

Tulsa can't afford light rail

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=2020#more-2020>

Since it looks like the new Tulsa Comprehensive Plan will include light rail mass transit, I thought it would be interesting to present the highlights of a report by author Randal O'Toole entitled, "Rail Disasters 2005," to describe the outcome that we can expect. This is especially important in view of the budget cuts that Mayor Taylor recently submitted to the City Council.

If Tulsa is having trouble keeping the lights on, so to speak, why would we consider an expensive system like light rail.

Sure, light rail brings glamour to a city, at least at first, but as O'Toole's report indicates, it is not a system that is prone to earn money, nor is it good for existing transit systems, such as busing.

O'Toole points out that "the high cost of rail transit produces two major threats to transit systems.

First is when high construction costs and cost overruns force transit agencies to cut back on bus service and/or raise fares, depressing transit ridership. This is best illustrated by Los Angeles, which lost 25 percent of its transit riders when building rail transit between 1985 and 1995, but similar circumstances can be found in Portland, Sacramento and Salt Lake City, among others."

He continued, "second is when a recession reduces the tax revenues that subsidize transit, forcing transit agencies to cut transit service to avoid defaulting on rail construction bonds.

This is best illustrated by San Jose, whose transit ridership dropped by a third in response to service cuts made since 2001, but similar circumstances can be found in San Diego, San Francisco, and Washington, among others."

Light rail is extremely expensive to build and is not a cost effective way to provide mass transit.

O'Toole writes, "Inflation-adjusted subsidies to the transit industry have grown from \$20 billion per year in 1992 to nearly \$31 billion in 2003.

These compare with subsidies to highways of \$6.6 in 1992 to \$15.2 billion in 2003. Yet highways produce nearly 100 times as much passenger transport plus far more freight transport than transit."

He also stated that "the growing cost of transit is in part due to the high cost of rail transit. Although rail transit carries only 36 percent of transit trips, it consumes 66 percent of transit capital funds. Light rail is particularly wasteful, producing only 3.6 percent of transit trips yet consuming 12 percent of transit capital funds."

The report includes an analysis of a number of American cities where light rail has been tried.

Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia and San Francisco were included in the “Old Rail Regions,” where varying forms of light rail has been in use since the late 1800s. All except Boston have either flat or declining ridership. In Boston, the number of passenger miles is increasing, but not the number of trips.

In the “New Rail Regions”, where cities began using light rail in the ’70s and 80s, cities had varying results. Atlanta, Baltimore, Buffalo, San Jose, Seattle, Los Angeles, and St. Louis all experienced declines in ridership.

In Dallas/Ft. Worth and Salt Lake City, ridership was growing, but not at the same rate that bus ridership was growing.

In Denver, Miami/Ft. Lauderdale, Portland and Sacramento, ridership was growing, but not as fast as driving is growing.

In San Diego, ridership was growing faster than driving in terms of trips, but not in passenger miles.

In Washington, D.C., the number of passenger miles of rail transit just kept up with the number of miles of driving.

Houston, Minneapolis-St. Paul and Trenton opened light rail lines in 2004. At the time of the report in 2005, all three had declining or stagnant ridership.

There are other studies that show that light rail is highly successful. In his report, O’Toole broke down the statistics and demonstrated how one report in particular bent the data to make it look more successful than it really was.

Light rail is popular with cities that want to create jobs through construction of light rail, but once the grant money is gone, they are left with infrastructure and payroll to maintain. This, in turn, leads to higher taxes to subsidize the system.

For a system that provides so little bang for the buck, it makes no sense whatsoever for the City of Tulsa to even consider it. If mass transit must be provided, it would be much better to expand the existing bus system, which would be much more practical and cost effective to operate.

But the best solution is to expand our road systems to relieve congestion for the most efficient and liberating transit, the car.

©2009 Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-664-7957, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

This entry was posted on Thursday, May 14th, 2009 and is filed under [Columns](#).