Over the clogged streets of Mexico City, gondolas fly free

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ECATEPEC DE MORELOS, Mexico — For years, the worst part of Marco Antonio Martinez’s grueling commute was the short stretch between his home in this densely populated suburb and the main road to downtown Mexico City.

He would catch a small, beat-up bus that would inch its way down narrow streets, crawling through intersections clogged by the region’s infamous traffic.

The 1-mile leg routinely took more than 30 minutes, made all the worse by nagging fears of on-board muggings — a sadly common hazard.
But 17 months ago, Martinez and thousands of other harried commuters here received what felt like a gift from on high. Now, Martinez glides above the angry clamor in an aerial gondola, bypassing the gridlock in a trip that takes just seven minutes, as he gazes at the buses below.

“Now I just feel calm and relaxed when I’m on it,” said Martinez, who works for a company that manages golf tournaments.

Known as the Mexicable, the 3-mile, $90 million gondola system opened to great fanfare in late 2016, an ambitious effort to improve public transportation in this suburb of more than 1.6 million. Initially met with some doubts, it has since provided more than 5.5 million rides, with about 20,000 passenger trips on a typical weekday. It has also drawn praise for giving low-income workers better access to public transportation.

As Boston considers a proposal that has drawn sharp skepticism in some corners, Ecatepec provides a case study in whether the unorthodox idea can be a viable option in a city’s perpetual battle against traffic.
“They didn’t have enough roads to relieve the traffic,” said Victor Jasso, who directs the Mexicable. “There was no space for expanding the roadway. Making [bus-only lanes] was impossible. And building a subway? Also not a chance.”

Dwarfing Boston with a metro population of more than 20 million people, Mexico City has some of the worst traffic in the world. But Boston’s is bad and **getting worse**, and a team of developers and engineers pitching a similar gondola system in the fast-growing Seaport District believe the basic concept could also apply in the neighborhood.

While there are considerable differences between the Mexicable and the Seaport plan, they share a fundamental goal — running transit high above busy streets. That’s a marked departure from how gondolas have historically been used: climbing steep hills, as in Portland, Ore.; crossing bodies of water, like the Roosevelt Island Tram in New York City; or giving tourists a new perspective on a city, as they do in London.

In Boston, the $100 million idea, which would be privately funded as part of an agreement between the developers and the city, would run gondolas one mile down Summer Street, with elevated stations at South Station, the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, and the Raymond L. Flynn Marine Park.

Preliminary plans call for 13 towers along Summer Street, allowing as many as 70 cars to shuttle along the route. Each would carry 10 passengers, and cars would arrive every nine seconds — serving up to 4,000 passengers an hour.

The developers behind the proposal declined to comment on the comparison to the system in Mexico City. But the Mexicable experience shows these systems “can be built in an urban environment and not be obtrusive,” said Rick Spear, the US president of gondola manufacturer Leitner-Poma, who has been in contact with the Boston proponents and whose parent company built the Mexicable.

In a neighborhood choked with traffic and at capacity on its bus routes, including the partly underground Silver Line, the idea has been polarizing.

Supporters say the city should explore new ideas to address an intractable problem, while critics see it as a shortsighted ploy by developers to lure people to their site on the Seaport’s eastern edge.
The idea is driven by MP Boston, the company behind the Millennium and Winthrop Square towers downtown, and its affiliate, Cargo Ventures, which plans to develop 1.8 million square feet in the marine park. City and state officials responsible for planning the region’s transportation network did not develop the idea, and so far seem lukewarm toward it.

Outside Boston, gondolas are gaining notice in US transit circles after “clear success stories” in countries such as Colombia and Bolivia, said Robert Puentes, president of the Eno Center for Transportation in Washington.

Yet in cities where residents feel improvements to the current public transportation system should take priority, gondolas may stir opposition, he said.

“Anything that isn’t directly focused on hitting that exact target of the existing system is an uphill battle,” Puentes said.

About 240 employees work on the seven-station Mexicable system, split between maintenance, security, operations, and customer service. Cars arrive at the seven stations — tall, concrete bunkers spaced through the Ecatepec neighborhoods — every few seconds, moving slowly as passengers climb aboard before releasing onto the cable route at up to 12.5 miles an hour.

They do not stop in stations unless forced by an operator, usually to help load a passenger with a wheelchair or a carriage. A trip costs 7 pesos, about 40 cents, paid at fare gates at the stations’ entrances.

The route runs north-south over neighborhoods of densely packed stores, schools, and homes, some colorfully painted and others entirely run down. Most of the route runs parallel to San Andres Avenue, a main road with one lane in each direction.

Though the ride offers sweeping views of the valley community, many riders behave as they would on a more humdrum commute: burying their heads in their phones.

The system shortens a leg of the commute, but does not provide a complete solution for the majority of riders, who are bound for Mexico City. The southernmost station is still some 15 miles from the city’s central area, requiring at least two other trips — an express bus route to a subway and bus station.
For the subset of riders who travel within Ecatepec, the benefits may be more pronounced. Yamile Corona, for example, rides the full route — from the northernmost station, where she lives, to the southernmost, where she works at a nearby restaurant, a trip that takes about an hour by road.

The gondola takes just 20 minutes, making it easier for her to find work to the south. The system also sees a surge in riders when students leave school and ride between neighborhoods.

“Down there is still pretty rough, but up here it’s not,” said Elia Isla Rojas, who uses the system to visit friends and family. “You can now connect with more neighborhoods.”

The terrain below the Mexicable rises slightly, but over 3 miles, the ride seems mostly flat. Advocates for a Boston gondola have pointed to Mexico as a potential model, noting that both would run along a busy central corridor to alleviate congestion.

“If you look at the volume of development coming up, it’s only going to get worse,” said US Representative Stephen Lynch, a Democrat who has become a prominent gondola supporter. “This is one piece that will allow people to get out of their cars, get out of buses, and not be affected by traffic.”

It’s not clear who would operate a Boston gondola; Lynch suggested the MBTA or a T contractor. But city and state officials haven’t yet warmed to the idea. The state Department of Transportation declined to comment, except to stress the gondola is “a preliminary concept for private transportation,” not a state project.
Chris Osgood, Boston’s chief of streets, said managing traffic and development along the waterfront will probably require several solutions, including improvements for buses, pedestrians and cyclists, and ferries. However, the city is “open to understanding” more about the proposal, he said.

The Mexicable and the Seaport plan differ in some key areas. Although run by a private contractor, the Mexicable was planned by the state government, not private developers as in the Seaport.

In addition, the Mexicable was built to serve hundreds of thousands of low-income residents, while the Seaport plan would connect a highly affluent, largely commercial area with a major transit hub at South Station.

Stacy Thompson, executive director of Boston’s Livable Streets Alliance, said those distinctions are crucial. Offbeat ideas like the gondola would be better received, she said, if they served parts of Boston where low-income and minority communities have long clamored for improved transit.

“It’s a disservice to folks in Mattapan, Hyde Park, and Roxbury, who really struggle, and don’t have access to consistent and reliable transit,” she said. “The gondola has the potential of compounding the inequities.”

Transit advocates also believe officials have not given enough consideration to potentially easier and cheaper options, such as high-speed bus service.
One idea they favor is also prominently used in Mexico City: bus rapid transit, a system that uses large stations with fare gates, high platforms, and exclusive lanes to run buses in major corridors every two to three minutes, providing service comparable to the subway.

Mexico City boasts an expansive bus rapid transit system, with seven that carry more than a million riders a day.

A similar system may be a better use of money than a gondola, said Todd Hemingson, a planning official for the transit agency in Austin, Texas, which last year tabled a gondola proposal after determining they are best reserved for “niche” purposes.

“Why not allocate more road space to public transportation?” he said. “You could do a lot of that for what would seem like a rather large price tag of $100 million.”

But in Boston, engineers working with the gondola proponents found the system would increase transit capacity far more than bus rapid transit, they wrote in a recent memo to city officials. Lynch, meanwhile, worries bus lanes would worsen overall traffic.

The Mexicable runs over land adjacent to the main avenue, while the Seaport plan would run directly over Summer Street — adding hulking stations over the street in a city that spent years taking down rail lines and an expressway.

Yet Nick Collins, a Boston state representative, said the biggest complaint he’s heard about the gondola is that it isn’t ambitious enough. Some residents would like to see it extend into South Boston, which proponents have said could happen eventually.

The Mexicable faced critics too, said Jasso, the system director. Ecatepec residents worried about noise, or that riders could see into buildings — a concern echoed in Boston, where proponents adjusted their design to avoid windows of a forthcoming hotel.

These issues abated in Mexico once the system opened, Jasso said. The Mexicable runs over, rather than beside, buildings, and cannot be heard by those below — especially not amid the sounds of street commerce and traffic.

Still, not everybody has hopped aboard. Standing outside a shop while his car was being repaired, Ecatepec resident Javier Castellan Martinez said he still
prefers driving. He sometimes looks up and sees the Mexicable has stalled, and isn’t convinced it’s quicker than his car.

Jasso said the system typically stalls only if operators intentionally slow it. Fail-safes such as backup generators ensure the system remains functioning more than 98 percent of the time. It also closes to passengers if wind exceeds 56 miles an hour.

Jasso wouldn’t say whether a gondola makes sense for Boston, but said it does in Mexico.

“One thing I can tell you is these systems work well when you need an alternative for mobility and you don’t have any other space,” he said.

Miriam Martinez and her children used the Mexicable to beat the traffic.