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<b>DOW</b>	<b>34,618.24</b>	<b>QE</b>	<b>10,253.49</b>	<b>SENSEX</b>	<b>67,838.63</b>	<b>GOLD</b>	<b>1,946.20</b>
	-288.87 PTS		-65.79 PTS		+319.63 PTS		+0.69%
<b>BRENT</b>	<b>93.93</b>	<b>WTI</b>	<b>90.77</b>	<b>SILVER</b>	<b>23.39</b>		
	+0.25%		+0.68%		+1.70%		



Assistant Undersecretary for Industry and Business Development Affairs at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry Saleh bin Majid Al-Khulaifi participated in the inaugural ceremony of the 8th Belt and Road Summit held in Hong Kong.

# Qatar takes part in 8th Belt and Road Summit

**TRIBUNE NEWS NETWORK**  
DOHA

QATAR participated in the 8th Belt and Road Summit, held in Hong Kong under the theme "Prospering on a Decade of Collaboration".

Assistant Undersecretary for Industry and Business Development Affairs at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry Saleh bin Majid Al Khulaifi participated in the inaugural ceremony, which brought together Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Chief Executive John Lee along with several senior government officials and high-level representatives of several countries and international organisations.

Al Khulaifi attended several sessions organised during the summit, in addition to participating in a business session on the Middle East titled "Business and Investment Outlook in the Middle East Market".

On this occasion, Al Khulaifi affirmed that Qatar's participation in the Belt and Road Summit reflects its deep



Assistant Undersecretary for Industry and Business Development Affairs at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry Saleh bin Majid Al Khulaifi.

belief in the multilateral trade system and the necessity to strengthen cooperation with different countries around the world, especially Hong Kong, which is one of Qatar's foremost trading partners, with bilateral trade of \$1.1 billion in 2021, representing an average annual growth of 35 percent

compared to 2017.

He praised the close historical ties between Qatar and China, pointing out that China comes at the forefront of Qatar's trading partners, as the largest source of imports and destination for Qatari exports. The value of bilateral trade between the two nations amount-

ed to \$26 billion in 2022.

The session also showcased the advantages of the Qatari business environment and the various laws, legislations, initiatives, and programs enacted to stimulate foreign investment.

During the summit, several meetings were held with high-level figures from the government and private sectors participating in the event.

This year's edition of the Belt and Road Summit coincided with the 10th anniversary of the initiative's launch, which aims to establish a trade network and infrastructure connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa, to foster common development and prosperity.

This event drew 6,000 representatives from involved countries and regions, including senior officials from more than 10 countries and business leaders from around the world. The summit showcased the progress achieved by the Belt and Road Initiative since its launch in 2013, and future investment prospects.

# MoCI organises workshop on risk management for entrepreneurs

**TRIBUNE NEWS NETWORK**  
DOHA

THE Ministry of Commerce and Industry, in cooperation with the Social Development Center "NAMA", organised a workshop titled "Risk Management for Entrepreneurs" during September 10-13, with the participation of entrepreneurs and owners of small and medium-sized enterprises.

The organisation of the workshop comes in line with the ministry's keenness to develop and educate entrepreneurs and SME owners, enhance their knowledge about risk management, and provide them with the needed expertise and skills in commercial affairs, in addition to identifying the challenges they face and overcoming them.

The workshop addressed the concepts and definition of risk management, and the role it plays in improving the decision-making process, its benefits, and its relationship to governance, security, and sustainability, in addition to showcasing the various internal and external threats companies usually face, and the concept of positive and negative risks.

Moreover, the workshop defined the concepts and framework related to risk management and ways to specify, assess, and manage risks, in addition to stressing the importance of education and communication in managing risks.

The workshop also covered various aspects related to providing the participants with ways to evaluate risks in the enterprise, how to make im-

**The workshop addressed the concepts and definition of risk management, and the role it plays in improving the decision-making process, its benefits, and its relationship to governance, security, and sustainability**

provements, how to effectively assess risks, and adopt the appropriate procedures and controls through the use of tools such as records, links, and risk matrix, in addition to exploring ways to deal with these risks following the best international practices, and the firm's capacity and risk tolerance.

# Malaysia attracts \$28.4 bn investments in H1 2023

**QNA**  
KUALA LUMPUR

MALAYSIA has attracted a total of 132.6 billion ringgit (\$28.4 billion) worth of approved investments in the services, manufacturing, and primary sectors from January to June 2023, its government said on Sunday.

According to a Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) statement, the domestic direct investment ac-

counted for a substantial 52.2 percent, or 69.3 billion ringgit, of the total approved investments, a 58.2 percent increase year-on-year. Meanwhile, foreign direct investment (FDI) contributed 47.8 percent, or 63.3 billion ringgit, of the total investment.

The services sector led the way in terms of investment approvals in Malaysia in the first half with a total of 82.4 billion ringgit approved, accounting for 62.1 percent of the total.

# China's natural gas output up 6.3% in August

**QNA & AGENCIES**  
BEIJING

CHINA'S natural gas output registered stable growth in August, data from the National Bureau of Statistics showed.

The country produced 18.1 billion cubic meters of natural gas last month, up 6.3 percent from a year earlier.

The country imported 10.86 million tonnes of natural gas last month, up 22.7 percent year on year. The growth rate was 3.8 percentage points higher than that of July, according to the bureau.

From January to August, China's natural gas output rose 5.7 percent year on year to 152.1 billion cubic meters.

China's oil refinery throughput in August rose to a record as processors in the world's second-largest crude consumer kept run rates high to meet summer travel demand and capitalise on strengthening export margins, according to another report.

Total refinery throughput was a record 64.69 million metric tonnes last month, up



China produced 18.1 billion cubic meters of natural gas in August.

19.6 percent from a year ago, the fastest annual growth since March 2021.

That is the equivalent of 15.23 million barrels per day (bpd), also a record on a daily basis and up from the 12.64 million bpd processed a year earlier when extensive refiners to cut runs.

August throughput was also up from July's 14.87 million bpd. Year-to-date throughput gained 11.9 percent from a year earlier to 491.4 million tonnes, or 14.76 million bpd.

# QC's gold panel reviews customs-related obstacles

**TRIBUNE NEWS NETWORK**  
DOHA

QATAR Chamber Board Member and Gold and Jewellery Committee Chairman Naser bin Sulaiman Al Haider presided over the committee's third meeting held at the chamber's venue in the presence of other members.

The meeting was also attended by the General Authority of Customs (GAC) Director of the Exemptions and Suspended Fees Department Sultan Abdul Latif Al Nuaimi.

Speaking at the meeting, Naser Al Haider praised the cooperation with the GAC and its prompt response to the chamber's invitation to participate in the meeting, while in turn, Sultan Al Nuaimi thanked the chamber, terming it an important partner to the Authority.

The meeting touched on the most prominent obstacles facing the sector which are related to the customs procedures and fees.

The GAC's representative delivered a number of recommendations to facilitate corporate grounding procedures, which were highly acclaimed by the committee's members.



Qatar Chamber's Gold and Jewellery Committee Chairman Naser bin Sulaiman Al Haider presides over the committee's third meeting at the Qatar Chamber's headquarters in Doha.



The meeting also reviewed procedures related to the export-import process, and mechanism to improve companies' customs clearance procedures.

For his part, Sultan Al Nuaimi said that the authority prevents the entry of counterfeit products and there are strict measures in this regard, adding that tariffs are uniform duties in the GCC countries.

He also noted the existence of customs exemptions between Qatar and the EFTA States, and four European countries, including Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, and Liechtenstein.

Al Nuaimi indicated that there is a new tendency among custom inspectors to streamline procedures with full efficiency and effectiveness.

The committee's members stressed that gold has a special nature, requiring different legislation and procedures to support the state's gold and jewellery industry and trade in the state.

At the meeting's conclusion, the committee's chairman urged members to send documents proving obstacles facing them to raise them to the GAC for appropriate action.





People line up to buy food at a main shopping area following the coronavirus disease outbreak in Shanghai, China

## China urged to shift growth model towards consumption

IMF says without structural reforms, medium term growth in China can fall below 4%

### AGENCIES

THE International Monetary Fund plans to tell China to boost weak domestic consumption, address its troubled real estate sector and rein in local government debt problems that are dragging down both Chinese and global growth, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva told Reuters.

Georgieva said in an exclusive interview the messages will be delivered to Chinese authorities in a forthcoming IMF "Article IV" review of China's economic policies.

The Fund will strongly urge Beijing to shift its growth model away from debt-fueled infrastructure investment and real estate, she said.

"Our advice to China is use your policy space in a way that helps you shift your growth model towards more domestic consumption," Georgieva said.

"Because the traditional way of infrastructure, pumping in more money, in this current environment is not going to be productive."

China's aging population and falling productivity were playing a "suppressing role" in its growth rate, along



with companies in the United States and Europe shifting supply chains away from China. China's problems in the real estate sector have also caused consumers to rein in spending, Georgieva said.

"We actually project that without structural reforms, medium term growth in China can fall below 4%," Georgieva said.

The IMF in July forecast China's 2023 growth rate at 5.2% and 4.5% in 2024, but warned it could be lower given the contraction in real estate.

Georgieva also said it was important for China to address consumer confidence

in its real estate sector by financing the completion of apartments that buyers have already paid for, rather than bailing out troubled developers.

### Anemic global growth

The IMF is preparing to issue a new set of global growth forecasts ahead of IMF and World Bank annual meetings Oct. 9-15.

Georgieva said separately the institutions would decide on Monday whether to proceed with the meetings in earthquake-hit Morocco.

The new forecasts are expected to reflect concerns

about anemic GDP growth around the world, as most large economies are still lagging pre-pandemic growth rates. The United States is the only large economy to have recovered pre-pandemic growth, while China is four percentage points below pre-pandemic trends, Europe down two percentage points and the world down three percentage points.

With China generating about a third of global growth this year, its growth rate "matters to Asia, and it matters to the rest of the world," Georgieva said.

Asked about U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo's recent comment that some U.S. firms viewed China as "uninvestible", Georgieva said: "There is some outflow from China."

It is a trend that we need to carefully monitor, how it evolves over time." She added there were some areas - including digital economy and green technologies - that remained attractive for investors.

She cautioned it was important to ensure China's big push on electric vehicles was not done using subsidies in a way that created unfair competition.

## UAW, automakers to resume talks as strike creates parts shortage

### AGENCIES

THE United Auto Workers said it plans to resume bargaining after launching its first simultaneous strikes at General Motors, Ford Motor and Chrysler parent Stellantis, with effects of the limited shutdown starting to spread on Friday.

The most ambitious U.S. industrial labor action in decades has halted production at three plants producing the Ford Bronco, Jeep Wrangler and Chevrolet Colorado, along with other popular models. By Friday afternoon a ripple effect was felt.

"Our production system is highly interconnected, which means the UAW's targeted strike strategy will have knock-on effects for facilities that are not directly targeted for a work stoppage," Ford (F.N) said in a statement.

It told 600 workers who are not striking not come to work on Friday and GM (GM.N) told some 2,000 workers at a Kansas car plant that their factory likely would be shut down next week for lack of parts, stemming from a nearby plant being struck. At a rally on Friday afternoon and at picket lines during the day, union members protested loudly and took special aim at a two-tiered wage system that left new hires without the pay or benefits of seasoned hands. That was unfair and favored investors over workers, they said.

"We're not going to wreck the economy. The truth is we are going to wreck the billionaire economy," said UAW President Shawn Fain. The

union is demanding a bigger share of profits, shorter work weeks, restoration of defined benefit pensions and stronger job security as automakers shift to electric vehicles.

UAW vice president Chuck Browning, who is leading talks with Ford, told a rally of hundreds of UAW workers in downtown Detroit on Friday afternoon that recent talks have made "good progress, but we have far to go." U.S. President Joe Biden, who faces re-election next year, called for the auto companies to reward workers just as executives' salaries have risen. "The companies have made some significant offers but I believe they should go further to ensure record corporate profits mean record contracts," he said.

Striking workers said "tier two" employees can make only half the hourly wages of senior UAW workers and get worse benefits.

"That's the biggest thing I hear in our plant: we were built on equal pay for equal work," said Bruce Baumhower, the UAW president for the local including the striking Stellantis (STLAM.MI), Jeep plant in Toledo, Ohio.

Some two-tier systems were set in place during bankruptcies more than a decade ago.

The starting wage for tier two workers of \$15.78 now is on par with fast food restaurants and has not changed since it was set 14 years ago, he said.

"Fourteen years later, our workers are still in bankruptcy," he added.



United Auto Workers union President Shawn Fain joins UAW members who are on a strike, on the picket line at the Ford Michigan Assembly Plant in Wayne, Michigan

## Broken dreams, shattered families in China's unfinished apartments

### AGENCIES

CONSTRUCTION worker Shi Tieniu bought a presale apartment in an industrial city in northwestern China's Shaanxi province, billed as a "superior product" to be "passed down through generations".

Eight years later, it is an unfinished shell, and every night he must climb 20 flights of stairs to sleep in a threadbare room without water, heating or electricity.

"I almost never drink water, wash my face or brush my teeth," said Shi, 39, who moved into the Gaotie Wellness City complex in May. "I want this to be finished as soon as possible, so my elderly parents have somewhere to spend their final years."

I have no money now, I've lost my family property and all that's left is this unfinished building." Shi and a few dozen desperate home buyers live in the block in Tongchuan city as part of a nationwide campaign to pressure authorities to address so-called "rotting" or unfinished homes that have become more common during a years-long property slump that has bankrupted many developers and left others massively indebted.

There remains little sign of reprieve, with UBS predicting property sales and construction will stabilise at only 50-60% of the peak reached in 2020-21 partly due to population decline and slowing urbanisation.

Shi bought the flat in 2015 for 276,000 yuan (\$38,000), two years after the developer,



[1/6] Shi Tieniu, 39, sits on a bed as he poses for a photo at his apartment, in an unfinished residential building at Gaotie Wellness City complex in Tongchuan, Shaanxi province, China.

Tongchuan New District Qianjinfang Real Estate, began construction on the sprawling 12-block site, advertised as a high-end complex with "CEO-level service".

Since 2015, construction repeatedly stalled but flats continued to be sold until 2020, residents say. The names of the developer and project changed several times, according to multiple housing contracts seen by Reuters.

Buyers have organised numerous protests at the city government since 2019. Tong-

chuan officials said in 2020 that a committee was established to resolve the issue, buyers said, but construction did not resume. When Reuters visited earlier this week, around 60 home buyers gathered on site to protest government inaction, holding up their housing contracts while shouting: "We want our homes!"

The developer could not be contacted for comment. Tongchuan city government and China's housing ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Many of Shi's neighbours are retirees who had bought apartments for their unmarried sons, or labourers who cannot afford to rent elsewhere.

To enter the complex, residents pick their way through an overgrown field, past abandoned construction machinery to a hole in the wall.

Inside, solar-powered lamps illuminate bare concrete walls and floors caked with layers of dust and gravel. Residents cook in a first-floor communal kitchen with a single gas burner, and the communal toi-



Home buyers eat dinner at a shared makeshift kitchen lit by a solar-powered lamp, inside an unfinished residential building at the Gaotie Wellness City complex in Tongchuan, Shaanxi province, China.

let is in a makeshift metal shed. In the communal living area, the phrases "strength in numbers" and "live in a new home soon" are scrawled on the windows.

"My life savings were spent here. My son is still unmarried. I'm already 60, after a few years I won't be able to climb so many stairs," said a resident and former coal miner surnamed Gao who paid 240,000 yuan for a flat in 2018.

Since the property debt crisis began in 2021, thousands of homeowners have faced simi-

lar situations nationwide as smaller developers face liquidity issues and industry giants like Country Garden narrowly avoided default.

"You cannot rely on these houses. Look at how they turned out now, and how it has destroyed my family," said home buyer Qi Xiaoxia, 65.

"My son is now 36. I borrowed money from all my relatives and friends to pay for the house. These past few years, we've tightened our belts to repay... but we still have no house and my son has no wife."



## Radiation row: Apple vows French update amid EU scrutiny

### AGENCIES

ACTING to settle a row over radiation levels, Apple pledged on Friday to update the software on iPhone 12s in France, but concerns in other European countries signaled it might have to take similar action elsewhere.

This week, France suspended sales of iPhone 12 handsets after tests that it said found breaches of radiation exposure limits.

Apple contested the findings, saying the iPhone 12 was certified by multiple international bodies as compliant with global standards. However, it said on Friday it would issue a software update to accommodate the testing methods used in France.

Researchers have conducted a vast number of studies over the last two decades to assess the health risks of mobile phones. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), no adverse health effects have been established as being caused by them.

But the radiation warning in France, based on results of tests that differ from those carried out in other countries, has prompted concerns across Europe.

Belgium said it would conduct its own review, while Germany said it was in touch with French authorities to find a European Union-wide solution. It was not immediately clear if that might include a software upgrade across the bloc.

Italy, meanwhile, is set to ask Apple to upgrade the software on iPhone 12s there, according to a government source.

The Dutch Authority for Digital Infrastructure said it was also conducting its own investigation, due in two weeks, and was in contact with Apple as well as German and French authorities. The agency said it had received calls from concerned consumers.

The French government welcomed Apple's software update, saying it would be swiftly

tested and should allow for sales of the relatively old iPhone 12 model, launched in 2020, to resume.

"We will issue a software update for users in France to accommodate the protocol used by French regulators. We look forward to iPhone 12 continuing to be available in France," Apple said in a statement.

"This is related to a specific testing protocol used by French regulators and not a safety concern," it said.

Apple routinely provides software updates for its phones and computers, mostly to fix security issues. They can be focused on a particular model or a region, and sometimes Apple issues such updates several times in a month.

Limb tests France's Agence Nationale des Fréquences (ANFR) said on Tuesday the iPhone 12's Specific Absorption Rate (SAR) – a measure of the rate of radiofrequency energy absorbed by the body from a piece of equipment – was higher than legally allowed, which prompted the sale suspension.

A change in French regulations in 2020 allowed for testing SAR for limbs – holding a phone in hand – as well as for the head and body, used elsewhere. In the French limb SAR tests, which the iPhone 12 failed, it is measured at a distance of 0 mm compared with a length of 5mm for body tests.

Industry experts said there were no safety risks as regulatory limits, based on the risk of burns or heatstroke from the phone's radiation, were set well below levels where scientists have found evidence of harm.

"Ultimately, I suspect the whole incident will be quickly forgotten," said Ben Wood, chief analyst at CCS Insight, highlighting that the iPhone 12 is an old model.

Apple launched the iPhone 15 on Tuesday, and the iPhone 12 is unavailable to buy from Apple directly. It can, however, be bought from third parties that have inventory or trade old phones.



UDC and Commercial Bank's visit to Mumbai, India to showcase investment opportunities in Qatar.

## UDC makes Mumbai debut to showcase investment options

### TRIBUNE NEWS NETWORK DOHA

UNITED Development Company (UDC), a leading Qatari public shareholding company and the master developer of The Pearl and Gewan Islands, has made its debut in Mumbai, India. The recent visit is part of UDC's strategic plan to expand its international presence and introduce its premium investment opportunities to the vibrant Indian market.

UDC partnered with Commercial Bank which provides attractive mortgage loan packages for foreign investors, offering loan tenures of up to 20 years. The visit was coordinated by Knight Frank, a renowned real estate consultant operating in both India and Qatar at the Four Seasons hotel in Mumbai.

The Qatar-India synergy is one rooted in historical ties and shared values, fostering a conducive environment for investment. This visit underscores UDC's commitment to global outreach, with a focus on the Indian market's potential to deliver high-value returns in Qatar's thriving property sector, specifically at The Pearl and Gewan Islands.

During the visit to Mumbai, senior officials from UDC actively engaged with promising Indian investors, wealth managers and promoters offering valuable insights into Qatar's investment climate, benefits, and returns, particularly in The Pearl and Gewan Islands. The event provided an excellent platform for networking and generated significant interest among Indian investors.

Key highlights of the visit emphasized Qatar's strategic location in the Middle East, its diversified and robust economy, and its commitment to diversifying beyond oil and gas.



Additionally, the event highlighted Qatar's pro-business policies, its reputation as a safe and family-friendly destination with no income tax, and the historical ties between India and Qatar, fostering trust in investment partnerships. Indian investors gained insights into Qatar's thriving real estate market, where Qatari residency is attainable with attractive benefits, and UDC's leading role as a prominent real estate developer in the country. Various investment options and accessible mortgage loan packages for foreign non-resident investors were also presented by Commercial Bank.

UDC is excited about the potential of this partnership with

Commercial Bank and aims to cultivate promising investment opportunities that align with its mission to provide premium real estate developments in Qatar, meeting the diverse needs and expectations of local and foreign investors alike.

UDC is a leading Qatari public shareholding company established in 1999, with a mission to identify and invest in long-term projects contributing to Qatar's growth and providing good shareholder value. Its activities cover a multitude of vital investment sectors including real-estate development, property management, infrastructure and utilities, district cooling, maritime and hospitality related businesses.

UDC's flagship project is The Pearl Island, a 4 million sqm mixed-use, man-made island development which is one of the largest real estate developments in the Gulf.

It incorporates a variety of distinct features including premium residences with state-of-the-art amenities, diverse entertainment facilities, in addition to an award-winning marina, beautiful beaches and more than 370 retail and F&B outlets.

UDC is also in the process of developing Gewan Island located adjacent to The Pearl Island, into the Company's latest world class residential, commercial and entertainment project. This development has the potential of becoming a magnificent destination that will maintain UDC's future growth.

Gewan Island, spanning 400,000 square meters, is designed to provide a distinctive integrated lifestyle experience. The island is characterized by sustainability and smart living features, offering a splendid lifestyle and leisure experience for both visitors and residents. It includes various projects such as Crystal Residence, featuring over 586 residential units distributed across 15 buildings, comprising one to three-bedroom apartments ranging from 90 to 240 square meters, as well as four-bedroom duplex apartments covering 365 square meters. Additionally, the island features a range of luxurious amenities, including Gewan Golf Club, Corinthia Hotel, Solymar Beach Club, a residents' Clubhouse, along with Banana Park, Crystal Walkway shopping district featuring 101 retail units, and another promenade along the waterfront, both equipped with leading air conditioning technology.



Customers enter an Apple Store on the Champs Elysees Avenue in Paris, France, Sept. 14, 2023.

## QNB pavilion at MoT conference showcases sustainability practices

### TRIBUNE NEWS NETWORK DOHA

QNB Group, the largest financial institution in the Middle East and Africa, hosted a pavilion during the "Sustainable Transportation and Legacy for Generations" Conference & Exhibition, organized by the Ministry of Transport, bringing together highly knowledgeable professionals and experts to share and exchange expertise and insights in the industry.

Organized within the Group's role as Strategic Sponsor for the prestigious event, QNB pavilion offered a unique platform to introduce its achievements and banking services and products supporting best business practices and contributing to sustainable growth, in line with the Qatar National Vision 2030 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Abdulla Mubarak Al-Khalifa, QNB Group CEO stated: "The organization of this pavilion reflects one of the basic



Organized within the Group's role as Strategic Sponsor for the prestigious event, QNB pavilion offered a unique platform to introduce its achievements and banking services and products supporting best business practices and contributing to sustainable growth.

pillars of our strategy to drive sustainable business growth achieved through organizational resilience, a goal which is not only reflected in our eco-friendly banking products and services, but also through our

CSR programmes and initiatives in local communities.

We are pleased to see this high turnout of interested visitors for QNB pavilion, which represented a unique opportunity to raise the level of aware-

ness about the importance of sustainable banking to address climate change challenges."

The Bank's key initiatives and programmes in the areas of sustainability were displayed on interactive screens where



visitors had the chance to learn about the Bank's sustainability ongoing initiatives and achievements entitling it to be awarded with a number of the most prestigious prizes.

QNB employees provided visitors with an overview on the latest green financing solutions, including QNB Sustainable Vehicle loans at special interest rates and financing electric and hybrid new and pre-owned cars, in addi-

tion to the green mortgages with special and exclusive benefits.

Through its subsidiaries and associate companies, QNB Group extends to more than 28 countries across three continents providing a comprehensive range of advanced products and services. The total number of employees is more than 29,000 operating through 900 locations, with an ATM network of more than 4,900 machines.



**QT Economy & Business**

# What if public transit was like Uber? A small city ended its bus service to find out

**AGENCIES**

WHEN a small city abruptly parked all its buses to launch a publicly subsidized van service offering \$1.50 trips anywhere in town, only one of its bus drivers — a big-city transplant went along for the ride.

Milton Barnes used to oversee packed subway stations in Washington, D.C., a far cry from the sparsely filled buses he drove after moving to Wilson, North Carolina, to care for his elderly parents.

Although transit ridership plummeted almost everywhere due to the pandemic, it has been surging in Wilson since its September 2020 switch from a fixed-route system to an on-demand one powered by a smartphone app.

"All day long I'm picking up people and dropping them off," Barnes, 59, the only driver to work under both systems, said while driving his van on a typically busy morning. "When you've got door-to-door, corner-to-corner service, it's going to be more popular." Long wait times made the bus route almost unusable for David Bunn, even when his car broke down and he couldn't afford to replace it.

Instead, Bunn, who has two broken discs in his back, would take a 5-mile (8-kilometer) roundtrip walk to pick up groceries. Then he spotted one of the public vans and dialed the phone number posted in a rear window.

"I don't have to walk everywhere I want to go now," said Bunn, 64. "They come pick me up, they're respectful, and they're very professional. It's a great asset to Wilson and a great service to me."

The city of less than 50,000 people is frequently cited as a model for how less-populated areas can capitalize on transit in the same way as bustling metropolises.

Wilson landed federal and state infrastructure grants to support the shared, public rides residents summon — usually within 15 minutes — through a service operating like Uber and Lyft, but at a fraction of the cost to riders.

Trips are now \$2.50, a dollar more than they were at launch, and Bunn quips, "you can't drive a Pinto for that." Other communities in North Carolina and elsewhere took notice and have tapped into available public funding to start programs of their own, height-



Driver Milton Barnes poses for a photo with customer David Bunn in front of his RIDE van in Wilson, N.C. on Aug. 24, 2023. The city of Wilson, North Carolina, ended its bus service in September 2020 to offer on-demand van trips anywhere in town for less than \$3 a ride.

ening Wilson's competition for continuing grant money. These smaller-scale, tech-based solutions to public transportation problems, known broadly as microtransit, have emerged as a great equalizer in the battle for infrastructure dollars that has traditionally pit the bus, train and subway needs of urban areas against the road construction projects sought by rural communities.

"We don't view transit as something only for big cities," U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg told The Associated Press. "We want people to benefit wherever they live, including in less-dense, rural areas. The point of transit is not to have a bus. The point of transit is getting people where they need to be."

Ryan Brumfield, director of the North Carolina's Department of Transportation integrated mobility division, said Wilson's transition to microtransit came largely by necessity. Officials seeking to lower Wilson's sluggish unemployment rate first had to address the fact that in some pockets of the 23-square-mile (59-square-

kilometer) city, as many as 3 in 10 residents lacked access to a car to get to work.

"That combination of a lot of people needing a service and it happens to be fairly dense makes on-demand a perfect fit," Brumfield said.

More than half the rides are for residents using the vans to "maintain or get employment," said Rodger Lentz, Wilson's assistant city manager who pushed for the switch.

But need and convenience weren't the only reasons behind the city's 300% spike in public transit ridership. Image was a factor, too.

"In small, southern towns, the perception of public transportation is that it's for the low-income," said Gronna Jones, Wilson's transportation manager. "There's a stigma attached to riding the bus. Going to microtransit and nontraditional vehicles removed that stigma." Wilson partnered with the New York-based Via, one of the nation's top microtransit companies, to create the software and launch the on-demand public van service known as RIDE.

Via started operations seven years earlier with what was then a consumer service offering shared van rides in parts of Manhattan's Upper East Side where the New York City subway didn't go. But founder and CEO Daniel Ramot said he always considered Via a public transit company, not a private competitor to Uber, though it took a while for cities to buy in.

"We literally could not get a meeting," Ramot said. "They said it was the dumbest idea they'd ever heard, that it was never going to work, that public transit was buses and trains."

The first city to sign a public contract with Via was the Texas capital of Austin, where certain corridors were adequately served by city buses but others were considered transit deserts.

Since then, Via has expanded operations to fill the transportation gaps in a broad range of communities in the U.S. and beyond.

On the Blackfeet Reservation in rural Montana, residents can use its app to order door-to-door rides. At one of the nation's busiest airports,

Chicago's O'Hare, overnight FedEx cargo workers now use it to get home. "Every movement is individual," said Melinda Metzger, executive director at PACE, a bus system in the Chicago area that teamed with Via this summer for the O'Hare pickup service.

"People are going different directions, and the biggest thing is patterns have changed. We have to understand and adjust to them."

Although the pandemic drastically altered the nation's transportation needs, it also helped illustrate one of microtransit's greatest assets: the ability to be nimble. Subway systems and even major bus lines lack flexibility to instantly change service as demand changes, but microtransit is designed exactly for such fluctuations, if it's tailored specifically to each community.

"This is not the music man, where you just bring it from town to town," said Alvaro Villagran, director of federal programs at the Shared-Use Mobility Center, which helps grant recipients with microtransit projects. "There are op-

portunities and challenges at the local level that need to be considered." Still, the biggest challenge of all is largely universal: cost.

While the Biden administration has prioritized mass transit and microtransit projects, providing grants through the \$1 trillion infrastructure law enacted in 2021, there is soaring demand for a limited amount of money.

Even Wilson won't be able to operate under its microtransit pilot program forever without finding new ways to pay for it, said Kai Monast, associate director of the Institute for Transportation Research and Education at North Carolina State University.

Monast predicts that although Wilson will remain committed to microtransit, the community eventually will return in part to a fixed-route system, adjusted heavily from the data gathered through years of on-demand van rides. But he trusts the city's creativity to make it more efficient.

"It could be that they'll find an answer that has never existed before," Monast said.

## Mean commuting time in the US jumped by almost a minute in 2022

**AGENCIES**

THE rate of workers driving to their jobs crept upwards nationwide last year, as did those who carpool to work by car, truck or van. The mean commuting time jumped by almost a minute in 2022 from the previous year, as more businesses ended full-time remote work, a sign that post-pandemic life edged closer in 2022 to what it was before COVID-19.

The rate of people working from home dropped from almost 18% in 2021 to 15.2% in 2022, according to new survey data on life in America released Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The survey covers commuting times, internet access, family life, income, education levels, disabilities, military service, and employment, among other topics.

Mark Behrens, a human resources data analyst in Orlando working for a Fortune 500 company, started driving to his office in March 2022 after working from home for two years because of the pandemic. Managers now require employees to spend at least three days a week in the office. While most of his co-workers resented the order, Behrens was elated to see the in-person collaboration with his colleagues return to something that felt closer to normal.



An officer directs traffic at Love Field Airport in Dallas.

"The advantage of coming into the office, even if it's only hybrid, is not being isolated, having some social connections," Behrens said. "You see people and you mention something you are working on and you start to talk about it more, and you can come up with more solutions, and make more progress."

The rate of people commuting to work alone in a ve-

hicle climbed from 67.8% in 2021 to 68.7% in 2022, and it went from 7.8% to 8.6% for carpoolers.

Public transportation usage rose from 2.5% to 3.1% year-over-year, and the time people spent traveling to work jumped almost a full minute to 26.4 minutes in 2022 compared to 25.6 minutes in 2021, according to the American

Community Survey's 1-year estimates.

Despite the significant decline in working remotely from 2021 to 2022, it still was almost three times higher than before the pandemic in 2019, when it was only 5.7% and more than three-quarters of workers drove alone to work in a vehicle.

The 2022 survey did not let participants say whether they

work from home full-time or only some of the time.

Even though there were advantages to working from home, like throwing something into the crock pot during lunch breaks, Allison Graves was happy to return to her first-grade classroom after teaching virtually for most of the first two years of the pandemic, which started in early 2020.

With a renewed commute, she could catch up on podcasts she missed because she didn't spend so much time in her car.

"Continuing virtually just wasn't the same as teaching face-to-face," said Graves, who lives in Virginia Beach, Virginia. "People spent much of 2020 and 2021 not going places, and now people are expected to be back or doing hybrid."

Earlier this week, the Census Bureau released national data on income, poverty and the rate of people without health insurance. American Community Survey data released Thursday showed what those rates were broken down by states and smaller geographies.

The District of Columbia and New Jersey had the highest median household income with \$101,027 and \$96,346, respectively, compared to more than \$74,000 nationally. Mississippi's \$52,719 was the lowest of any state.

The rate of those lacking health insurance was lowest in Massachusetts and the District of Columbia, respectively 2.4% and 2.9%, compared to the national average of 8%. It was highest in Texas at 16.6%.

Fewer people moved in 2022 compared to 2021, and the presence of a child in a household also dropped slightly.

The average household size trended lower, going from 2.54 to 2.5 people, as did the average family size, going from 3.15 to 3.11 people.

The foreign born population inched up slightly to 13.9%, and the rate of people who spoke only English at home dropped slightly from the previous year to 78% in 2022.

Even though the back-office-three-days-a-week work schedule was mandated for Behrens' office in 2022, few co-workers followed it, so his company decided not to renew its Orlando office lease.

Now all 100 office employees will be working from home, something Behrens isn't looking forward to when it starts at the end of the month.

"I won't get to see anybody," Behrens said. "It's not ideal for me, though most people have no problem with this, whatsoever, and love it and don't miss the commute."