

Light rail is not the answer for Tulsa

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=2096#more-2096>

The push is on for rail transit in Tulsa as well as the rest of the country.

In September, the 2009 Transportation Bill (SAFETEA-LU, otherwise known as the federal surface transportation policy) will allocate billions of dollars to projects across the country, and proponents of rail are lobbying Congress to fund “sustainable” forms of transportation. This bill comes up for renewal every six years, so the stakes are high.

In Tulsa, planners have formulated four separate scenarios for our new Comprehensive Plan. These are available to see online at the PlaniTulsa website.

Scenario A - “Trends Continue” - leaves Tulsa on the same path it has been on since the last Comprehensive Plan. It presumes little investment in the downtown area, and most of the regional growth to be in the suburbs. It includes a limited amount of mass transit.

Scenario B - “Main Streets” - focuses growth on major streets and assumes only some loss of growth to the suburbs. It includes mass transit primarily on the major streets and highways, but assumes that most transportation is still by car.

Scenario C - “New Centers” - focuses growth in certain areas, creating more dense developments primarily in the downtown area, areas north and south of downtown, and at the eastern side of Tulsa. This plan specifically mentions providing bus and train transit between the “hub” areas of the city.

Scenario D - “Centered City” - indicates very dense development in and around the downtown area, with sporadic dense development in other areas of the city. In this scenario, buses, trains and streetcars would connect the city on major streets and highways.

Presumably, the amount of light rail traffic would be the most extensive with Scenario D, the least with Scenario A, with varying degrees in between.

According to a paper issued on December 3, 2008, and authored by Wendell Cox and Ronald Utt, PhD, of the Heritage Foundation, organizations that are lobbying Congress for the transportation bill are calling for a substantial increase in the federal fuel tax as well as a substantial shift from funding highways to funding transit, trains and other projects that provide for hiking and biking.

The report, entitled “Transportation Policy: Getting the Facts Straight,” states that our current funding already favors transit. It states that while “about 20 percent of federal surface transportation spending is devoted to transit, only 1.9 percent of all urban passenger travel and

4.9 percent of all commuters use transit”, and that even though \$1 trillion has been spent on mass transit since 1970 when 8.5 percent of commuters used transit, only 4.9 percent used transit in 2007. The authors cite a number of sources, including the US Census Bureau.

In review of the four scenarios, B, C and D clearly indicate the use of light rail, and the positive tone of the verbal descriptions in favor of light rail seems to grow from B to D. While I did not see any recommendations of one scenario over the other, it seemed apparent to me that the presenters clearly wanted Scenario D to be seen as the best.

But is light rail really right for Tulsa, even if we could get funding from the transportation bill? The infusion of cash into the community for construction of light rail would obviously provide temporary jobs, but who is going to pay for the operation and maintenance of the system after the federal funds are gone? And who would pay for the replacement of the system after it reaches its useful life?

Would it not mean an never-ending pattern of begging from the federal government?

This is a bit like driving a hybrid car. It feels good at the gas pump, but five years later, when it’s time to replace the battery (which costs thousands of dollars), you realize that the hybrid did not save you any money, it just made you feel good.

One way or another, the U.S. taxpayer would be footing the bill. If true to statistics, light rail would be subsidized by over 90 percent of the taxpayers who never use it for the benefit of the less that ten percent who would.

I agree that Tulsa needs to do something to improve itself, but we need to look toward innovation instead of subsidization.

The push for rail is really about reducing the use of the car and creating dense development, not providing for the poor, not providing transportation options.

Tulsa has an opportunity to be a planning leader by being fiscally responsible and finding a better way to develop the city, without pouring scarce money down a black hole

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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.

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