

Is light rail beneficial to our cities?

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=2142#more-2142>

In a recent online periodical, AIArchitect This Week, the headline was, “AIA Supports Transportation for America’s Blueprint for National Transportation Program Authorization”. This was in reference to a 100-page paper entitled “Route to Reform - Blueprint for a 21st Century Transportation Program” issued by Transportation for America (or T4 America). You can obtain a pdf copy of this paper at http://t4america.org/docs/blueprint_full.pdf

This document was issued in anticipation of the federal funding for transportation that will be determined this fall in the 2009 Transportation Bill (SAFETEA-LU).

The AIA is in favor of light rail because it creates infrastructure projects that support light rail (terminals, etc.) and because it helps to create other projects near terminal areas.

The question, of course, is whether or not light rail is actually beneficial to a city as a whole, even considering the projects and jobs that it undoubtedly creates.

I recently spoke at a group in Oklahoma City, the Oklahoma Conservative Political Action Committee, speaking about New Urbanism and light rail. After the meeting I was approached by a gentleman who rather forcefully told me that I was all wrong about light rail. I told him the same thing that I tell most people who think I am wrong about something - show me the facts, and if I’m wrong, I will be more than happy to write an article saying so.

He claimed that building light rail was actually cheaper than building roads because the rails and trains last longer than roads do. He claimed that DART (Dallas Area Rapid Transit) had been a great success, and that they were expanding the lines because it was so popular.

When I pressed him for proof, he could not cite any, but he did arouse my curiosity about DART, so I’ve done some research for him. In fact, DART was mentioned in AIArchitect This Week as an example of a successful light rail system.

It wasn’t difficult to find a lot of very detailed information about DART on the Internet, far more than I can include in this article, but here’s a brief history.

Dallas had several privately owned streetcar and transit companies until 1964 when the city took ownership and operated transit under the Dallas Transit System (DTS). DART came about in 1983 when 15 member cities voted a 1% sales tax to form it as a regional system. Two of those pulled out in 1988 because DART attempted to take out long term debts.

In its beginning, DART planned to construct 160 miles of light rail lines, but later reduced this down to 66 miles of light rail and 18 miles of commuter rail. They currently have three rail

lines, the Red Line, the Blue Line and the Trinity Rail Express commuter. The Green Line and the Orange Line are the newest lines that are still under construction.

DART did not actually begin construction of their rail systems until 1990, seven years after the sales tax vote. The “Starter System” was constructed between 1990 and 1996, which included about 20 miles of track. Additional lines were completed in 2002.

In 2006, DART received a \$700 million grant from the Federal Transit Administration, in addition to taking out a \$2.9 billion long-term loan for the construction of the Green Line and the Orange Line. These are expected to be completed by 2013.

By 2030, DART plans to complete a 97 mile network of bus corridors, as well as additions to their HOV (high occupancy vehicle) lanes, for a total of 116 miles. By 2006, DART was operating 120 bus routes, 32 of which serve the downtown Dallas area and link downtown with some of the suburbs. They currently operate 30 rail routes.

According to a report published in light-railnow.org, DART has been a great success. It quoted one source that said, “We’ve seen repurposing of many older buildings and new buildings coming on line as a result of the trains...”. It quoted another study that said, “...office properties near suburban DART rail stations increased in value 53% more than comparable properties not served by rail, and values of residential properties rose 39% more than a group of control properties not served by rail.”

That report also mentioned Park Lane, a 33-acre, \$750 million mixed use high rise that is being constructed near the DART Park Lane rail station. The developer reportedly said that the project would not have been possible without the presence of light rail.

Sounds good? Before you decide, you need to hear the other side of the story, next week

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