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RETURN REQUESTED

Rail Transit: Success Under Attack



—Roger K. Lewis, from his "Shaping The City" column/Washington Post

JUST LIKE DOT AT HOME . . .

The World Bank's "aggressive promotion of urban bus alternatives to the exclusion of all forms of rail has failed to really address basic needs . . ."

—Michael Replogle and Ken Hughes, *Alternative Transportation for Third World Development*

SAN DIEGO TROLLEY PACKS THEM IN

"The number of commuters boarding the trains has been growing by leaps and bounds, [Metropolitan Transportation Board Chairman James R.] Mills said. 'These are the people we were warned would never get out of their cars to ride transit. . . There are people who will ride rail transit who won't ride bus transit.'"

—San Jose Mercury News, May 10

101 Ways to Ignore Rail Transit Needs

The biggest disappointment in U.S. transport may be our continued growing reliance on the automobile for daily commuting in spite of the success of San Diego's light rail transit (LRT) system which opened in July 1981. San Diego LRT:

- Has consistently covered over 85% of its operating costs from fares;
- Ridership rose from about 11,000 a day in 1981 to 27,000 now (weekday average from 11,500 to 28,500 of which about 3,500 is on the Euclid branch that opened in 1986);
- Has, at or near several of its stops, significant development under construction—a trend that is expected to intensify, insuring continued long-term ridership growth; and
- Is expanding from the current 20 route miles. A total of 68 is planned by the late 1990s, plus Oceanside-San Diego commuter rail (planned startup: 1992).

Rail's success in southern California, an automobile stronghold, should send a clear message elsewhere.

So should the fact that, during transit's "dark ages" (1950-70), rail ridership losses were far less than bus. The biggest drops in transit rides per capita were in Los Angeles and Detroit—the 2 biggest systems to become all-bus.

Buses will always be important, but their overuse creates congestion and air pollution problems rail could avoid.

Undaunted, public officials outside California continue to push auto dependence, all-bus transit, and—sometimes—costly, unproven forms of "fixed guideway" technology.

Besides well-known funding problems, rail is also hurt by:

- Sloppy news media coverage;
- Potential LRT neighbors who—unaware that LRT coexists nicely with affluent suburbs of Boston, Cleveland, and Philadelphia—fear noise, danger, and unwanted development;
- Transit managers pushing unnecessarily expensive rail systems; and
- The fact that costly garages at heavy rail transit (HRT) stations are easier to plan and build than LRT feeder lines.

The LRT-neighbor problem is ironic. When anti-develop-

ment arguments kill rail, the result is not a development slowdown but intensification of auto-dependent development, an overall worsening of congestion compared with what rail-oriented development would mean, and a decline in the quality of life LRT opponents were trying to save!

Sloppy Reporting and Thinking

Asst. Editorial Page Editor Vincent Carroll calls his *Rocky Mountain News* "the single-minded scourge of rapid transit." The paper's campaign to block Denver rail included his Mar. 20 column which even attacked San Diego LRT, quoting a 1984 report that said "no major impact on business activity or land development has been identified." Development doesn't happen overnight. The system was only 3 years old when the report was done; if updated, it would be more favorable to LRT.

Carroll also says "many [San Diego] trolley riders have formerly traveled in buses and carpools," noting that Harvard University's Tony Gomez-Ibanez says "cream-skimming" of bus riders has happened on other rail systems.

"Cream-skimming" is a negative term designed to make us forget one of rail's main *advantages*: the ability to handle heavy traffic flows more efficiently than buses—fewer vehicles and employees per passenger, no local air pollution, less congestion and noise pollution.

Carroll also takes BART to task because "Bay Area residents still regard traffic as one of their biggest headaches," but traffic would be a much bigger headache without BART. BART would also help the San Francisco area respond to future calls for fast auto-use reductions more dramatically than all-bus cities.

In suggesting that little federal rail money was still available, Peter Applebome's July 23 *New York Times* "news story" compared the total 1983 federal transit budget with the *rail portion* of the 1988 budget. He shows federal rail funds down 81%! The correct figure is 20%.

The Ridership Game

Carroll says "Portland [LRT] ridership is less than half of what had been expected and it began to slide in the system's second year."

Far from "sliding," average weekday ridership rose slightly (19,500 in FY '87; 19,600 in FY '88) while *morning rush hour ridership jumped 18.6%*, despite a Sep. '87 fare increase! The 40,000 projection was for the 6th year of service (i.e., 1992) and assumed 7 more cars. Tri-Met staff still expect to hit 40,000 on time if they get the cars.

An employee of a well-known consulting firm engaged by a country club to fight LRT told a Montgomery County, Maryland, Council hearing Mar. 15 that San Jose's LRT (projected daily full-system ridership 40,000) was carrying under

LRT, HRT DEFINED

Light Rail Transit (LRT) uses modern trolley cars that can operate anywhere rails can go, including on and across streets. "Stations" can be as simple as bus-stops and almost as frequent. Electric power source is an overhead catenary wire. Examples: San Francisco's Municipal Railway, Cleveland's Shaker Rapid; Boston's Green Line.

Heavy Rail Transit (HRT) requires total grade separation and must go over or under roads. Electric power source is usually a third rail. Examples: Rapid transit lines in New York, Washington, Atlanta, and San Francisco (BART); Boston's Red, Orange, and Blue Lines (Blue having lost ridership when converted from LRT and shorn of its surface lines).

LAMM: CLEAN AIR REQUIRES TRANSIT

"For Denver and cities like it, [ex-Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm, now Prof. of Public Policy & Contemporary Issues, Univ. of Denver] suggests, the only way to cut air pollution is to plan growth and development around efficient metropolitan and regional mass transit systems. Denver is currently developing a light rail project, yet most observers agree completion is years away. In the mean time, automobile traffic is expected to increase. . . .

"I sense right now that we have taken all of the easy options [to make our air cleaner] I think that Denver, painfully but inevitably, is going to have to say we can't continue to have low-density sprawl all the way down to Colorado Springs and all the way up to Fort Collins and hope to have any kind of air quality in the metropolitan area."

—from Jan. 4, 1988 *National Public Radio's*
"All Things Considered"

1,000. He failed to reveal San Jose had only opened a glorified test track!

New rail systems are also attacked for not meeting ridership projections made when gasoline prices were higher and expected to keep rising. Critics ignore the possibility that the lower actual ridership might still justify the project.

In arguing against rail, Carroll said "Vancouver carries 25% fewer passengers than forecast" without even explaining what the system is: an exotic "Sky Train."

Detroit, Miami as Punching Bags

At a Dec. 16 luncheon just before the end of Ray Barnhart's tenure as Federal Highway Administrator, your editor asked about rail transit needs, whereupon Barnhart ridiculed Detroit's people mover and Miami's Metrorail and called for more HOV (high-occupancy vehicle) highway lanes. He said cities want rail systems as status symbols.

● Carroll attacks Detroit as a "forecasting folly," saying 1987 ridership was only 1/7 the 1990 projection. He didn't explain the project as a people mover (*not* LRT) and—before construction—the projection he used was discarded since it assumed connections with LRT that was never built and commuter rail that is no longer operating.

● The very low farebox contribution to Miami HRT + people mover costs (less than 1/4 of San Diego's) suggests LRT might have provided more value for money sooner, but that's an argument for using rail technology more efficiently—not ignoring it!

(Even Miami will improve in time, thanks to station-area development and connecting traffic from forthcoming commuter trains and a planned Miami Beach LRT line.)

HOV Lanes, Buses, Carpools: Not the Whole Answer!

Rail critics often wind up with kind words about "improved bus systems, lanes on highways for buses only, and road management and pricing plans to increase the cost of driving" (Applebome).

We favor increasing the cost of driving, but that's politically tougher than building rail systems. Besides, given the magnitude of the problem, we really need all approaches.

Carroll says necessary conditions for rail in most cities "may never exist unless we *first* . . . cut back subsidies for auto commuting," provide HOV lanes etc. On the contrary, the best chance for upping driving costs may lie in a package that also includes a rail system to ease driving-cost pains—or in



—Roger K. Lewis, from his “Shaping The City” column/Washington Post

THROWING OUT THE OLD RULES

Roger K. Lewis, a professor of architecture who writes for *The Washington Post*, reported July 23 on efforts to design communities around pedestrians rather than automobiles.

He says a tricounty planning body—including developers and preservationists—for Middlesex, Somerset, and Mercer (NJ) Counties have developed an action agenda which includes “rezoning to encourage mixed-used centers and higher densities to reduce auto trip lengths, and supporting public transportation; improving transportation efficiency by means other than just building more roads—such as aggressive trip reduction policies and tactics.”

Lewis also reports planning in Key West, FL, based on the notion “that traditional American towns teach frequently forgotten lessons about how to configure urban spaces and buildings. Traditional towns serve pedestrians as well as they serve automobiles.”

making good rail service available first.

Big all-bus systems cannot attract as many riders as balanced systems that include rail. PATCO’s Philadelphia-Lindenwold (NJ) rail transit line has a far bigger market-share than do buses on northern Virginia’s much-touted Shirley Highway HOV lanes. A bigger share of bus riders walk to/from their homes, but total ridership suffers because cost-effective frequent service can’t be offered on the many branching neighborhood routes. HOV lanes are virtually useless for off-peak and counterflow transit service, while rail lines run all day, 7 days a week.

Garages vs. LRT

While some areas struggle to get their first rail, others—like Washington—have HRT systems whose station parking fills up early in the rush hour. UMTA chief Alfred DelliBovi in May offered \$100 mill. in transit funds for expanding transit-station parking nationwide. We think highway money should fund parking; UMTA should concentrate on LRT feeder lines to get

TRANSIT AND SUBURBAN SPRAWL

The *Times’* article cites arguments that “jobs are migrating outward along with population to areas rail cannot serve.” (Applebome should have said “transit cannot serve,” since suburban sprawl is almost totally auto-dependent.)

But a huge potential remains for rail lines to attract auto commuters who work downtown or in selected suburban locations—and many suburban jobs are begging for transit-dependent workers who have not “migrated outward.”

Moreover, there’s not enough land and breathable air to sustain today’s sprawling auto-dependent development patterns. Buses have little impact on development and thus don’t discourage suburban sprawl; rail lines do.

In the words of Vukan Vuchic, a Univ. of Pennsylvania professor of transportation engineering and the one pro-rail academic Applebome quoted, “When people say American cities have low density . . . they are correct. But we have rail systems serving areas with low densities more efficiently than bus systems. Rail is invigorating for a city. It’s nonsense to say people don’t want to ride trains.”

WHERE TO PUT TRACKS

“You’re liable to find the [Sacramento LRT] track almost anywhere it could be fitted in: middle-of-the-street, in the curb lane, side-of-the-road . . . and even in the middle of a never-used freeway.” (*Pacific Rail News*, Aug. ’87)

Since transit demand often exists where there are no rail rights-of-way, creative use of major arterial roads is a must. (Some opponents of Bethesda-Silver Spring LRT—which would use an old rail line—favor LRT on U.S. 29 northeast from Silver Spring. The county’s Commission on the Future also wrote favorably of this, but the county executive and state highway administration oppose it.)

Don’t forget beltways! Roger K. Lewis of the Univ. of Maryland says “in the future, rail lines could provide circumferential, rather than radial transportation options.” With development concentrated where radial and circumferential lines intersect, the potential exists for Tokyo-style success—if we can ever end free employer-provided parking!

people to HRT stations. Everyone could use LRT, not just those who have a car to park and can get it there before the garage fills up.

LRT Fights: Some Status Reports

Maryland: In return for approving the Baltimore LRT line sought by Gov. William D. Schaefer (June News), the state legislature required Maryland DOT to study LRT potential statewide. Initially, 25 possible routes will be screened!

Maryland’s logical #2 line, a cross-Montgomery County link between the Bethesda and Silver Spring HRT Metro stations, has been endorsed by the county executive but is opposed by wealthy owners of abutting property including a country club. A hiker/biker coalition is seriously questioning LRT even though the county proposes joint “trail/rail” use of the right-of-way.

State Sen. Frank Shore, in a July 27 talk to the county’s Action Committee for Transit (formed from a nucleus of NARP members) joked that a prominent politician who lives



—Mike Jenkins/Montgomery Journal

Maryland Gov. William Schaefer's enthusiastic support of light rail transit is the topic of this cartoon.

next to the line worries LRT would make "his jacuzzi shake a little" and the country club folks fear "their putting will be off on the 13th hole if the trolley whistles at the wrong time."

A county council vote is expected this fall. A victory for phony environmentalism would really be another auto victory; environmentalists are not winning anti-road fights in the county.

Gov. Schaefer raised eyebrows when, upon returning from a June visit to Toronto, he said the next LRT line would soon be announced for Maryland's Washington suburbs. Suburban governments have not approved LRT and, a few days later, the governor correctly noted that "environmental" concerns will make it difficult to bring LRT to Montgomery County.

Texas: Perceived management problems had much to do with Dallas Area Rapid Transit's (DART) June 25 referendum defeat. A widely-distributed flier warned victory would let DART "sell bonds, and go into debt, for ANY AMOUNT, at ANY TIME, for ANY REASON, without ever having to ask your approval again . . . All to build a 93-mile rail system."

After approving DART's sales tax, Dallas voters watched 5 years of "endless planning, squabbling, hiring and firing of directors," yet DART now has "only a set of oft-changed plans." (*Pacific Rail News*, Oct. '87) The rail plan shrank from 143 to 93 miles while cost-per-mile estimates rose due to added tunneling. (Rail shrank from 160 miles [June '83 News] to 143 in late '83 when most cities in southern Dallas County voted DART down.)

Now, DART is "starting all over," reviewing routes and technology choices (mag lev, monorail, ad nauseam), and "hopes" to have a new regional transit plan within 12 months. (*Dallas News*, July 13)

Houston, meanwhile, is building a 20-mile LRT system—

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Join a local group fighting for rail transit or, if necessary, form one! Contact NARP if you're not sure which to do.
- Support rail transit plans and more rail funding in letters to the editor and to public officials, rebutting unfair attacks. Contact NARP for needed info if you can't get it locally.
- Support S. 2667, Sen. Robert T. Stafford's (R-VT) "Global Environmental Protection Act of 1988," to cut carbon dioxide, the most dangerous greenhouse gas, 50% by 2000. A heavy burden would fall on cars.

and 75 miles of HOV lanes.

Washington: Over the past year, pro-rail public sentiment has intensified in Seattle, the Pacific Coast's last big all-bus city. Gov. Booth Gardner now favors developing rail promptly rather than waiting until 2010. The July 29 *Tacoma News Tribune* reported: "Extra lanes on the freeway will lead only to more traffic, Gardner said. Highway money must be diverted to a rail system . . . 'Rail is a part of transportation,' he said. 'We must get beyond seeing the gas tax as only for concrete.'" After attending a recent WashARP meeting, Rep. George Walk, chairman of the state legislature's Joint Committee on Transportation, became a dues-paying WashARP member! ■

COMMUTER & TRANSIT RAIL

Atlanta's Hartsfield International became the 4th U.S. airport with rail transit service on June 18, when Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority opened a 2.6-mile extension of its heavy rail South Line from East Point Station to Airport Station (Oct. '87 News). The segment cost \$86 million. The other U.S. airports are Cleveland Hopkins (1968), Washington National (1977), and Chicago O'Hare (1984). Thus, the 2 busiest U.S. airports—O'Hare and Hartsfield—now have rail access. 32 miles of MARTA's rail system are now open (of 53).

Miami-West Palm Beach commuter rail service (Oct. '87 News) is now expected to start in December. Locomotive and car deliveries began in early May; in mid May, the State of Florida purchased 81 miles of CSX Railroad track between greater Miami and West Palm, much of which will be used by the commuter trains. The state paid \$264 million for the property, which Amtrak and CSX will continue to use.

New Jersey Transit put into service its \$97 million, 16-mile extension of catenary electrification on the North Jersey Coast Line between Matawan and Long Branch in late June . . . on time and on budget (Oct. '87 News). Revenue electric commuter service began July 2. This project eliminates a time-consuming locomotive change at South Amboy, cutting trip times between New York and points south of Matawan by :05 to :18. Diesel trains will continue operating Long Branch-Bay Head.

Pittsburgh's Port Authority Transit of Allegheny County opened a 0.5-mile trolley branch from Steel Plaza Station to Penn Park/Amtrak Station June 5, thus completing the agency's \$542 million light rail modernization project (July, Oct. '87 News). The Penn Park Branch uses an ex-Conrail tunnel (once used by Amtrak's "National Limited"). Pittsburgh's trolley system is 22.5 miles.

San Jose's light rail system grew to 9 miles June 17, with the opening of a 2.5-mile extension south from Civic Center Station to Convention Center Station in a downtown transit mall (Oct. '87, Feb. '88 News). The operator is Santa Clara County Transit District.

Wilmington-Philadelphia commuter rail service, which last ran on Dec. 31, 1982, is tentatively set to return next Jan. 15, thanks to productive negotiations between the Delaware Transportation Authority and Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA). Plans call for 14 round-trips per weekday. The all-peak-hour operation would see service in both directions in the morning and afternoon/evening.