking station close (or closer) to their workplace. But so far, Indego only serves areas in Center City and adjacent neighborhoods. Even if subsequent phases see bike share spread across the city, what about major employment centers in the suburbs? And why pay for bike share when you have your own ride and are willing to schlep it onto a train or bus?

When Rebecca Collins started her job at SEPTA in January 2014, the agency was already in the early stages of a significant culture change. To carry out the agency’s sustainability plan, different departments had recently started gathering in one room for the first time. In that setting, she says, “I found that people are more willing to try things out.”

Brought on as a strategy and sustainability planner, Collins went to work writing SEPTA’s new Cycle-Transit
Plan. Released in April, the 28-page document outlines where the agency can improve in terms of cycling infrastructure and what commuters can realistically expect. The aim is to update the plan every year as needs, and possibilities, expand.

The bulk of the plan centers on bike parking, and for good reason: it's the most important problem that's also the easiest to fix. (From the Alliance for Biking & Walking's 2014 benchmarking report: "Bicycle parking is the most common cycling-transit integration strategy globally, and costs less than a tenth as much as park-and-ride facilities for automobiles on a per-passenger basis.") In its capital plan, SEPTA allocated $3 million over the next three fiscal years for bike infrastructure improvements alone.

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Other cities have tackled the issue of multimodalism in creative ways. In Boston, the MBTA embraced parking cages that put an extra barrier between bikes and thieves. Through a partnership with local bike organizations, the BART system in California's Bay Area eventually developed a policy that allows bikes on transit at all times of day.

Alameda County, in fact, passed an $8 billion ballot measure last November whereby residents chose to tax themselves to pay for transportation improvements over the next 30 years. Some of this will go to roads, but most will go to transit, and about $1 billion is earmarked specifically for biking and walking improvements.

"We're seeing this happen around the country where, because federal funding has stalled a little bit, communities have taken it into their own hands to find ways to pay for improvements that are not so central to just roads," says Kwan, of the Alliance for Biking & Walking.

Not only governments have taken notice. In June, a nationwide mapping and analytics platform called Urban Engines introduced what it calls "mixed-mode routing" into its wayfinding app for urban commuters. ("While other navigation apps require you to choose one mode of transportation, we know those options don't always fit your needs," two of the company's co-founders wrote in a blog post announcing the tool.)

Later that month, here in Philadelphia, the Clean Air Council came out with GoPhillyGo, a trip planning tool that explicitly takes multimodalism into account.

"There are a lot of trips that, without a tool like this, make you feel like you really need to drive," says Nick Rogers, transportation coordinator at the Clean Air Council. "We wanted to develop a tool for people to see how convenient trips are when you combine modes."

Ridership on SEPTA and transit systems across the country is the highest it's been in decades. Same goes for cycling rates. At the national and local levels, awareness of how the two modes can interact is slowly creeping into mainstream thinking. Our transit systems will have to adapt, or else maroon potential riders in rush-hour traffic. •